

Strategising for continuance commitment: the role of servant leadership behaviour

Servant
leadership
behaviour

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which servant leadership behaviour as a non-financial mechanism influences changes in continuance commitment. Research that investigates effects on specific forms of commitment is likely to provide more tailored information, thereby enhancing the quality of resulting decisions.

Design/methodology/approach – This study used an explanatory approach to investigate the envisaged linkage between the study variables from a social-psychological perspective.

Findings – Findings revealed that servant leadership behaviour significantly influences the variations in continuance commitment.

Research limitations/implications – The data used were sourced from organisations in the health sector. Results were more likely to be limited to organisations dealing in services like healthcare, education, hospitality and business sectors. Also, since the data used were cross sectional, the application of results could be limited by changes in business cycle effects. Nevertheless, the study provides a direction of thought and a platform for a longitudinal study by future researchers.

Practical implications – Organisations have the option of relying upon servant leadership behaviour as a non-financial mechanism of enhancing continuance commitment. This is likely to relieve the pressure on financial resources, especially for organisations in developing economies that often operate under conditions of economic scarcity.

Originality/value – This work is the first of its kind to describe the effect of servant leadership behaviour on continuance commitment in the health sector within Uganda which is a typical developing economy facing challenges of high attrition rates.

Keywords Strategy, Servant leadership behaviour, Continuance commitment

Paper type Research paper

1. Background

Organisational strategists appreciate that a committed workforce is a key conduit by which the vision can be pursued and realised (Carter *et al.*, 2019; Mathieu *et al.*, 2015). While the question of “how should organisations ensure a steady workforce?” has stood a test of time, environmental dynamisms have required that response strategies to the above fairly constant question undergo continuous modelling to enhance their derived value (Barney and



Clark, 2007). Indeed, managers who fail to solve the above puzzle, risk plunging the entity into abrupt and unplanned costs like the replacement of lost human capital intertwined with many other dysfunctional outcomes (Dixit and Bhati, 2012; Mathieu *et al.*, 2015; Knies *et al.*, 2015). Most of the studies that have attempted to unearth novel ways of enhancing commitment have taken a generalist view of commitment which lumps together all the many forms of commitment. This blurs the specific effect of various dimensions of commitment and in the process may decrease the applicability of resulting recommendations to a specific managerial problem at hand. A review of existing works (Njuki and Moronge, 2016; Lutwama *et al.*, 2012) raises the possibility that the deficiency of specifically targeted research has continued to harbour the low staff commitment as manifested through unending strikes, high employee intentions to quit, high turnover, a feeling of worthlessness amongst staff, laxity and poor work attitude, increased absenteeism and general low productivity (see also, AHSPR, 2014/2015; HRH Report, 2015; Rubel and Kee, 2015).

Coupled with ever-growing economic challenges that are common place in developing economies and thus mean that it is often a challenge to satisfy the economic demands from personnel, existing studies allude to the fact that non-financial innovations stand to play a significant role in enhancing continuance commitment (Munga, 2008; Sendjaya, 2015; Carter *et al.*, 2019). Thus, innovative strategies that enhance commitment and productivity through non-financial means rather than solely financial means continue to attract attention and interest from practitioners. Along the foregoing line of thought, leadership studies suggest that key servant leadership behaviours including follower, process and task orientedness and servant leadership authenticity when collectively practised have an enhancing effect on commitment (Coetzer *et al.*, 2017; Ling *et al.*, 2016; Page and Wong, 2000). Many such research findings exist but none of them clearly describes the effect of servant leadership behaviour on continuance commitment in a health setting in developing nations, yet one can only be productive if he/she is healthy. Cognisant of this empirical void, our study is based on empirical evidence sourced from a health setting within a developing nation where organisations have scanty economic resources and thus, the motivation to hold on to non-financial strategies that drive human capital commitment which stand to benefit many organisations.

2. Literature review

This section provides a review of literature on servant leadership behaviour and continuance commitment. The variables are defined in the context of the study and their linkage established in light of existing studies.

Continuance commitment refers to the employee's recognition of the benefits of continued association with the organisation compared to the perceived cost of leaving it (Meyer and Allen, 1997; Battistelli *et al.*, 2016). This kind of commitment depicts a situation where employees continue working for the organisation for the fact that they feel they cannot bear the costs of leaving that organisation. Some of the costs of leaving the organisation that may scare employees from leaving and hence get them to commit to the current organisation include the perceived loss of investment benefits that accrue to the current job and the perceived loss of friends that have accrued through association with others on the current job. Other credible causes could be the natural inertia that one develops when he works for a considerable number of years in a given organisation and perceived loss of customised privileges which cannot be enjoyed outside the current job, etc. (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Mayer *et al.*, 2008; Battistelli *et al.*, 2016). Following recent publications that reveal that each of the aspects in the three component model affect organisational performance differently, there is a proliferation of studies that consider precise effects of either affective, continuance or normative commitment (see, e.g. Jaros *et al.*, 2017; Valaei and Rezaei, 2016; Farrukh *et al.*, 2017). Continuance commitment has also

independently attracted research attention of the late as a specific strategy for curbing attrition rate and enhancing productivity in the services sector, especially in education, health sector, information technology research, amongst others (see, e.g. [San-Martín et al., 2020](#); [Kasogela, 2019](#)). Deepening our knowledge of this key aspect of commitment from an empirical perspective of the healthcare system in a developing nation is thus credible and timely.

On the other hand, the phrase servant leadership behaviour can be demystified into three words, “Servant”, “Leadership” and “Behaviour”. In line with [Northouse \(2012\)](#), leadership is used to refer to the process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. Also, the word “Behaviour” is used to mean the “conduct” of the leader ([Yukl, 2013](#); [Nangoli et al., 2018](#)). The word servant is used to mean working in the spirit of fulfilling the interests of others as a priority over own individualistic interests and this is a defining factor of servant leadership. [Pekerti and Sendjaya \(2010\)](#) clarified that it is in fact the concern for followers that is paramount when setting aside servant leadership from other kinds of leadership like the transformational leadership whose paramount concern is “performance beyond expectations” (see also [Van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011](#)). Thus, this study uses the phrase servant leadership behaviour to mean the conduct of the “servant leader” as that leader attempts to influence others to pursue the organisational common goal. It advances the perspective that “The servant-leader is servant first . . . (servant leadership) begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. . . as opposed to one who is leader first. . . the leader-first and the servant-first are two (different) extreme types. . . 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, 1977, 1991](#)). Some servant leadership frames like that of [Spears \(2002\)](#) provide that the set of servant leadership behaviours include, amongst others, listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualisation, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people and building community. Generally, while many frames that discuss leadership behaviours do exist (see, for example, [Sendjaya \(2015\)](#), [Patterson \(2003\)](#), [Spears \(2002\)](#), [Laub \(1999\)](#), this study adopted the frame by [Page and Wong \(2000\)](#) which has also been more recently adopted by other scholars (see, e.g. [Farrington and Lillah, 2019](#); [Politis and Politis, 2017](#)). This was so because it pays detailed attention to each of four salient domains of leadership – personality, relationship, tasks and processes ([Farrington and Lillah, 2019](#)). It also provides a more comprehensive yet precise measure of the key behavioural orientations of servant leadership which in its entirety is a wide area of study with multiple frames of behaviour. Page and Wong’s frame uses four behavioural orientations of follower orientedness, leadership authenticity, process and task orientedness, to summarise the behaviours of successful servant leadership and is still very resourceful and reliably used by various scholars ([Nordbye and Irving, 2017](#); [Politis and Politis, 2017](#); [Nangoli, 2019](#)). Leaders’ follower orientedness addresses the extent to which the leader relates to others in terms of caring for them, empowering them and developing them; leaders’ process orientedness is manifested through modelling, team building and shared decision-making; leaders’ task orientedness is concerned with visioning, goal setting and leading; finally, leaders’ authenticity gets manifested in terms of integrity, humility and servanthood.

Extant literature has generally established a positive linkage between servant leadership behaviour and commitment (see, e.g. [Sokoll \(2013\)](#) and [Munga \(2008\)](#)). In furtherance of this fact, scholars like [Hunter et al. \(2012\)](#), [Coetzer et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Brown and Bryant \(2015\)](#) contended that servant leadership behaviour is one principal factor that can be depended upon to enhance commitment and thereby keep attrition rates to a minimum. In fact, researchers like [Nangoli \(2019\)](#) contended that employees do not usually leave organisations but in actual sense, they often leave “bad” organisational leadership. This implies that once the organisational leadership embraces appropriate leadership behaviours, there is a likelihood that employee attrition will be kept to a minimum amidst limited economic

rewards. More specifically to continuance commitment, what has been established is the fact that entities that experience high attrition rates, risk losing uniquely skilled experienced staff and risk-facing prolonged labour shortages (Mathieu *et al.*, 2015; Conway and Briner, 2012). However, the specific effect of servant leadership behaviour on continuance commitment of health workers is still to be revealed. From the above literature, it is hypothesised that servant leadership behaviour has a significant positive effect on continuance commitment of health workers in developing nations.

3. The research methodology of the study

3.1 Philosophical paradigm and research design

This study assumed a positivistic research paradigm and an explanatory causal research design (Neuman, 2011) that was cross sectional based on time categorisation. Neuman (2011) supported the argument that when conducting explanatory studies, a cross-sectional design is sufficient to understand what has happened or been happening.

3.2 Population and sample size determination

This study was conducted in a hospital setting and the sampling frame was 14,082 hospital employees working in the government hospitals in Uganda. A sample size of 576 respondents was derived based on the formula by Raosoft (2014). Both the unit of analysis and the unit of enquiry were the individual health carders.

3.3 Research instrument and measurements

A structured questionnaire was used to gather views from the respondents (Saunders *et al.*, 2007). Generally, questionnaires have the advantage of being above the researcher's effect and variability, which conserves objectivity of collected data and these are a worthwhile method for conducting studies of a positivistic nature. The independent variable was measured using an abridged form of the tool designed by Page and Wong (2000). The tool assessed servant leadership in terms of leaders' follower orientation (caring for followers, empowering them and developing them), leaders' authenticity (integrity, humility and servant hood), process orientation (modelling, team building and shared decision-making) and task orientation (visioning, goal setting and leading). The resultant tool was tested for validity first using six senior lecturers with technical knowledge in leadership research and four medical practitioners with knowledge in research methods. The ratings were analysed by computing an item-level content validity index (I-CVI) and a scale-level CVI (S-CVI) based on a rating scale of 5. The I-CVI was computed by dividing the number of experts who related the goodness of an item with 3, 4 or 5 by the total number of experts. Only those items that scored an I-CVI of 0.8, 0.9 or 1.0 were retained in the questionnaire, while those that scored I-CVI below 0.8 were deleted. Also, the reliability values for all four aspects of servant leadership behaviour were found to be above 0.7 threshold. Follower orientation had reliability of 0.90, leaders' authenticity had reliability of 0.89, process orientation had reliability of 0.93 and task orientation had reliability of 0.91. A factor analysis was also conducted using the principal component analysis (Osborne, 2015) and the resulting statistics in terms of factor loadings (above 0.5 for each item), eigenvalue (all above 1.0) and computed Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (above 0.5) all provided supportive evidence that the tool was valid. As regards the measurement of the dependent variable, the tool by Allen and Meyer (1990) as latter applied by Hashmi and Naqvi (2012) was used and specifically the items that measure continuous commitment were identified, sorted out and used. Also here, the CVI was used to assess content validity. Only those items that scored an I-CVI of 0.8, 0.9 or 1.0 were retained in the questionnaire, while those that scored I-CVI below 0.8 were deleted (Lynn, 1986;

Polit *et al.*, 2007). Also, reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha test and those items that were found to have an alpha coefficient of 0.7 and above were accepted (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2000). Data were collected using questionnaires, and responses were collected on a Likert scale with five verbal anchors, which are as follows: 1: “Strongly disagree”, 2: “Disagree”, 3: “I am not sure”, 4: “Agree” and 5: “Strongly agree”.

4. The data analysis, presentation and interpretation of findings

4.1 Response rate

After conducting preliminary data cleaning, the final interpretations were based on responses of 76.7% of the targeted 576 respondents, of which the percentage return was 81.6%. This indicated that response bias was not much of a concern in this study (Lindner and Wingenbach, 2002). Preliminary cleaning specifically entailed deleting outliers and missing values.

4.2 Demographic characteristics of the respondents

The study’s demographics showed that that majority of the respondents (64.5%) showed that they received low financial compensation, while 30.7% felt that their compensation is moderate and only 4.8% felt that their compensation is satisfactorily high. This finding is typical of organisations operating in developing countries as most face resource constraints and thus cannot reward their staff with a competitive pay. As such, this points to the need to innovatively use non-financial means as a way of enhancing commitment. Also, as regards the job tenure of respondents, results indicated that 36% of the respondents had worked for between three to six years, 28% had worked for less than three years, 19% had worked for between seven to 10 years and 17% had worked for more than 10 years. Also, the results about tenure depict that about two-thirds of the workforce in the studied organisations are likely to quit the current job within six years. Higher job tenure in this case is directly linked to higher continuance commitment and also can be linked to more experience and expertise in the industry. These are as shown in Table 1 below.

4.3 The correlation analysis of the study variables

The correlation analysis was intended to measure the linear relationship between the variables (Hair *et al.*, 2013) as can be seen in Table 2 below. The obtained findings indicate that servant leadership behaviour has a positive and significant relationship with continuance commitment (0.35, *p*-value < 0.01). The results indicate that an increase in

Item	Categorisation	Frequency	Percent (%)
Monetary compensation	Low pay	296	64.5
	Moderate pay	141	30.7
	High pay	22	4.8
	<i>Total</i>	<i>459</i>	<i>100</i>
Job tenure	Less than three years	131	28.5
	3–6 years	163	35.5
	7–10 years	87	19
	More than 10 years	78	17
	<i>Total</i>	<i>459</i>	<i>100</i>

Table 1.
Demographic characteristics

servant leadership behaviour by one unit may be associated with a 35% change in continuance commitment.

4.4 The regression analysis

As seen in Table 3 below, a regression analysis was conducted to test the magnitude by which servant leadership behaviour causes changes in continuance commitment. Prior to running regressions, tests of multiple regression were undertaken to ensure that robust regression results are obtained (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2013). The test results indicated that the data were linear, normally distributed, homoscedastic and there was no multicollinearity.

The table also shows that monetary compensation and job tenure were considered as the confounding variables for the study. These did not have a significant effect as they, respectively, had a level of significance that is above the established threshold of 0.05. This is evidenced by the respective β values and corresponding significance of 0.09, $p > 0.05$ for monetary compensation and 0.03, $p > 0.05$ for job tenure.

As regards the main objective of the study, which sought to investigate the effect of servant leadership behaviour on continuance commitment, the findings in Table 3 indicate that servant leadership behaviour has a positive and significant effect on continuance commitment, $r = 0.39, p < 0.05$. This result indicates that a unit change in servant leadership behaviour explains 0.39 unit change in continuance commitment. The results imply that if organisational leaders take care of their subordinates besides the tasks, embrace authenticity

Table 2.
The correlation analysis of the study variables

Variable	(1)	(2)
Servant leadership behaviour (1)	1	
Continuance commitment (2)	0.01 0.35** 0.01	1 0.01

Note(s): ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

Table 3.
The regression analysis of servant leadership behaviour and continuance commitment

Coefficient estimates	<i>B</i> unstd	S.E	β std	<i>t</i>	Sig	VIF
Constant	1.82	0.22		8.36	0.01	
Monetary compensation	0.09	0.07	0.06	1.39	0.17	1.02
Job tenure	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.90	0.37	1.03
Servant leadership behaviour	0.39	0.05	0.35	7.72	0.01	1.04
<i>Model summary statistics</i>						
<i>R</i>		0.36a				
<i>R</i> -square		0.13				
Adjusted <i>R</i> -square		0.12				
Standard error of the estimate		0.81				
Durbin-Watson statistic		1.40				
Change statistics	<i>R</i> -square change	0.11				
	<i>F</i> -change	59.55				
	Significance	0.01				

Note(s): a: Dependent variable: continuance commitment; ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

and embrace teamwork, then the organisation will realise increased employee productivity and a reduction in the attrition rates of its workforce.

The findings also further indicated that the percentage variance in continuance commitment as explained by changes in servant leadership behaviour is 13% ($R^2 = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$). The R^2 statistic was used to measure the strength of the relationship between servant leadership behaviour and continuous commitment. Since this statistic is below average, it could have been interpreted as a low predictive power. However, research by Frost (2019) argued that a low R -square is a common occurrence in behavioural studies. This is because it is hard to model all variables affecting the dependent variable and as such the obtained statistic regardless of its size can be used to arrive at conclusions as long as it is significant.

5. Discussion of results from empirical and theoretical perspectives

Empirically, the study's results established that servant leadership behaviour has a positive and significant effect on continuance commitment, $r = 0.39$, $p < 0.05$. Whilst the strength of the relationship was below average, based on the assumptions of Frost (2019) that a statistically significant low R -square in behavioural studies can be used to arrive at conclusions regardless of size, the results interpreted that servant leadership is a significant predictor of continuance commitment. This kind of finding is in agreement with the works of Brown and Bryant (2015), who indicated that servant leadership behaviour is one principal factor that can be depended upon to enhance commitment. While they studied commitment in general from a varied setting, our findings further refine and validate their findings by revealing that continuance commitment of health workers, in particular, is enhanced through embracing servant leadership behaviours. This is a positive step for developing nations as they now can target this new strategy as a means of curbing the high attrition rates and observed general low productivity as earlier described by scholars like Njuki and Moronge (2016) and Lutwama *et al.* (2012). Also, taking the general view that people are naturally social animals who have the need to belong (Avneet, 2013), it is clear that embracing the servant leadership behaviours of follower orientation (people orientation), leaders' authenticity, leaders' task orientation and leaders' process orientation (Page and Wong, 2000; Pekerti and Sendjaya, 2010; Nangoli, 2019) are necessary for promoting continuance commitment. Thus, such leadership behaviour stands to increase the would-be cost of leaving the organisation as subordinates tend to attach a higher value to the positive care they receive from the leadership. The above-mentioned efforts are purposed to propel valuable staff to stay on and serve the organisation and as a result, the organisation saves itself from the costs of recruitment, training and developing alternative staff. Premised on the fact that a longer tenure enhances the value inherent in the human resources (Meyer *et al.*, 2002), the above empirical results reveal that servant leadership behaviours (Mahembe and Engelbrecht, 2014; Greenleaf, 1977) are a key mechanism by which the value of staff to the organisation can be enhanced.

6. Conclusion and recommendation

Building continuance commitment is one sure way of benefitting from the tailored skill of the existing workforce coupled with avoiding costs associated with high attrition. Embracing servant leadership behaviours enables the organisation to realise the above ambition, yet with comparatively little or no strain on the limited financial resources. This study thus recommends that organisations seeking to enhance their competitive advantage should embrace servant leadership behaviours as a way of enhancing the continuance commitment of its staff. Given that this study only used data from the health sector setting to arrive at

conclusions, the recommendations must be implemented with caution in other sectors. As such, further studies could investigate the same effects in various sectors like the judiciary, education, amongst others, where employees' dissatisfaction is reported to be high. Also, there is need to extend the study of the use of non-financial incentives to drive commitment further by investigating the impact of other non-financial mechanisms on the specific forms of commitment, that is, affective, normative and continuance. Such in-depth studies stand to enhance decision quality as far as effecting commitment is concerned.

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