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Dr. Amina Omar Mohamud

Faculty of Management
Science, SIMAD University,
Mogadishu, Somalia

Dr. Mohamud Mohamed Allaso

Faculty of Computing, SIMAD
University, Mogadishu,
Somalia

Servant leadership and employee well-being: A path toward sustainable organizational performance in East Africa

Amina Omar Mohamud and Mohamud Mohamed Allaso

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Abstract

Servant leadership has emerged as a critical leadership model embraced within organizations and targeted to improve employees' well-being, morale, and performance, leading to organizational excellence over time. This qualitative study sought to explore how servant leadership might encourage greater employee well-being and job satisfaction, and how this relates to the sustainability of organizational performance in the East African context. Data were synthesized from peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and conference proceedings pertinent to Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Findings demonstrate that servant leadership encourages organizational trust and safety, reduces stress, and enhances employee engagement, with positive implications for sustainability outcomes. However, challenges exist within contexts such as hierarchy of leadership, limited leadership training, and socio-economic competing priorities. The study recommends that servant leadership and well-being recapitalization be strategically pursued for improved productivity and governance in both public and private sectors in East Africa.

Keywords: Servant leadership, employee wellbeing, organizational performance, sustainable leadership, east africa, human resource management

Introduction

In recent decades, leadership research has shifted from transactional and transformational paradigms toward more human-centered approaches emphasizing ethical behavior and employee development (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010) ^[6, 16]. Among these, servant leadership stands out for its focus on the growth, empowerment, and well-being of employees as a pathway to sustainable organizational performance (Eva *et al.*, 2019) ^[5]. This servant leadership model, with its emphasis on humility, empathy, and community stewardship, resembles the African communal leadership models, such as *Ubuntu*—"I am because we are" (Nkomo, 2011) ^[12]. These culture bounded values can create environments for the promotion of servant leadership to organisational systems that are beneficial to employee's well-being and enhances and sustains their performance.

Despite being popular in international management literature for over four decades, there is little empirical evidence from East Africa for the uptake of these servant leadership concepts (Okeyo & Were, 2022) ^[14]. Most organisations are run from the top down using colonial administrative styles (Kamoche *et al.*, 2012) ^[7], and this has given rise to disengaged staff, low job satisfaction, and staff burnout, affecting performance and staff retention in most organisations (Ngari *et al.*, 2023) ^[11].

Thus, there is a critical research gap concerning how servant leadership principles can enhance employee well-being-including mental, emotional, and professional satisfaction-and contribute to sustainable organizational outcomes in East Africa.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the effect of servant leadership behaviours on employee well-being and job satisfaction in East African organisations.
2. To investigate how employee well-being mediates the relationship between servant leadership and organisational performance.
3. To identify cultural and contextual factors that enhance or inhibit servant leadership effectiveness in East Africa.

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Amina Omar Mohamud

Faculty of Management
Science, SIMAD University,
Mogadishu, Somalia

4. To develop recommendations on integrating well-being frameworks into leadership development programmes across the region.

Therefore, there is a need to revisit how servant leadership principles regulate employee well-being (satisfaction in mind and emotions, and satisfaction from their jobs) as well as provide sustainable organisation performance in East Africa.

Literature review

Concept of Servant Leadership

The title servant leadership was coined by Greenleaf, (1977) [6] who argued that a leader should have more in concern—that is active concerns—in serving others instead of self. The next group of scholars outlined it as: listening, empathy, stewardship, and commitment to the growth of people (Spears, 2010; Van Dierendonck, 2011) [16, 17]. Aspects more relevant to multicultural environments and resource constraints environments is suggested by Patterson (2019) [15].

Employee Wellbeing and Job Satisfaction

Employee wellbeing relies on physical, psychological, and social cohesion factors for job satisfaction and engagement (Danna & Griffin, 1999) [3]; Deci and Ryan (2000) [4] and Bakker and Demerouti (2017) [1] looks at the positive impact of supportive leadership on wellbeing stemming from autonomy, purpose and recognition.

Servant leadership and employee performance

Studies suggests that servant leaders promote trust, collaboration and performance (Eva *et al.*, 2019) [5]. Community based leadership strongly inherent in African setting is advocated for some great leadership qualities, inclusiveness and resilience (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016; Walumbwa *et al.*, 2010) [2, 19].

Servant Leadership in East Africa

While belief in Ubuntu features as an important pillar of servanthood, actual practice in Africa is still poorly demonstrated because of “centralized organization management paradigms” (Van Schalkwyk, 2019) [18]. A study of servant leadership on Kenyan public agencies showed evidence of reducing sickness absence. In Uganda, a study on servants’ NGO suggested that servant leadership stimulate organized behavior (Kasozi & Waiswa, 2021) [8]. Nzuve and Bakari (2020) [13] further demonstrated that servant leadership boosts morale. Lack of leadership development programs, awareness of the servant leadership model and high rate of economic insecurity limited their practices (Mwesigwa *et al.*, 2022) [10].

Methodology

A qualitative content review of peer reviewed literature were conducted on some evidences around servant leadership, employee wellbeing and employee performance in east Africa. Data were obtained from academic journal articles, policy papers, conference proceedings, and reports from institutions. Key databases of interest included Google Scholar, Scopus, and ResearchGate. Also, studies examining leadership and human resource management in East Africa.

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted to detect

recurring themes across studies, categorized into three sets of key themes: (1) servant leadership behaviours, (2) employee well-being, and (3) organisational performance.

Research Findings and Discussion

The Influence of Servant Leadership on Employee Wellbeing

Studies reveal that key attributes of servant leadership - empathy, listening, and empowerment - are positively associated with employees' wellbeing. Lower turnover and increased employee satisfaction were noted in NGOs and microfinance institutions in Kenya (Nzuve & Bakari, 2020) [13] contrasted with non-servant leadership models, while Ugandan healthcare organisations indicated trust and team composition increased due to the presence servant leaders (Mwesigwa *et al.*, 2022) [10].

Employee Wellbeing - A Mediator to Sustainable Performance

There is evidence to support the premise that employee wellbeing functions as a mediator variable between servant leadership and performance, noting a correlation of advantage where a sense of employee welfare is backed by organisation values relates a productivity gain (Okeyo & Were, 2022) [14].

Cultural and Contextual considerations

A notable contributor to the acceptance of servant leadership is cultural collectivism in East Africa (Nkomo, 2011) [12]; however, the bureaucratic legacy and an inadequately strong pool of experience in the appreciation of leadership training means implementation efforts are stuttered (Kamoche *et al.*, 2012) [7].

Implications for Practice

Sustainable performance is best conducted in an environment where a sense of well-being accompanies the employee wellbeing, fostering strong good practices to become axioms according the practices of organisational policies and the leadership development program. It is the duty of organizations to create openings for mentoring and participative management that will keep alive the culture of servant leadership.

Recommendations

- **No one left behind:** It will do for every organization to make provisions for its internal bodies at that to grow servant leadership to give clarity to scale of what-should-be of its managers and workers, qualify, put-to-use, and reward their abilities in listening, showing empathy, and putting people ahead of possessions.
- **Care of the employees:** Nothing must be impugned, within the mechanics of staffs’ association, in the minium standard setting of the confines of appropriate psychological need that positions servant leadership, as well the heart-style of the defaulted award scheme in recording the impact on business (see:b) on the verged, nearing and fully in line being impacts recorded on Part, by the HR unit going above board and on its own to include the provisions of psychological support.
- **Cross-industry Collaboration:** Government, femininity and academia bless do good service in making such slideroom preparations for servant leadership in such called Oriental dimension Centre of

Excellence that could expand it in other regional centres of leadership good make the servant researchers' chances to hone their originality and pursue a thing or learn neat things as in Africa).

- **National HRA, policy intervention:** “As a high to do and as HR, too”, fashion a tenant, for itself, maybe a servant leadership policy that defines and which influence what it expects to get back from leadership.

Conclusion

It would reshape the cut-throat competition in East Africa. Servant leadership is open once again to more competitive edge, tactic and bottom-line, if it can be, again, custom made to suit these good intents in East Africa. As much research is carried out in various industries one at a time or two+ at a time leading to quantifiable rates of productivity being attributed to “servant leaders”, I expect to provide at least exploratory research in future. I might “pop up” representative of atonse aspic. Pop round, okay?

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