Servant leadership and employee engagement: a qualitative study

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Abstract

Servant Leadership is a holistic approach whereby leaders act with morality, showing great concern for the company's stakeholders and engaging followers in multiple dimensions, such as emotional, relational and ethical, to bring out their full potential and empower them to grow into what they are capable of becoming. Servant leadership has been linked through various mediators to positive individual and collective outcomes, including behavioral, attitudinal, and performance. Among follower attitudinal outcomes, the present study aims at deepening the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement in a large Italian consulting firm; first, by assessing the implementation of a servant leadership approach through a survey based on SL-7; second, by qualitatively investigating the servant leadership experiences lived by junior employees and their influence on individual engagement though a semi-structured questionnaire. The findings of the study suggest that employee engagement is positively influenced by servant leadership through various mediators, either leader-centered, such as empowerment, team-centered, such as team cohesion, organization-centered, such as positive organizational climate, job-centered, such as challenging tasks, and employee-centered, such as proactive personality. Some factors also emerged to hinder the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement, particularly those related to the working environment: namely, high pressure, poor work-life balance and remote-working. The article also provides theoretical and practical implications and identifies potential areas for future research on servant leadership.

Keywords: servant leadership, employee engagement, SL-7

1.   Introduction

1.1.   Servant leadership

In response to negative outcomes emerging from leadership styles associated with the promotion of the leader's self-interest, moral-based leaderships have recently emerged with the aim of promoting integrity and prioritizing the support and development of followers (Liden et al., 2015). Servant Leadership is a holistic approach whereby leaders act with morality, showing great concern for the company's stakeholders (Shirin, 2015) and engaging followers in multiple dimensions, such as emotional, relational and ethical, to bring out their full potential and empower them to grow into what they are capable of becoming (Eva et al, 2019). In other words, leaders, instead of pursuing their self-interest, focus on investing in personal relationships with employees and other company's stakeholders to increase trust, loyalty and commitment. Key qualities of servant leaders are humility, ensuring followers'

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development, listening, sharing in decision-making, behaving ethically and promoting a sense of community (Jit et al., 2016). The idea is that when followers needs and well-being are prioritized, they are able to achieve their goals, and this flows upward so that the leader's and the organizational goals are met in turn (Kohntopp and McCann, 2018). Servant leadership has been linked through various mediators to positive individual and collective outcomes, including behavioral, such as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and proactive behavior (Walumbwa et al., 2010; Hu and Liden, 2011; Liden et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2016; Bande et al., 2016) attitudinal, such as engagement and job satisfaction (Mayer et al., 2008; Schneider and George, 2011; van Dierendonck et al., 2013; Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2014; Chan and Mak, 2014; Coetxer, Bussin, and Geldenhuys, 2017; Amah, 2018), and performance, such as team performance and innovative behavior (Schaubroek et al., 2011; Hu and Liden, 2011; Song et al., 2015; Panaccio, Henderson, Liden, Wayne, and Cao, 2015; Rasheed, Lodhi, and Habiba, 2016; Krog and Govender, 2015). For these reasons, several companies, including some of those ranked by Forbes Magazine among the "best 100 to work for", such as Mariott, Starbucks, SAS and Zappos.com (Eva et al., 2019), foster an organizational climate based on service, ethics and healthy work relationships that significantly contribute to organizational success.

The concept of servant leadership is not new among both academics and practitioners, as it was introduced by Greenleaf in his essay "the servant as leader" (1970, 1977), where he argued that true leadership is synonymous with service, and servant leaders' highest priority is to serve others, namely employees, customers and the community. However, it has received growing consideration by scholars especially in the last 2010s. The literature on servant leadership can be divided in three main streams of research: a first stream focusing on its conceptual development, a second stream investigating its measures and its most relevant outcomes, and a most recent stream deepening these relationships to identify antecedents, mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions (Allen et al., 2016; Eva et al., 2019).

1.2. SL-7

In the second stream of research, different measures of servant leadership have been developed with the aim of testing its degree of implementation in a given organizational context. Eva et al (2019) identified 16 measures in extant literature and examined each of them according to their relative theoretical and methodological rigor in construction

and validation phases. They ended up recommending 3 out of 16 scales of servant leadership under study, among which Liden et al.'s (2015) 7 item composite measure (SL-7). SL-7 consists in a shortened version of the global servant leadership measure of 28 items developed by Liden et al. (2008). As a multidimensional construct, it covers 7 different dimensions identified in servant leadership: 1) emotional healing, which addresses the leader's involvement in the follower's well-being and personal problems; 2) creating value for the community, which assesses the leader's concern towards the community surrounding the organization; 3) conceptual skills, which captures the leader's ability to deal with work problems and understand organizational goals, 4) empowering, which reflects the extent to which the leader delegates to followers entrusting them with autonomy and responsibility; 5) helping subordinates grow and succeed, which is related to the development of followers' full potential by the leader to help them grow into what they are capable of becoming; 6) putting subordinates first, which involves the leader's motivation to serve followers and prioritize their needs and well-being; 7) behaving ethically, which includes behaving with integrity, honesty and trustworthiness (Liden et al., 2015). The limited number of items (i.e. seven) makes this scale concise, while still valid and reliable, and does not introduce fatigue or boredom among respondents with a negative impact on quality. Even though SL-7 has already been validated and tested by scholars across various organizations (Karatepe et al., 2018; Lapointe and Vandenberghe, 2015; Tang et al., 2016), to the authors' knowledge, it hasn't been applied to the Italian cultural, economic and political context, yet.

1.3. Employee engagement

Servant leadership has been linked to several individual and collective outcomes, either follower centered, leader centered, team centered and climate and organization centered. With regards to followers, three types of outcomes seem to be influenced by servant leaders: behavioral outcomes, attitudinal outcomes and performance outcomes (Eva et al., 2019). Among follower attitudinal outcomes, some scholars assessed a positive relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement (van Dierendonck et al., 2013; Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2014; Coetzer, Bussin and Geldenhuys, 2017; Ling et al., 2017).

The term engagement was first mentioned by Kahn in 1990 in his article "Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work" (1990), where he stated that "in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically,

cognitively, and emotionally during role performances". Since his conceptualization, several authors have defined and measure the construct differently, to the point that nowadays there is still little consistency around the term (Borah and Barua, 2018). Overall, employee engagement refers to a series of positive attitudes displayed by employees, such as passion for their work and organization, commitment and contribution to organizational success. Since the human capital represents one of the most important assets in an organization, leaders are challenged to identify those drivers that can either increase or decrease engagement. When employees are engaged, they become in fact more emotionally involved, loyal and productive, thus providing better customer service experiences, particularly in services-oriented firms (Keith, 2008; Carter and Baghurst, 2013). Disengaged employees, instead, can negatively affect organizational performance through absenteeism, non-participation, poor customer service and an adverse approach towards colleagues (Carter and Baghurst, 2013). It is therefore essential for leaders to create a unique organizational culture based on ethics where they lead through service, meaning that they collaborate with followers for the achievement of established organizational goals without imposing authoritative power.

When analyzing the concept of employee engagement, an overlap of attributes emerges with respect to servant leadership, such as the fact that both constructs imply the emotional attachment of employees to their organization. This further suggests that servant leadership may have a positive influence on employee engagement.

1.4.   Purpose of the study

Although the concept of servant leadership is not recent in time, significant empirical research started after the seminal work by Ehrhart (2004) and mainly consisted in quantitative research conducted in the United States and China (Eva et al., 2019). Most studies have focused on quantitative analyses of the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement (e.g. van Dierendonck et al., 2013; Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2014; Coetzer, Bussin and Geldenhuys, 2017; Ling et al., 2017). Very limited qualitative research on the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement is available so far. Thus, the present study aims at providing a complementary qualitative contribution in the Italian context, where the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement has been very little investigated. Particularly, it addresses an organization where the servant leadership approach is likely to be adopted: a large and long-term oriented services

firm (i.e. consulting), having several female leaders. Servant leadership has indeed been predominantly observed in organizations having some degree of permanence, with a long-term orientation (Kohntopp and McCann, 2018). Moreover, servant leadership, as a leadership style focused on serving others, is closely related to employees' service behaviors (Su et al., 2020). By providing guidance to their subordinates and inspiring them with vision, servant leaders can pass on them their motivation to serve and help them grow into service-oriented employees (Greenleaf, 1970; Lemoine et al., 2019). Last but not least, the organization under study has been chosen as it has several female leaders compared to other consulting firms. Females differ from males in their moral reasoning modes, as they are more communal and affiliative (Eagly, 1987) and generally display higher relationship and caring characteristics (Butz and Lewis, 1996; Fridell et al. 2009). Overall, women are reported to show behaviors of altruistic calling, emotional healing, and organizational stewardship, which have been identified as central in servant leadership (Politis and Politis, 2012; Beck, 2014; de Rubio and Kiser, 2015). The fact of having several female leaders in the organization further increases the likeliness of producing a higher level of service by followers and creating a culture of help, humility and vision.

The purpose of the paper is therefore that of qualitatively investigating the servant leadership experiences lived by employees and their influence on individual engagement, thus contributing to the body of knowledge of servant leadership and partly also to that of employees' engagement.

2. Methodology

To gain a first understanding of the company and explore the existence of a servant leadership approach, a first preliminary analysis of the firm's secondary data and internal documentation as well as three interviews to senior managers were conducted. This allowed to identify some of the underpinnings of servant leadership; integrity, respect for the individual and stewardship were clearly mentioned as part of the firm's core values and DNA.

The first part of the study was then launched, with two main objectives. First, it aimed at collecting the demographic variables of the participants (gender, role and length of service) as well as of their direct supervisor (gender and role) with multiple choice questions. Second, it aimed at testing the degree of implementation of servant leadership (high, moderate, low, extremely low) in the selected consulting firm through

a survey based on SL-7 scale developed by Liden et al. (2015), consisting of seven questions with a 7-point Likert scale.

The second part of the study was qualitative and based on a phenomenological design, with the aim of investigating the drivers through which servant leadership may influence employees' engagement. In particular, a semi-structured questionnaire consisting of three open-ended questions was distributed to determine the mediating mechanisms that can foster or hinder the relationship between the two constructs, as reported in table 1.

Table 1: Research questions

RQ1	How does your leader motivate you at work and inspire you to do and accomplish more in your role?
RQ2	Which are other factors (related to your personality, your team and the organizational context) increasing your engagement?
RQ3	What about your leader and your working environment does not motivate you?

According to the literature, mediating mechanisms fostering the positive relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement can be of four types: leader-centered, follower-centered, team-centered and finally climate and organization-centered (Eva et al., 2019).

The first question was developed on the basis of the extant literature (Carter and Baghurst, 2013) to investigate the leader-centered mechanisms that mediate the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement.

The second question addressed the other three types of mechanisms mentioned above which could possibly foster employee engagement.

The third question was developed to explore the existence of mediating mechanisms of the four different types that hinder the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement, which, to the authors' knowledge, hasn't been addressed in the literature so far.

Overall, the phenomenological design based on these three questions sought to identify the engagement level of the participants and how this was influenced by servant leadership.

2.1. Participants

The investigated firm is among the largest companies in the world, with more than 500.000 people employed in 80 different countries, and has been ranked among the top ten management consulting firms by revenues in 2019 (CNN Money, 2011). When undertaking the study, according to the purpose of the research, only the Italian division headquartered in Milan was targeted. In Italy, the firm employs 17.000 people divided in three different practices: Technology Consulting, Business Process Operations and Strategy and Management Consulting. This last practice has its core business in consulting services whereas the others differ in terms of working methodology and client approach; for this reason, it has been addressed for the objective of the study. A further selection has been made picking, among all, the Financial Services industry counting 1.000 employees, with particular focus on banking groups, as it represents the key revenue contributor of the business, with 350 employees (250 junior resources and 100 senior resources). The main reason is that it consists in the most representative and heterogeneous segment in terms of gender and different seniority levels. In particular, junior resources (i.e. analysts, with a working experience between 0 and 3 years, and consultants, with a working experience between 3 and 6 years) were involved in the study. Therefore, the present study used individuals as the unit of analysis.

Out of the 250 employees invited to participate, 159 completed both the survey and the questionnaire, with a response rate of about 63,6%. Eight surveys and the related questionnaires were discarded due to the fact that the answers to the semi-structured questions lacked of content validity and were not connected to the purpose of the research. The final sample consisted of 151 junior employees, of which 73 females (48,3%) and 78 males (51,6%). The majority of them (61,6%) were in the role of analysts, the entry level job, while the others were consultants. With regards to the length of service, 16,56% had been working in the company for less than a year, 60,26% for a period between 1 and 3 years and 23,18% for more than 3 years. With regards to their direct supervisor, 58,9% declared to report to a male and 41,1% to a female, while the seniority of leaders was distributed as follows: 58,940% managers, 37,086% senior managers, 1,987% managing directors and 1,987% principal directors.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

Prior to the distribution of both surveys and questionnaires, confidentiality was ensured to all participants and the researcher asked for honest responses. Two URLs

containing a web-based survey and a web-based questionnaire were provided to the participants via email. This method allowed for an electronical collection of data, which ensured the effectiveness of data entry and integration while reducing the time. Surveys and questionnaires were completed during a seven weeks period.

An approach of theoretical coding was employed on surveys' data and questionnaires' information to analyze the servant leadership practices shown by leaders and their influence on subordinates. The process of thematic analysis enabled to systematically analyze qualitative information by attributing explicit "codes" which captured the essence of observations, thus enhancing the clarity of results (Boyatzis, 1998). The manual coding procedure, compared to the use of automated or computerized software, allows to gain deeper insights to the meaning of words and themes identified (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009) and it is particularly precise for the detection of subtle themes. For this reason, it was preferred and adopted together with the previous literature (Eva et al., 2019) for the generation of themes and subthemes. As a first step, data was transferred and listed in a proper worksheet (i.e. Excel), to have a clear display of the experiences of each participant in relation to their personal characteristics and those of their leaders. In the second step, the responses of participants were reviewed in order to eliminate unclear words or comments. From the third step on, the coding procedure started to be applied by taking notes on invariant constructs to identify recurring themes. In the fourth step, the meanings of themes were analyzed individually and then compared together to detect subthemes. The following step consisted in gathering the demographic information of the sample as well as counting the occurrences of themes and subthemes in order to understand their relevance with respect to the object of the study. As last step, some analyses were made through tables of statistics (i.e. pivot tables), with the aim of gaining an overview of participants' responses.

2.3.   Data validity, reliability and triangulation

Validity of data refers to how accurately data are measured, while reliability indicates the consistency of the research approach across different researchers and projects (Gibbs, 2007; Creswell, 2014). Even though confidentiality was assured at the beginning of the study, some factors could have influenced the findings.

Above all, participants could have felt pressured to participate to the survey and the questionnaire as they have been solicited by a company's manager, who represented the company's entry point for the author. However, there was no direct interaction

between the researcher and the respondents, thus reducing the possibility of bias; in fact, researchers who have little familiarity with a phenomenon tend to direct their attention to the manifest level (Boyatzis, 1998).

Moreover, the survey and the open-ended questions employed for the purpose of the study may have been limited in investigating the mechanisms at the basis of the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement, compared to face-to-face interaction. Personal interviews and focus group could have helped gain better insights on the topic. However, using a semi-structured questionnaire allowed to reduce the risk of introducing the researchers' personal bias or prior knowledge in the data collected.

Data triangulation consists in "the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data or methods of data collection in descriptions and themes in qualitative research" (Creswell, 2005). Secondary data and internal documentation (i.e. intranet, internal annual surveys) on the leadership style implemented by the firm and on employee engagement helped triangulate the research findings, which were also confirmed by the preliminary interviews with senior managers. Additional objectivity was obtained by including a second researcher in the analysis, external to the company, who reviewed the transcripts of the questionnaires and the coding process.

3.   Results

The first part of the study intended to assess the degree to which leaders exhibit behaviors that are characteristic of servant leadership. The survey based on the short scale of SL-7 developed by Liden et al. (2015) was used to measure each of the seven areas corresponding to a different servant leadership behavior (i.e. emotional healing, creating value for the community, conceptual skills, empowering, helping subordinates grow and succeed, putting subordinates first, behaving ethically) through a 7-point Likert scale question. To obtain an average score for each item, the 151 scores of every single dimension were added together and then divided by 151. Surprisingly, all items scored high, particularly the dimensions of conceptual skills, empowering and behaving ethically. These results confirmed the insights gained through the preliminary analysis on the firm's secondary data and internal documentation, together with the interviews to senior managers, during which servant leadership traits and setting had already been observed.

Once identified a servant leadership practice within the organizational context, the second part of the study was conducted. Servant leadership effects had already been linked to employee engagement by previous literature (Carter and Baghurst, 2013; De Clercq, Bouckenooghe, Raja, and Matsyborska, 2014; Bao, Li, and Zhao, 2018;). This was the starting point of the semi-structured questionnaire, with the final aim of deepening the servant leadership experiences lived by employees and investigating the mechanisms that can foster or prevent their engagement.

RQ1 sought to identify the factors through which leaders motivate employees to do and accomplish more in their role. According to Eva et al. (2019), some leader-centered mediators were identified and reported in table 1, with their relative number of occurrences in employees' responses: empowerment, leader prototypicality, LMX, trust, communication arrangements and identification with the leader.

Table 2: theme occurrences in responses to RQ1

RQ1 mediating factors	Number of occurrences
Empowerment	113
Leader prototypicality	86
LMX	71
Trust	63
Communication arrangements	38
Identification with the leader	32

Empowerment is here conceived as a set of managerial practices aiming at increasing employees' autonomy, proactivity and responsibilities. Not surprisingly, it came out to be the most significant theme affecting the level of employee engagement, with several subthemes emerging from responses.

Above all, junior resources claimed to be motivated by their leaders' encouragement to do their best on a daily basis, leveraging on their strengths and improving their

weaknesses, with the aim of achieving better results. Below are some representative comments from employees:

- "My leader always pushes myself to perform at my best";

- "She is really helping me to accomplish more";

- "My leader is inspirational (…) encouraging the entire team to overperform".

Support from both a personal and team level also emerged to be a crucial empowerment factor increasing employee engagement. In particular, subordinates appreciated the fact that their leaders stood at the front line to provide them assistance when needed and helped them achieve their personal and professional goals. This aspect was emphasized in different ways:

- "He is always available to support when I ask for help and he gives me amazing advices in terms of daily routine management";

- "My leader is a focal point for the team since he is part of our daily work, supporting and taking key decision together";

- "He is always ready to drive the group and to literally take care of you if needed. I think that these aspects match with the servant leadership definition".

Other important factors fueling engagement were autonomy and responsibility. Employees valued the fact of feeling reliable and self-sufficient in managing their everyday activities, tasks and even the relationship with the client. Very often, these two mechanisms were interrelated one another and also emerged in combination with trust. This latter has been widely analyzed in literature as a frequent moderator in the leader-follower relation (Eva et al., 2019), due to its fundamental role in fostering engagement. Here are some of the most significant statements:

- "I appreciate the way she gives me the freedom to manage my work as well as the relationship with the Client";

- "I feel confident and I perform better thanks to the independence I have when doing my job";

- "He is giving me trust and a lot of responsibility that makes me accomplish more and increases my overall motivation".

Finally, among the most relevant factors of empowerment, employees stressed the importance of undertaking new challenges on a daily basis, such as following new

projects, carrying on different activities and serving more than one client. After all, providing a range of different tasks and creating variation are known to be excellent motivators for employees (Sabir, 2017).

Comments from participants reflected their willingness to get involved in such activities:

- "My leader motivates me by pushing me out of my comfort zone";

- "The challenges she gives me are increasing day-by-day";

- "He inspires me involving me in interesting tasks".

Other behaviors shown by leaders and inspiring employees were, to a lesser extent, personal appreciation and recognition, the support of their ideas as well as a greater and more direct exposure with clients.

Leader prototypically is defined as the extent to which a leader's characteristics are representative of the characteristics of his/her group (Pierro, Cicero, Bonaiuto, van Knippenberg, and Kruglanski, 2005). The higher it is, the more likely individuals will have positive perceptions of the leader, thus increasing their willingness to change accordingly. Among the most recurring aspects cited by subordinates, there was the leader personal commitment, namely the fact that the leader is very assiduous and shows a great dedication to work. This was confirmed as follows:

- "My leader is the first one in office and the last one leaving the office";

- "My leader is a hard-worker and motivates me keeping concentration and effort high in all daily tasks";

- "My senior manager (that I can consider my current leader) is what you call a go-to-guy: (…) he is incredible, and I can't still figure out where he gets all the energy he passes down to us";

- "My leader is inspirational in terms of commitment and team-work management. I feel I am over achieving my professional goal thanks to this".

Another characteristic of the leader appreciated by employees was availability, which is fundamental, because when people feel that they can have personal access to their leaders, they are in turn more engaged (Catteeuw, Flynn, and Vonderhorst, 2007). Availability often came out in combination with the subthemes of personal and team support analyzed before, as reported in the following statements:

- "My leader is a senior manager and he's really busy; regardless his agenda, he is always available to help me going through my work";

- "He is available every time we need support or advice";

- "My leader is (…) always available for a hint/ quick help and ready to listen to each one of us";

- "He is always ready to drive the group and to literally take care of us".

The leadership and management style of supervisors also has a critical role with regards to employee engagement (Popli and Rizvi, 2016; Othman, Hamzah, Abas and Zakuan, 2017). The ability of a leader to guide a team and to effectively manage daily tasks and routine creates a positive climate that fosters employees' productive behaviors and sense of belonging to the organization (Liden et al, 2008). This is true especially when the adopted approach is supportive, inclusive and ethical. On the other hand, the lack of a clear leadership approach or a wrong management style de-motivate employees, kill productivity, and lead to disengagement and turnover (Catteeuw, Flynn, and Vonderhorst, 2007; Schyns and Jan Schilling, 2013). This aspect recurred several times in employees' responses:

- "Working for the team is the key when you are a leader and my manager puts this pillar into his managerial style and approach. This is inspirational because it makes all of us feel part of something important";

- "I like the way my leader applies his leadership style: first of all, he is always standing by our side until we have all completed our work; second, he is always ready to intervene in case we are following the wrong approach; finally, he supports us in case we have troubles with the client";

- "She is inspirational, as she can always manage though situations";

- "I feel I am overachieving my professional goal thanks to this kind of leadership that is devoted to supporting the team".

Additionally, some employees mentioned the importance of an approach oriented to action and the client, but also soft skills and enthusiasm shown by the leader.

Leader-Member exchange (LMX) focus on the relationship developed between a leader and their subordinates, from both a conceptual and emotional standpoint. Its quality is predictive of outcomes at the individual, group and organizational level (Gerstner and Day, 1997), including employee engagement. The most recurring

subthemes emerging from the questionnaire with regards to this point were guidance and leading by example. These behaviors make a leader an inspirational example to be followed by subordinates, setting the standards for the right attitude at work and conducting the team to the achievement of organizational goals. The most representative statements were:

- "He is always guiding the team without prevailing";

- "My senior manager represents a key focal point as well as an inspirational model when guiding the team";

- "She is a perfect example of how all junior resources should behave, work and perform";

- "He provides us example and guidance according to the job we have to perform".

A central aspect of servant leadership is stewardship, which was also found by the present study in the investigated organizational context, according to several respondents. Stewardship refers first and foremost to a commitment to serving the needs of others. The servant leader is distinguished by other leaders primarily by its motivation to serve his / her followers (Sendjaya and Sarros, 2002), which relies on love for people and a moral calling to help (Keith, 2008). By making the conscious choice of valuing others and behaving altruistically (Laub, 1999; Winston, 2004), servant leaders generate a share vision of help and caring while providing employees with the freedom and resources to become servants themselves with respect to clients and the community. The implementation of servant leadership creates indeed the basis for an organizational culture where employees are committed to deliver a memorable customer experience (Carter and Baghurst, 2013). Some of the respondents reported:

- "My leader feels like the one that wants to serve, and this approach guides the team to feel really committed, hence over perform and over achieve professional goals";

- "I feel like we are all really focused in reaching (…) our professional goals, and to do so we are supported and guided by our managers which are there to serve us when we need";

- "She puts us above everything and this is great. We feel committed and part of something really important";

- "My leader makes sure that our highest needs are met".

The importance of having a positive interpersonal relationship with the leader was emphasized by more than one employee. This dimension involves the degree to which the leader is emotionally attached to his / her followers and care about their personal problems and well-being. Thus, it requires some of the characteristics identified as critical to the development of servant leaders: listening, which also encompasses hearing one's own inner voice, showing empathy, to accept and recognize people for what they truly are, and healing, to help make whole those with

whom they come in contact (Spears, 2010). Examples of employees' responses include:

- "I feel I can always rely on her, also after working hours";

- "He is always ready to literally take care of you if needed";

- "The positive relationship we developed motivates me and inspires me in my role".

Trust is a multidimensional construct representative of the level of confidence that one individual has in another's competence and his or her willingness to act in a fair, ethical and predictable manner (Nyhan and Marlow, 1997; Cufaude, 1999; Maren et al., 1999). Servant-led organizations have been found to exhibit higher levels of both leader and organizational trust, which act as mediating mechanisms for several follower behavioral and attitudinal outcomes, such as engagement. Comments that can be considered representative are:

- "My leader (…) has high working standards and she never leaves something behind. At the beginning this behavior was complex for me to manage, but nowadays I feel that her trust is helping me overcome the initial concern I had and perform even better";

- "I feel trusted and this gives me great stimuli to overachieve my professional goals";

- "She puts a lot of trust in our work and this is inspiring for me".

With regards to communication arrangements, continuous feedback and tailor-made advices provided by the leader resulted as the most important factors triggering employee engagement. A one-to-one interaction aimed at learning more about each other and gaining insights on how to move the relationship forward, from both a

personal and a professional standpoint, came out to be a real stimulus for subordinates, as reported below:

- "I feel inspired by the fact that her feedback towards junior resources are continuous and important";

- "She tells me how to improve my weaknesses and reinforce my strengths";

- "He is always available to support when I ask for help and he gives me amazing advices in terms of daily routine management, cutting-down of complex tasks and issues simplification".

Some respondents also mentioned straight forward communication as the basis for a relationship generating engagement.

The last theme emerging from RQ1 was identification with the leader, which is related to the sharing of objectives, attitude and values to create an organizational culture where both leaders and followers unite to reach higher organizational goals. In particular, goal congruence, was the most recurring subtheme, with statements as:

- "There is a strong goal congruence among what we have to deliver and how my manger pretends we act in order to achieve the project objectives";

- "We both have the same mid-term professional goals".

Moreover, according to subordinates, leaders have to act in a manner that is both inspirational and of example for their followers, thus becoming key-role models to aspire to, as embedded in the following comments:

- "My senior manager represents for the team a key focal point as well as an inspirational model when delivering and guiding the team";

- "I feel like my work is always at a higher level when helped and supported by my senior manager. This makes me think he is really making the difference".

RQ2 explored those factors of servant leadership, other than leader-centered, that may influence employees' engagement. On the basis of the previous literature, the mediating mechanisms were divided in: team-centered, organization-centered, job-centered and employee-centered. In table 2, they are listed on the basis of their impact on engagement, with the number of occurrences in employees' responses.

Table 3: theme occurrences in responses to RQ2

RQ2 mediating factors	Number of occurrences
Team-centered	116
Organization-centered	61
Job-centered	34
Employee-centered	31

Factors related to the team clearly emerged as the most significative in influencing the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement. In particular, the most commonly recurring topic was team cohesion, which refers to a dynamic process where forces bind members to each other so that the team stick together and remain united in the pursuit of common objectives (Guzzo and Shea, 1992; Carron, Brawley, and Widmeyer, 1989). According to the similarity–attraction perspective, the perception of similarities in personality, attitudes and values increases the level of attraction among team members (O'Reilly, 1989; O'Reilly et al., 1991). This factor was stressed by several employees:

- "Spending time with the team outside work and sharing personal issues with them is motivating";

- "The team is really united and we all feel like one. We are part of something that moves and grows together";

- "Team cohesion is something impressive and is fostered by my leader".

Other factors reported by respondents, to a lesser extent, were team support, team efficacy and group identification.

At the organizational level, a positive organizational climate and inclusive organizational practices are very likely to influence the effectiveness of servant leadership on employee engagement. Organizational climate is a multi-dimensional concept that refers to those aspects of the environment that are consciously perceived by organizational members (Armstrong, 2003). Many participants reported that the fact of perceiving a positive organizational climate increased their commitment to work.

Inclusive organizational practices empower employees, promote equitable and more humane workplaces, and are more responsive with regards to various societal expectations (Gotsis and Grimani, 2016), thus reflecting the servant leadership philosophy. Below are some of the most significant clauses supporting this sub-theme:

- "I like the overall organizational climate that is inclusive and positive";

- "Enthusiasm and positive working environment motivate me";

- "The internal supportive environment and the inclusive organizational practices are inspiring".

Other emerging subthemes were a climate based on trust and a culture focused on a fair adoption of the work-life balance principle as well as on valuing people.

In relation to the characteristics of the job itself, its content, in terms of tasks and activities, came out to be a relevant aspect fueling employee engagement. In particular, many respondents claimed to feel really engaged by the work's topics, which were described as dynamic, diversified and challenging:

- "My current project assignment is of great interest to me";

- "Challenging tasks and goals are what I look for";

- "We deal with different opportunities and challenges everyday".

Finally, when dealing with possible employee-centered mediators, the proactive personality and motivational orientation of the follower may play a major role. Proactive personality is the personality of those who tend to take control of the environment, by seeking out opportunities, showing initiative and persevering to bring about meaningful change (Bateman and Crant, 1993; Parker et al., 2010). Previous literature has already demonstrated that proactive personality influences how followers respond to servant leaders (Newman, Schwarz, Cooper, and Sendjaya, 2017) and is in turn influenced by servant leadership itself (Panaccio, Henderson, Liden, Wayne, and Cao, 2015; Song and Lee, 2020), bringing to a series of positive individual outcomes, such as the willingness to master tasks and goals. All these factors significantly contribute to increase employee engagement, as reported by junior resources:

- "I try to create my own motivation, ambition and vision in everyday work";

- "Personal motivation is very high and I am enthusiastic about my work";

- "The fact that the more effort I put, the better the result I obtain, is inspirational to me".

In contrast to RQ1 and RQ2, RQ3 investigated the factors that can hinder the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement. The mediating mechanisms identified were divided in organization-centered and leader-centered. Some participants reported that there is nothing about their leader or their working environment that does not motivate them.

Table 4: theme occurrences in responses to RQ3

RQ3 mediating factors	Number of occurrences
Organization-centered	124
Leader-centered	18
Nothing	16

Nearly all participants stated that the main factors lowering their engagement were linked to the organization and specifically to the intense working environment. High-pressure and a poor work-life balance are not the ideal conditions where employees can thrive: they indeed require a lot of resources that are not possessed by everyone, often leading to poor psychological and emotional outcomes. Rush, long working hours and stressful deadlines during peak periods were reported as the main reasons at the heart of the problem. It must be underlined, however, that these aspects are typical of the consulting industry, regardless the degree of servant leadership implemented by the single firm. Thus, unlike other factors, they may not be fully representative of a servant leadership environment. Below are some representative statements reported by employees:

- "There is a lot of pressure and this increases the level of stress that sometimes might turn out into team-conflicts that are unusual and do not last longer than a day";

- "Working hours are sometimes really thought and pressure is always very high";

- "Sometimes the client needs are put ahead of the work-life balance principle";

- "Work-life balance is critical during peak periods and pressure is generally very high".

Another critical aspect that has seriously affected employee engagement during 2020 is related to lockdown and the pandemic restrictions of Covid-19. Because of the health crisis, several companies, including the one under study, have forced their employees (especially those with junior positions) to work remotely. According to some researchers, the intense use of agile working will lead to an increase in productivity and other positive financial outcomes (Hickman, 2019). On the other hand, it can generate stress, weaken ties among employees and obviously reduce the managers' span of control, as claimed by some subordinates of the company under study. In fact, the theme of agile working often arose in combination with two other leader-centered mediators: the unclear definition of tasks and the low supervision exercised by leaders.

- "I like working in a team, sitting near my teammates; hence I feel demotivated by remote-working";

- "Remote-working has changed the approach to work, creating a gap among us and reducing supervision";

- "Agile-working has negatively changed the way we work: tasks now are unclear and I miss my team and the working environment as a whole".

Missed promotions was another aspect considered quite relevant by employees in fueling disengagement.

4.   Discussion, limitations and further development

The study examined the leader experiences individually lived by junior employees in a consulting company. First of all, the responses of participants confirmed that servant leadership was practiced by managers and experienced by employees, and the organization overall emerged to be significantly "servant".

Additionally, several themes were identified revealing that employee engagement is positively influenced by servant leadership through various drivers, as supported by other studies (Carter and Baghurst, 2013; De Clercq, Bouckenooghe, Raja, and Matsyborska, 2014; McNeff and Irving, 2017; Bao, Li, Zhao, 2018). Employees felt more engaged when leaders valued their opinions, giving them autonomy and responsibility, owned their behaviors, through appreciation and recognition for work

contributions, and encouraged them to do their best daily and to take on new challenges. Trust, feedback on a continuous basis and ad-hoc recommendations came out as factors that helped them improve confidence in their work and willingness to perform better. Moreover, leaders were expected by employees to share professional goals and values, lead by example and act as role models towards the clients and the community. The sense of caring from managers and their motivation to prioritize followers' needs and well-being strongly contributed to have more devoted and committed employees. The characteristics of leaders most appreciated by employees came out to be their personal commitment and dedication to work, their availability and support towards the team and their management approach, especially when dealing with complex situations. All these factors contribute to the success of the organization, by creating employees who are committed and want to become servant leaders themselves to deliver an outstanding client experience.

When considering drivers increasing engagement and not related to the leader, the employee proactive personality, the strong peer-to-peer relationship, the organizational climate of trust and inclusion as well as the variety and stimulating content of the job emerged as the most valuable.

However, the findings from this study also revealed that there are factors hindering the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement, which, to the authors' knowledge, have been little investigated so far. In a servant-led organization where leaders do not impose authoritative or positional power, welcoming and valuing the opinions of all subordinates and encouraging them to take initiatives and make decisions, low supervision and unclear definition of tasks may sometimes occur. These aspects, observed in the organization under study, were even amplified by agile-working brought by the pandemic restrictions of covid-19. Some of the observed dynamics negatively affecting motivation are typical of consulting companies, such as a poor work-life balance, due to long working hours, and intense pressure, due to a fast-paced and turbulent working environment. Last but not least, it is not surprising that employees expect to have a fast career growth in a consulting firm, compared to other companies; missing the opportunity to be promoted has therefore a harmful effect on their engagement.

From a practical standpoint, the findings of the study have some implications. In similar organizational contexts, leaders should try to foster a climate of inclusion, trust, open communication, flexibility and peer relationships to have more loyal and devoted

employees, better contributing to the organizational success. Since servant leadership is a combination of a learned behavior and an innate trait, dedicated workshops, seminars and training could benefit managers and senior managers in empowering and developing followers, as well as emerging professionals in building their relationship with clients. Additionally, managers should try to reduce criticalities like those emerged in the company under study. In order to avoid low supervision and confusion, they should diversify individual tasks while distinguishing roles, develop communication strategies to overcome difficulties derived from agile-working and establish a well-defined career path and the relative steps to be achieved. They should also try to reduce pressure and enhance a better work-life balance by setting clear and realistic goals, by encouraging mindfulness with the team and the leader and by offering a flexible working environment.

The findings of this paper should be considered in the light of its limitations.

First of all, since the respondents of the survey and the questionnaire were junior resources who were asked to take part in the research by a company manager, they may have felt somehow pressured to do so. However, there was no direct interaction between the researcher and the respondents, with no possibility for the former to guide responses. Research bias was reduced by providing the confidentiality statement and by asking semi-structured open-ended questions. Moreover, data were collected and analyzed by the first researcher and then revised by a second researcher to achieve further objectivity. In future research, face-to-face interaction (i.e. individual interviews or focus groups) could provide better insights and more meaningful data specifically with regards to servant leadership, even though the possibility of influencing participants with comments by the researcher would be higher.

The results of the study can't be generalized to the consulting industry, as the sample was taken from a single organization. Future studies could assess whether this servant leadership approach is implemented by different consulting firms.

Moreover, the servant leadership influence on employee engagement may not be necessarily the same outside consulting. Quantitative correlational studies could additionally expand the scope of the research by assessing the main differences and commonalities across various industries.

Last but not least, the results could be somehow culturally driven, as the leadership style is influenced not only by organizational culture but also by national culture (Janicijevic and Marinkovic, 2015). It would be therefore interesting to assess whether

the findings of the present study could be obtained in branches of the same consulting firm located in different countries.

5.   Conclusion

This paper analyzed the servant leader experiences of 151 subordinates of a consulting firm and provided additional support to those studies showing that servant leadership is connected to employee engagement. In particular, through a qualitative analysis, the research allowed to identify those mechanisms that positively influence the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement and those that have a negative impact on it.

All in all, it can be inferred that organizational leaders have a fundamental role in establishing a culture based on ethics and trust, where subordinates are engaged to be productive, loyal and committed to the clients, to serve them with the best possible approach. Moreover, a strong tie both between a leader and his or her peers and among peers themselves can be acknowledged as the baseline for the creation of a servant-led environment, where several other factors highlighted in this study can further contribute to achievement of the organizational success.

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