

## **Servant Leadership: Its Effect on Organizational Identification, Perceived Organizational Fit, Performance, and Employee Retention in Sales**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Servant leadership has become an important area of research because of its association with important employees' attitudes and behaviors. This study investigated the relationship among servant leadership, organizational identification, person-organization (P-O) fit, performance, and turnover intentions using a sample of 228 business-to-business salespeople and 82 sales managers. The results indicated that servant leadership directly influenced organizational identification and P-O fit and indirectly influenced performance and turnover intentions through organizational identification and P-O fit. The results have important implications for managing the salesforce.

Keywords: Servant leadership, organizational identification, person-organization fit, performance, turnover intentions

## INTRODUCTION

The uniqueness of a salesperson's job makes leadership especially important in the professional selling profession (Ingram et al., 2005). Salespeople often work away from other employees, including the sales manager. Because of their boundary spanning role, salespeople encounter contradictory demands between interests of the organization and clients. Given the distinctive role of the sales manager, marketing researchers have analyzed various leadership roles such as transformational/transactional leadership (Bass, 1977; Mackenzie et al., 2001; ethical leadership (Schwepker and Schultz, 2015), supportive leadership (Jaramillo and Prakash, 2008), and leader member exchange (Schwepker, 2017) and how they influence salespersons' job attitudes and outcomes. During the last decade, marketing researchers have started to analyze how servant leadership influences salespersons' behaviors and organizational outcomes (e.g., Grisaffe et al., 2016; Jaramillo et al., 2015; Jaramillo et al., 2009; Schwepker, 2016). Servant leadership is an "(1) other-oriented approach to leadership (2) manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, (3) and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community" (Eva et al., 2019, p. 114).

The reason for the increased focus on servant leadership is based on research indicating that servant leadership provides incremental increases in employees' attitudes and behaviors beyond that of the leadership styles of transformational, transactional, authentic, and ethical (Grisaffe et al., 2016; Hoch et al., 2018). This research on servant leadership has provided important insights.

While prior salesforce research has provided insights into the value of studying servant leadership, few studies have examined the relationship between either servant leadership and person-organizational fit (P-O fit) or servant leadership and organizational identification (OI). For example, Hoch et al. (2018), in their meta-analysis, reported that servant leadership was significantly correlated with organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and performance. However, OI and P-O fit were not included in their study.

P-O fit is "the compatibility between individuals and organizations" (Kristof, 1996, p. 3). P-O fit has been a dominant theme for more than 30 years and is related to important job attitudes (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). P-O fit is a critical component in organizations attaining and keeping valuable employees (Cable and DeRue, 2002). Therefore, examining the association between P-O fit and servant leadership seems to be very relevant.

While research has investigated the relationship between P-O fit and other leadership theories such transformational leadership (Chi and Pan, 2012; Guay, 2013; Raja et al., 2018), ethical leadership (Al Halbusi et al., 2021; Schwepker, 2015; and leader-member exchange (Badawy et al., 2019; Sluss and Thompson, 2012), only one study could be located that analyzed the influence of servant leadership on employees' P-O fit (Jaramillo et al., 2009). This lack of research is surprising since understanding the job attitudes related to P-O fit is important, but knowing antecedents of P-O fit is also very important.

OI also is an important variable because of its association with many important employees' job attitudes and behavior (see the meta-analyses by Greco et al., 2022 and Riketa, 2005). For example, when employees identify strongly with the organization's values and goals, they are less likely to seek employment with another company. As Ashforth et al. (2008, p. 333) have stated, employees who have a strong identity with the organization become "a microcosm of the organization." They behave according to the characteristics of the organization. Their

behavior benefits the entire organization rather than just the individual (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Since OI is strongly associated with employees choosing to join and stay with an organization (Ashforth et al., 2008), comprehending reasons for the development of OI is important. While limited, some research indicates that servant leadership is linked to OI. Thus, additional research investigating the relationship between OI and servant leadership is warranted.

The purpose of this study is to build on previous research by investigating outcomes of servant leadership. This research makes two valuable contributions to existing research. First, few studies have examined the degree to which servant leadership influences employee's OI or P-O fit. Do salespeople perceive a better fit with their organization and identify more with it when their sales manager is viewed as a servant leader? This question is very relevant since OI and P-O fit are antecedents to performance and turnover intentions. Second, this study investigates if servant leadership influences turnover intentions directly or indirectly through P-O fit and OI. While turnover has been studied for over 100 years (Lee et al., 2017), comprehending predictors of turnover is especially important given that the costs of turnover (e.g., recruiting and training new employees) could be as high as 200 percent (Rubenstein et al., 2018). Turnover is particularly relevant in the selling profession where the turnover in some selling jobs is much higher than other jobs (Richardson, 1999). This study will analyze if servant leadership has a direct influence on turnover intentions of salespeople or indirectly through other variables. The literature review and support for the hypotheses are presented below.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Servant Leadership

Robert Greenleaf (1977) is often given credit for the development of servant leadership. The key to how Greenleaf defined servant leadership is his emphasis on the servant leader to be a servant first. He saw servant leadership as more than just managing. Greenleaf (1977) envisioned servant leadership as a method of how one lives his or her life. Servant leaders have a moral responsibility to help not only the organization to succeed but also their subordinates, and the organization's clients and stakeholders (Ehrhart, 2004). Servant leaders place the needs of followers first rather than their own self-interest (Panaccio et al., 2015). Long-term organizational objectives will be achieved by first focusing on followers' needs and ambitions and secondly on their own self-interest (Giolito et al., 2021). They communicate openly and honestly with employees about organizational goals and the importance of achieving those goals (Hu and Liden, 2011). Servant leaders are distinctive from other leaders in two ways: serving first and concentrating on others' needs (Grisaffe et al., 2016; Liden et al., 2014).

Servant leadership encompasses seven dimensions (Panaccio et al., 2015): (1) helping followers grow and succeed in their careers; (2) behaving ethically; (3) empowering followers to handle and solve problems; (4) making the satisfaction of subordinates needs a top priority; (5) paying attention to followers' personal concerns; (6) developing subordinates conceptual skills so that they can perform their jobs more effectively; and (7) creating value for the community.

While servant leadership has similarities to other leadership theories (Erhart, 2004; Eva et al., 2019; Russell and Stone, 2002; Stone et al., 2004; van Dierendonck, 2011), one of the major differences of servant leadership from the other leadership theories (authentic, ethical, and transformational), is its emphasis on the needs of followers and service to others (van Dierendonck, 2011; van Dierendonck et al., 2014). As opposed to other leadership theories where

the leader's agenda is emphasized, servant leaders inspire employees by focusing on their needs and behaviors (Liden et al., 2014). The results reported by Grisaffe et al. (2016) and Hoch et al. (2018) have shown that servant leadership is distinct from other leadership theories and provides incremental variance in predicting employees' job attitudes and behavior over other leadership theories.

### **Organizational Identification**

Organizational identification (OI) has been defined as “perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) of which he or she is a member” (Mael and Ashforth, 1992, p. 104). It is a form of psychological attachment that happens when members accept the important features of the organization as features that define themselves (Dutton et al., 1994). OI has become one of the most important concepts in organizational behavior because of its link to significant attitudes and behaviors (Edwards, 2005).

The concept of OI began with the work of social identity scholars (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 1979, 1985). Social identity theory examines the behavior of group members based on their perceived status differences and comparisons with members of other groups. An essential aspect of identification is the value a person attributes to membership in the organization (Tajfel, 1982). According to social identity theory, group classification involves three mental processes: (1) social categorization – the method that people classify themselves into different groups based on visible characteristics (e.g., gender, age, race), (2) social identification – the method that people use to identify as part of a group, which influences them to adopt and behave according to group norms and (3) social comparison – the method that people use to compare their group to other groups regarding social standing and prestige.

The extent to which a person identifies with a group determines the level the person applies the group's characteristics to himself or herself and behaves in a similar way to other members of the group (Ashforth and Mael, 1989); Dutton et al., 1994). According to social identity theory, group members view themselves as distinct from members of other groups, which allows them to maintain group identity (Tajfel, 1982). When a person strongly identifies with the group, he or she behaves according to the group's expectations (Olkonen and Lipponen, 2006). Ashforth et al., state that organizational identification “is at the core of why people join organizations and why they voluntarily leave, why they approach their work the way they do and why they interact with others the way they do during that work” (2008, p. 334).

A key aspect of servant leaders is their emphasis on serving others outside of the organization, which is a distinctive characteristic of the organization. They also convey the organization's emphasis on fostering a culture where employees can develop their skills, allow opportunities for personal growth, and acknowledge appreciation for their contributions to the organization's success (Liden et al., 2008; Schaubroeck et al., 2011; van Dierendonck, 2011). Employees will view the organization as an attractive place to work, feel more valued, and identify more strongly with its goals and values when working for a servant leader. Employees identify more strongly when they view the organization as an attractive place to work (Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006).

Interestingly, few studies have investigated how servant leadership impacts employees' OI. For example, three studies using employees in China, (Zhang et al., 2012; Zhao et al., 2016; Zhu and Zhang, 2020) and one study that sampled 205 food employees in Pakistan (Chughati,

2016) reported that servant leadership was positively related to OI. No study could be located that surveyed a sample of American workers or salespeople. Thus, a need appears to exist for a study examining the relationship between servant leadership and OI with salespeople working in the United States. Although only four studies have investigated the relationship between servant leadership and OI, each study reported that servant leadership is positively related to OI. Therefore, the following hypothesis is offered to be tested.

H<sup>1</sup>: Servant leadership is positively related to OI.

### **Person-Organization Fit**

Kristof (1996, pp. 4 -5) defined person-organization fit (P-O fit) as “the compatibility between people and organizations that occurs when: (a) at least one entity provides what the other needs, or (b) they share similar fundamental characteristics, or (c) both.” Schneider (2001, p. 142) has asserted that P-O fit is so influential “as to be one of, if not, the dominant conceptual forces in the field.” P-O fit has been an important concept for over thirty years (Chatman, 1989; O'Reilly et al., 1991).

Schneider's (1987) ASA theory (attraction-selection-attrition model) is considered the foundation of P-O fit. According to ASA theory, people will be attracted and apply to organizations that match (fit) their personality with the features of potential employers. Organizations will target potential employees that they consider to be a good fit through various recruitment processes. They select from among the pool of applicants the individuals who they believe are the best fit for their organization (Huffcutt et al., 2001). Applicants are more likely to accept the offer when they perceive their characteristics (attitudes, personality, and values) are congruent with the characteristics of the organization making the offer. Employees who do not perceive a good fit between their characteristics and the organization's characteristics will have lower job satisfaction and performance than other employees who perceive a good fit (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Through performance feedback, organizations may send a signal to employees that they are not a good fit and encourage them to leave. Essentially, according to ASA theory, individuals will seek employment with organizations and stay longer with those organizations where their characteristics align with those of the company (Chapman et al., 2005). According to ASA theory organizations seek individuals who have a “homogeneity of personality” through ASA (Schneider et al., 2000, p. 74).

Most research involving P-O fit has involved outcomes and not antecedents of P-O fit. Does a leader's characteristics influence subordinates' perception of how well they fit within the organization? Only one study was found that analyzed the relationship between servant leadership and P-O fit. Jaramillo et al. (2009) reported that servant leadership was a significant predictor of P-O fit. Given the importance of P-O fit in predicting job attitudes (job satisfaction, and organizational commitment), and the recent attention given to servant leadership, more research investigating the relationship between the two variables is needed.

Theoretically, a sales manager who is a servant leader should envelop feelings among the salesforce that they fit well with the company. Servant leaders allow employees to handle difficult situations as they feel best. They make career development for their subordinates a priority while also putting the interests of their employees ahead of his/her own. Supportive behavior is a key dimension of servant leadership. Last, they make behaving ethically a priority. That attitude coincides with the fact that salespeople often work without direct supervision and

need the freedom to make decisions without consulting their sales manager. All salespeople encounter periods when making sales is difficult. During these “down times,” they need support from their sales manager. Salespeople who have high moral values also appreciate working for a sales manager who is servant leader. While only study has examined the relationship between servant leadership and P-O fit, based on research by Chatman (1989) and Schneider (1990), salespeople will report a better fit when congruence between their values and those of the sales manager exists.

H<sup>2</sup>: Servant leadership is positively related to P-O fit.

Intuitively, employees who perceive a positive fit with their organization should identify more strongly with the organization. Pratt (1998) has argued that OI and P-O fit are theoretically similar. Social identity theory, which suggests that individuals are attracted to other individuals based on similarity, is the foundation for OI. A person’s self-identity is increased by congruence with the environment (O’Reilly et al., 1991). Several studies including the meta-analysis by Kristof-Brown et al. (2005) have reported that P-O fit is critical in creating OI (Anaza, 2015; Bouraoui et al., 2005; Cable and DeRue, 2002; Demir et al., 2015). This research has reported that P-O fit is positively related to OI.

H<sup>3</sup>: P-O fit is positively related to OI.

Research has shown that OI has a moderate, but significant correlation with in-role performance. In their meta-analysis both Koo et al. (2015) and Ricketta (2005) reported virtually the same correlation between OI and performance ( $r = .18$ ) and ( $r = .17$ ) respectively.

H<sup>4</sup>: OI is positively related to performance.

### **Antecedents of Turnover**

Analyzing the causes of turnover has been focus of research for over 100 years (Lee et al., 2017). Turnover is especially important in professional selling because of both the direct and indirect costs (customer retention and training costs) of turnover (Boles et al., 2012). Thus, additional hypotheses related to understanding salesforce turnover will be tested.

Four meta-analyses have been conducted examining the correlation between P-O fit and turnover intentions (Arthur et al., 2006; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Verquer et al., 2003). The results have been consistent in showing that P-O fit has a significant correlation with turnover intentions.

H<sup>5</sup>: P-O fit is negatively related to turnover intentions.

People who strongly identify with their organization often have several reasons for wanting to remain employed there. First, they will have a greater sense of belonging to the organization when they have a strong identity with it. Second, when they perceive a good match between their values and the organization’s values, they are more likely to have a desire to remain part of the organization and vice versa (Schneider, 1987). Third, a major goal of organizations is to retain their best employees. An employee who possesses high OI will more

likely share and support this goal and choose to not leave (Ashforth and Mael, 1989); Van Knippenberg, 2000). Last, a person's self-concept will be enhanced when he or she displays higher levels of OI. They want to be part of an organization when their need for self-enhancement is increased, and uncertainty is reduced (Pratt, 1998). Leaving the organization would be harmful to a person's self-concept (Haslam and Turner, 2001) and therefore he or she is less likely to leave. Previous research has reported that OI has a significant, negative relationship with turnover intentions (van Dick et al., 2004; van Knippenberg et al., 2007; Zhu et al., 2017).

H<sup>6</sup>: OI is negatively related to turnover intentions.

Last, research has shown that performance is negatively related to turnover intentions among salespeople (e.g., DeConinck and Johnson, 2009; Pettijohn et al., 2007; Pappas et al., 2023).

H<sup>7</sup>: Performance is negatively related to turnover intentions.

An important question relates to how servant leadership influences turnover intentions. Does servant leadership have a direct, significant relationship with turnover intentions or is the relationship mediated by other variables? Research results do not provide a clear answer to this question. For example, in their recent meta-analysis Chaudhry et al. (2021) reported a moderate, significant correlation between servant leadership and turnover intentions. However, some research indicates that servant leadership predicts turnover intentions directly (Hunter et al., 2013; Westbrook and Peterson, 2022) while other research has reported the relationship between the two variables is mediated by other variables (Jaramillo et al., 2009; Zhao et al., 2016). Given the importance of turnover in professional selling (Boles et al., 2012), a need appears to exist to investigate the direct relationship between servant leadership and turnover intentions. Since the results of past research has produced mixed results, a research question versus a hypothesis will be proposed.

R<sup>1</sup>: Is the relationship between servant leadership and turnover intentions direct or indirect through other variables?

## **METHODS**

### **Sample and Procedure**

This study involved both sales managers and salespeople who they managed. A list of sales managers was purchased from a business that sells various email lists of businesses. A list of 400 sales managers were emailed explaining the study's purpose along with a copy of the questionnaire and requesting that their salespeople and they participate in the study. Each salesperson was requested to go online and complete the survey. Confidentiality was promised to each participant as the responses would be seen only by the researchers. Eighty-two of the sales managers and 228 of the salespeople agreed to participate.

Most of the salespeople were married (69.3%) male (70.6%) and possessed at least a two-year college degree (88.6%). They averaged 12.3 years of sales experience and had worked for their current employer an average of 7.4 years. Their average income was \$78,792. The compensation for the salespeople is as follows: salary, commission, and/or bonus (52.6%), salary

(28.1), and commission (20.1). They worked in a variety of industries including manufacturing, service, and wholesaling.

Demographic information for the sales managers is as follows: all but two of the sales managers had completed at least four years of college; a large percentage of the sales managers were men (70, 81.7%); they had been employed as a sales manager for an average of 9.8 years; the number of salespeople supervised ranged from 4 to 8 with the average number being 6.1.

## Measures

All items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). *Servant Leadership* was measured using the 7 – item scale developed by Liden et al. (2015) ( $\alpha = .87$ ). Two items were used to measure *Performance* ( $\alpha = .82$ ). The sales managers were asked to rate each salesperson’s performance regarding achieving annual sales targets and keeping expenses at acceptable levels. *Organizational identification* was measured using the six-item scale developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992) ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ). Turnover intentions were measured using three items developed by Konovsky and Cropanzano (1991) ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ). *P–O fit* was assessed using Cable and DeRue’s` (2002) three item subjective fit measure ( $\alpha = .91$ ). The factor loadings were high for each variable: performance .76 to .80, organizational identification .62 to .84; P-O fit .82 to .90; turnover intentions .70 to .86, and servant leadership .63 to .87. The variance extracted for each construct was .60 for performance, .63 for servant leadership, .55 for OI, .74 for P-O fit, and .63 for turnover intentions.

## RESULTS

The correlations among the variables along with their mean and standard deviations appear in the table.

Table Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations

	OI	Perf	SL	PO	Turn
Organ. Iden					
Perform	.29				
Servant Lead	.42	.24			
P-O fit	.50	.25	.50		
Turnover Int	.33	.28	.21	.31	
Means	47.6	36.0	37.8	26.5	9.5
Std. Dev.	10.2	6.9	14.5	7.1	2.2

Model fit was assessed by using traditional goodness-of-fit measures: comparative fit index (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). Values above .9 for the CFI and SRMR indicate a very good model fit. A value below 0.05 for RMSEA indicates a very good model fit (Hair et al., 2018).

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicate a very good fit ( $\chi^2 = 260.73$ ,  $df = 179$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .95; SRMR = .039; RMSEA = .046) while the fit indices also indicated a very good fit for the hypothesized model fit ( $\chi^2 = 264.58$ ,  $df = 182$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .97; SRMR = .042; RMSEA = .043).



Support was found for the hypotheses: Servant leadership is positively related to OI ( $H^1 \beta = .22, t = 2.95$ ); Servant leadership is positively related to P-O fit ( $H^2 \beta = .47, t = 7.45$ ); P-O fit is positively related to OI ( $H^3 \beta = .39, t = 4.75$ ); OI is positively related to performance ( $H^4 \beta = .31, t = 3.66$ ); P-O fit is negatively related to turnover intentions ( $H^5 \beta = -.17, t = 2.11$ ); OI is negatively related to turnover intentions ( $H^6 \beta = -.19, t = 2.18$ ); performance is negatively related to turnover intentions ( $H^7 \beta = -.18, t = 2.10$ ). The research question involved determining if servant relationship was a direct predictor of turnover intentions or if the relationship was strictly mediated by other variables. One additional path was added to the model testing this relationship. The results indicated that this revised model was not significantly different from the hypothesized model ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 1.32 NS$ ). Thus, the relationship between servant leadership and turnover intentions is mediated by OI and P-O fit.

## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the direct influence of servant leadership on OI and P-O fit and its indirect relationship with performance and turnover intentions. The results have several important implications regarding outcomes of servant leadership. An important theoretical implication is that servant leadership is a direct predictor of both OI and P-O fit. Salespeople who view their sales manager as a servant leader reported that they had a higher level of P-O fit. Only one study could be found that investigated the relationship between P-O fit and servant leadership (Jaramillo et al., 2009). Since only one study has analyzed this relationship, this study makes an important contribution to the understanding of the connection between P-O fit and servant leadership. Sales managers who are servant leaders make career development of the salesforce a priority and allow salespeople the freedom to handle difficult situations in their own way. In addition, they won't compromise their ethical principles to achieve success. The salespeople in this study reported that when their sales manager possessed these traits, they perceived a better fit with the organization. They perceive their values aligning with the values of their company. The key point is that, according to ASA theory (Chapman et al., 2005), employees will want to work for and stay employed with a company where their characteristics are like those of the company. The results of this study are important because they indicate that servant leadership is linked to the degree in which employees perceive their fit in the organization.

The results indicated that servant leadership is also important in determining a salesperson's identity with their organization. This result supports the limited prior research indicating the positive relationship relation between servant leadership and OI (Chaudhry et al., 2021). Salespeople identify more with their organization when working for a sales manager who is a servant leader. OI is important because it influences an employee's decision to work for a specific company and how he or she interacts with other employees.

Another implication is the significant relationship between OI and performance. Prior research has indicated a significant, but somewhat low correlation between OI and performance (Greco et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2015; Peng and Kim, 2020; Riketta, 2005). Dissimilar to the results reported by (Gabler et al., 2014) in their study involving salespeople, the results in this study indicated that OI is a significant predictor of performance. Further research needs to confirm these results.

The last important result is that servant leadership was not a direct of turnover intentions. Its relationship with turnover intentions is mediated by both OI and P-O fit. Thus, while

employing sales managers who are viewed as servant leaders by the salesforce has important implications regarding salespersons' OI and their perceived fit, they do not have a direct influence on turnover intentions among the salespeople they manage.

### **Limitations and Future Research Opportunities**

Like all research, this study has some limitations. First, this study examined only five variables. Future research could include additional outcome variables of servant leadership such as actual turnover rather than turnover intentions and organizational justice. Second, this study focused on only outcomes of servant leadership and not antecedent variables. Some antecedent variables that could be included are moral identity, extroversion, and narcissism. A third limitation of this study is that the sample was cross-sectional. Examining salespeople working for a singular company may have produced different results.

Several future research opportunities exist. One area of future research involves examining gender differences regarding servant leadership. Are women or men more prone to be servant leaders? A second area of future research is investigating how sales training influences servant leadership. Most organizations probably don't emphasize servant leadership as part of their training for either the sales manager or the salespeople. Several interesting questions arise with training. How many organizations do emphasize traits associated with servant leadership or the other leadership theories (transformational and ethical)? Can servant leadership training be successfully implemented into the salesforce? Should companies hire internal or external trainers and/or sales managers?

In conclusion, this study's results have revealed the importance of investigating the degree to which servant leadership influences OI, P-O fit, performance, and turnover intentions. Overall, the results show the importance of servant leadership in the salesforce.

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