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## The effects of empowerment role identity and creative role identity on servant leadership and employees' innovation implementation behavior

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine whether both empowerment role identity and creative role identity moderate the relationship between servant leadership and innovation implementation behavior. Data were collected from 6 private eye hospitals in Turkey. The sample included 393 office employees and their immediate managers. The obtained data from the questionnaires are analyzed through the SPSS statistical packaged software. Moderated hierarchical regression was used to examine the moderating roles of empowerment role identity and creative role identity on the servant leadership and innovation implementation behavior relationship. The results show that servant leadership is positively and significantly correlated with innovation implementation behavior. In addition, the results of the hierarchical multiple regression analyses support the moderating effects of empowerment role identity and creative role identity with regard to the relationship between servant leadership and innovation implementation behavior.

*Keywords:* Servant leadership, Innovation implementation behavior, Empowerment role identity, Creative role identity

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### 1. Introduction

Innovation implementation refers to the process by which employees become capable and committed to using a specific innovation. It calls for innovation adoption: 'a decision, typically made by senior organizational managers, that employees within the organization will use the innovation in their work' (Klein and Sorra, 1996). Implementation failure occurs when, regardless of this decision, employees do not engage in the innovation as frequently or as consistently as required for the potential benefits of the innovation to be realized (Klein and Sorra, 1996).

The reason for an organization's failure to achieve the intended benefits of an innovation it has adopted might, therefore, result from either a failure of implementation or a failure of the innovation itself. Increasingly,

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organizational analysts advocate the former explanation suggesting that implementation failure, not innovation failure, leads to an organization's inability to achieve the intended benefits of the innovations they adopt (Klein and Sorra, 1996). The understanding of factors that promote employees' innovation implementation behavior – 'an individual's consistent and committed use of a particular innovation' (Choi and Price, 2005:84) – is, therefore, needed. This study refers to an innovation as 'a technology or practice that an organization is using for the first time, regardless whether other organizations have previously used the technology or practice' (Klein et al., 2001:811). A review of literature by Klein and Knight (2005) has identified several factors which play a critical role in influencing innovation implementation behavior: the team's or organization's climate for innovation implementation (Klein et al., 2001; Holahan et al., 2004; Michaelis et al., 2008), leadership support for innovation implementation (Sharma and Yetton, 2003; Michaelis et al., 2008), and managerial patience (Repenning and Sterman, 2002). Reviewing the above-described key situational factors, leadership may significantly influence employees' innovation implementation behavior.

The purpose of this study is to examine how servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1991; Ehrhart, 2004) affects employees' innovation implementation behavior. Further, the study concentrated on identifying individual difference variables by which servant leadership is related to innovation implementation behavior. In this context, the study begins by a literature review of servant leadership, innovation implementation behavior, empowerment role identity and creative role identity, and then will go on to development of hypotheses. Research methodology, analyses results and research model will take place at second section. The results of the analyses will be discussed and recommendation will be provided for managers and academician at the last section.

## **2. Literature Review And Hypotheses**

### *2.1. Servant leadership and innovation implementation behavior*

Building on the seminal work of Greenleaf (1991), Ehrhart (2004) conducted a thorough review of the literature and identified seven dimensions of servant leadership. The first dimension involves forming relationships with followers, such as when servant leaders spend quality time and forge interpersonal bonds with their followers. Second, servant leaders empower followers (e.g., including follower input on important managerial decisions). Servant leaders also help followers grow and succeed by providing opportunities to enhance follower skills. Fourth, servant leaders behave ethically. For example, a servant leader will follow through on promises made to followers to demonstrate their adherence to strong ethical values. Fifth, these leaders demonstrate conceptual skills, such as balancing daily work with future vision. They also put followers first by promoting follower success. Finally, servant leaders create value for others outside the organization, such as encouraging followers to engage in community service opportunities outside of work (Hunter et al., 2013).

While it shares similarities with related leadership theories, there is evidence that servant leadership is separate from transformational leadership and leader-member exchange (LMX; Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006; Ehrhart, 2004; Parolini et al., 2009) and has incremental predictive validity (Schneider and George, 2011). Servant leadership also has a moral component similar to ethical and authentic leadership (Brown, Trevino and Harrison, 2005) but differs in its focus on all organizational stakeholders (Graham, 1991) and inclusion of altruistic and self-reflective behaviors (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing and Peterson, 2008). Altogether, servant leadership is different from other leadership styles and, in its distinctiveness, offers the potential to have a unique influence on organizations and their stakeholders (Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko and Roberts, 2009).

The limited empirical research on servant leadership has shown that it is positively related to employee satisfaction, intrinsic work satisfaction, caring for the safety of others and organizational commitment (Avolio et al., 2009). Joseph and Winston (2005) examined the relationship between employee perceptions of servant leadership and organizational trust and reported a positive relationship with both trust in the leader as well as trust in one's organization. Washington et al. (2006:700) examined the relationship between servant leadership and the leader's values of empathy, integrity, competence, and agreeableness, and reported that "employees' ratings of leaders' servant leadership were positively related to employees' ratings of leaders' values of empathy, integrity, and competence".

Leaders who are willing to convey their willingness to comprehend the individual needs and capabilities of employees and to serve those needs seem to be an important factor in building trust (Fairholm, 1994). Greenleaf (1977) states that trust is at the root of servant leadership. This view is echoed by several authors, for instance, Howatson-Jones (2004) who sees trust as the cornerstone of servant leadership. That an interdependent trustful relationship can develop between servant leaders and their employees is emphasized by Kerfoot (2001). Finally, McGee-Cooper (2003:13) states that the most precious and intangible quality of (servant) leadership is trust.

Research demonstrates that trust in a leader provides employees with an understanding of management's good intentions (Harvey et al., 2003). Employees, who trust their leader, believe in the value of the innovation and think that they and the organization will benefit from it, consequently trust in a leader should enhance employees' commitment to change (Michaelis, Stegmaier and Sonntag, 2009). Specifically, individuals with a high degree of trust in a leader may feel that they will not be the target of negative attacks or manipulation, because they believe that the intentions of the upper management are trustworthy (Byrne et al., 2005). Further, they feel that they are respected by the organization and have some opportunity to protect their own interests (Korsgaard et al., 2002). Under these circumstances, employees are more likely to concentrate on the positive outcomes of change-initiatives instead of constantly questioning or criticizing them. Consequently, employees who perceive that the organization treats them with respect and dignity through difficult times of change should have higher levels of commitment to change than those who believe that they are treated unfairly.

Likewise, trust in a leader, which is mostly aroused through open communication and disclosure, may give individuals a sense of control by feeling protected by the good intentions of upper management (Byrne et al., 2005). These behaviors are likely to lead to affective commitment to change because by providing support and encouragement, employees are more likely to respond to change initiatives and accept the change message (House and Mitchell, 1974). Taken together, trust in a leader is likely to be associated with high levels of affective commitment to change (Michaelis, Stegmaier and Sonntag, 2009). Consequently, employees with high levels of commitment to change are more likely to exhibit innovation implementation behavior. Therefore, a positive relationship between servant leadership and innovation implementation behavior is expected.

*H1: Servant leadership is positively related to employees' innovation implementation behavior.*

## *2.2. Moderating effects of empowerment role identity and creative role identity*

Although servant leaders focus on employees' empowerment, there is some evidence that employees differ in the extent to which they welcome and see themselves as psychologically empowered (Ahearne et al., 2005; van Dierendonck, 2011). To assess this view, we draw on role identity theory (Stryker and Burke, 2000), according to which individuals develop expectations regarding appropriate behavior in various roles and internalize them as components of self or role identities. A role identity, then, is a self-view, or meaning ascribed to the self with respect to a specific role (Farmer, Tierney and Kung-Mcintyre, 2003). Individuals use role identities as cognitive schemata to provide meaning for the self, help interpret events, and channel behavioral options (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Empowerment role identity can be defined as the extent to which an individual views him- or herself as a person who wants to be empowered in a particular job (Zhang and Bartol, 2010). According to role theory, role identity is composed of related "multiple selves" that are defined further as a hierarchical ranking of identities. Individuals carry out multiple roles in order of salience, judging some identities more important than others (Stryker and Serpe, 1994).

In the case of empowerment, a study by Labianca, Gray and Brass (2000) concluded that resistance to empowerment in the context of a change initiative was motivated more by "well established, ingrained schema" regarding appropriate actions associated with an employee's role than by self-interest. Kirkman and Shapiro (1997) theorized that employees differ in the extent to which they desire self-control or self-management and suggested that an employee is more likely to be resistive when he or she is uncomfortable with work-related decision-making, is reluctant to work autonomously, and assumes a passive rather than proactive stance with respect to work goals. Such resistance has been shown to be associated with lower job satisfaction and lower organizational commitment (Maynard, Mathieu, Marsh and Ruddy, 2007), supporting the idea that some employees consider empowerment as inconsistent with their desires and role perceptions. Forrester (2000) argued that some employees might view

themselves as unready to handle new responsibilities or have other reasons for not wanting to take on more empowered roles. On the other hand, role identity theory (Stryker and Burke, 2000) suggests that an employee who envisages empowerment in a positive way is likely to regard it as fitting within his or her role identity set and to experience greater psychological empowerment in a servant leadership context and is likely to exhibit higher innovation implementation behavior. Accordingly, we propose:

*H2: Empowerment role identity strengthens the positive relationship between servant leadership and innovation implementation behavior.*

Creative role identity refers to a self-attributed meaning in reference to the role of performing creatively in the workplace (Farmer, Tierney and Kung-McIntyre, 2003). From the role identity perspective, we hypothesize that creative role identity moderates the relationship between servant leadership and innovation implementation behavior. Although servant leadership reminds followers of their role to show loyalty and obedience (van Dierendonck, 2011), followers are inclined to fulfill their role obligations in a way that does not contradict their creative roles. Specifically, employees holding a strong creative role identity are highly sensitive to contextual supports for (or threats to) their creative roles (Farmer et al., 2003) so that they tend to treat high levels of servant leadership as an important support for their creative action. They enjoy utilizing their leader's benevolence to perform more creatively because doing so fulfills their critical need for self-verification (McCall and Simmons, 1978; Riley and Burke, 1995). With such strong creative role identity, they also respond drastically to the lack of servant leadership. Low levels of benevolence induce a serious threat to their creative role identity, as creative actions may receive little support from their leaders. To prevent their self-views from damage, they tend to opt out of creative actions (Wang and Cheng, 2009; McCall and Simmons, 1978; Burke, 1991; Farmer et al., 2003). Thus, a strong, positive relationship is expected between servant leadership and the creativity of employees high in creative role identity.

In contrast, employees low in creative role identity are insensitive to contextual supports for (or threats to) their creative endeavors. Low levels of servant leadership have little effect on their creative production; they do not deliberately avoid opportunities to perform creatively when servant leadership is low (McCall and Simmons, 1978; Farmer et al., 2003). High levels of servant leadership, on the other hand, remind them of their role obligation specified in cultural traditions much more than providing useful resources for their creative actions. Hence, servant leadership mainly generates indebtedness, loyalty, and obedience that may facilitate a controlling supervisor-subordinate relationship. A controlling supervisory style discourages out-of-the-box thinking, enhances satisfaction with the status quo, and, in turn, has a harmful effect on creativity (Oldham and Cummings, 1996). Therefore, for employees low in creative role identity, we expect a negative relationship between servant leadership and creativity, which leads to low level of innovation implementation behavior.

*H3: Creative role identity moderates the relationship between servant leadership and innovation implementation behavior.*

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1. Research Goal*

In this study, we aim to identify the moderating effects of empowerment role identity and creative role identity on the relationship between servant leadership and innovation implementation behavior. To test the hypotheses, a field survey using questionnaires was conducted.

#### *3.2. Sample and Data Collection*

Data were collected from 6 private eye hospitals in Turkey. The sample included 393 office employees and their immediate managers. Hospitals' administrations in the study were contacted via email or phone and informed about the research. Data obtained from those 393 questionnaires were analyzed through the SPSS statistical packet program and three proposed relations were tested through regression analyses.

### 3.3. Analyses and Results

We assessed servant leadership from the follower's perspective with Ehrhart's (2004) 14-item measure. This scale included seven dimensions averaged together to form one servant leadership score. Example items included "My manager creates a sense of community among employees," and "My manager makes the personal development of employees a priority". Employees' innovation implementation behavior was assessed with an adapted version of a six-item scale ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ) from Choi and Price (2005). Sample items included, 'I heavily use this innovation at work' and 'I use this innovation for task-related communication.' On a five-point scale ranging from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 5 ('strongly agree'), employees indicated the extent to which each of the six items applied to them in terms of employing the introduced software. A four-item scale ( $\alpha = .77$ ) to measure empowerment role identity was adapted from Callero's (1985) role identity measure and Farmer et al.'s (2003) creative role identity measure. Finally, Farmer et al.'s (2003) three-item scale was used to measure creative role identity ( $\alpha = .81$ ). On a 6-point scale that ranges from 1, "strongly disagree," to 6, "strongly agree," subordinates evaluated the extent to which the role of creative employees had been incorporated into their self-identity. Sampled item is "to be a creative employee is an important part of my identity."

The demographic variables of gender, age and job tenure, which have been related to innovation implementation behavior in past research (Marsden, Kalleberg and Cook, 1993) were controlled.

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations and correlations for the study variables.

Table 1 Results of hierarchical regression analysis for innovation implementation behavior \*

Variables	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	32.30	2.19						
2. Gender	0.73	0.27	.09					
3. Job tenure	4.63	2.81	.23*	.03				
4. Servant leadership	4.29	0.73	.13	.13	.06			
5. Empowerment role identity	3.83	0.83	.06	.11	.16	.21*		
6. Creative role identity	4.23	1.26	.26	.16	.19	.20*	.23**	
7. Innovation implementation behavior	3.19	0.89	.13	.09	.13	.33***	.29**	.30***

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Hypothesis 1 was tested with hierarchical regression analysis (Table 2). In step 1, the control variables were entered and in step 2, servant leadership. As can be seen in the section of the table showing the values yielded by step 2, servant leadership was significantly, positively related to innovation implementation behavior ( $\beta = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ), a finding that supports Hypothesis 1.

Table 2 Results of hierarchical regression analysis for innovation implementation behavior \*

Steps and Predictor Variables	Models	
	1	2
Step 1		
Age	.13	.09
Gender	.06	.05
Job tenure	.16*	.09
Step 2		
Servant leadership		.31***
<i>F(df)</i>	0.79	3.23*
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.06	.23
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.03	.19

\*  $p < .05$ .\*\*  $p < .01$ .\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

The hypotheses 2 and 3 in the study were tested by using moderated hierarchical regression, according to the procedure delineated in Cohen and Cohen (1983). The significance of interaction effects was assessed after controlling for all main effects. In the models, gender, age and job tenure were entered first as control variables; servant leadership, predictor variable, was entered in the second step; the moderator variables (i.e., empowerment role identity and creative role identity) were entered in the third step; and the interaction terms, in the fourth step. In order to avoid multicollinearity problems, the predictor and moderator variables were centered and the standardized scores were used in the regression analysis (Aiken and West, 1991).

Table 3 Results of hierarchical moderated regression analysis for empowerment and creative role identities on innovation implementation behavior\*

Steps and Predictor Variables	Models			
	1	2	3	4
Step 1				
Age	.12	.10	.09 (.08)	.08 (.07)
Gender	.09	.04	.03 (.03)	.01 (.01)
Job tenure	.14*	.09	.08 (.06)	.06 (.05)
Step 2				
Servant leadership (SL)		.30***	.28** (.26**)	.26** (.23**)
Step 3				
Empowerment role identity (ERI)			.30***	.29**
Creative role identity (CRI)			(.32***)	(.31***)
Step 4				
SL x ERI				.29**
SL x CRI				(.33***)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.29	.36	.43 (.40)	.46 (.43)
<i>Change in R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.09	.06 (.04)	.03 (.03)
<i>F</i>		2.16*	2.69** (2.23**)	2.99** (2.61**)

\*  $p < .05$ .\*\*  $p < .01$ .\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Note: Standardized regression coefficients are shown for the moderated regression analysis of creative role identity and servant leadership on innovation implementation behavior in parenthesis

As can be seen in the step 4 results from Table 3, the interaction effect for servant leadership and empowerment role identity was significant for innovation implementation behavior, supporting Hypothesis 2 ( $\beta = .29, p < .01$ ).

Hypothesis 3, which states that creative role identity moderates the relationship between servant leadership and innovation implementation behavior, received strong support (see Table 4). The interaction effect for servant leadership and creative role identity was significant for innovation implementation behavior ( $\beta = .33, p < .001$ ).

As predicted, when an employee had high empowerment role identity, the relationship between servant leadership and innovation implementation behavior was stronger. Similarly, it was found that creative role identity strengthened the positive relationship between servant leadership and innovation implementation behavior. The positive relationship between servant leadership and innovation implementation behavior was more pronounced when an employee's creative role identity was high.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study highlighted the relationship between the servant leadership style and employees' innovation implementation behavior. The results revealed that employee perception of servant leadership was positively related to employees' innovation implementation behavior, which supported hypothesis 1. The most striking result to emerge from data is that employees' empowerment and creative role identities affected the relationship between servant leadership and employees' innovation implementation behavior. So, hypothesis 2 (empowerment role identity moderates the servant leadership and innovation implementation behavior relationship) and hypothesis 3 (creative role identity moderates the servant leadership and innovation implementation behavior relationship) are fully supported. These findings are consistent with the literature on leadership and innovation implementation behavior. Although there are so many studies examining the servant leadership-trust in leadership (Howatson-Jones, 2004; Kerfoot, 2001; McGee-Cooper, 2003) and trust and innovation implementation behavior (Byrne et al., 2005; House and Mitchell, 1974; Michaelis, Stegmaier and Sonntag, 2009) in literature; servant leadership-innovation implementation behavior relationship and the moderator effects of empowerment and creative role identities on the relationship between servant leadership behavior and innovation implementation behavior are examined and revealed for the first time through that study, which differentiates this study from others.

However, this study was conducted on eye hospitals of Turkey; findings might not be transferable to all types of organizations. Thus, it is recommended that further researches can be conducted on organizations in industries other than healthcare industry and in different countries for the generalizability of findings. Another limitation of this study is that same respondent answer the all questions related to servant leadership, innovation implementation behavior, empowerment and creative role identities. Further studies can be designed in a way that innovation implementation behavior and servant leadership related questionnaires are filled out by different respondents, in order to prevent same-source bias.

Servant leadership contributes to a work environment that promotes the virtue of serving others and in which followers want to remain. These follower outcomes are critical to any organization that strives to reduce turnover costs and enhance employee performance, teamwork and innovation capabilities. Because of these positive results, more organizations may consider selecting for and cultivating servant leadership qualities among their managers. Transformational leadership training programs can enhance transformational leadership behaviors (Barling, Weber and Kelloway, 1996), and we may expect similar results for servant leadership, although such programs need more empirical testing. Organizations may consider creating a broader servant-minded culture throughout the organization to better support and maintain the virtuous behaviors of servant leaders in the long-term (Liden et al., 2008).

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