

Servant Leadership and Employee Voice Behavior: The Role of Work Reflection and Proactive Personality

Source: frontiers | **Published:** July 29, 2024 | **PMS Relevance:** PMS RELATED | **Type:** Research Study | **Geography:** Asia-Pacific

Source URL: <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1421>

Executive Summary

This article addresses the mechanisms through which servant leadership promotes employee voice behavior, a topic of growing importance as organizations rely on upward information flow for effective decision-making. The authors argue, drawing on Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), that employee work reflection serves as a cognitive mediator in the servant leadership–voice behavior relationship, and that employee proactive personality moderates this mediated pathway. Evidence is drawn from two studies: a three-wave time-lagged field survey of 489 employees across Chinese industries (Study 1) and a 2×2 experimental manipulation with 107 participants (Study 2). Study 1 findings confirm that servant leadership positively predicts employee voice behavior ($\beta = 0.349$, $p < 0.001$), that work reflection mediates this relationship ($\beta = 0.228$, $p < 0.001$), and that proactive personality moderates the servant leadership–work reflection link. Study 2 experimentally replicates the moderation effect. The authors conclude that cognitive and personality factors jointly shape how servant leadership translates into voice behavior, extending SCT into the servant leadership domain and identifying boundary conditions for leadership effectiveness.

Key Insights

1. Employee work reflection functions as a cognitive mediator between servant leadership and voice behavior, with the mediated path statistically significant ($\beta = 0.228$, 95% CI [0.177; 0.281]) in a Chinese multi-industry sample.
2. Proactive personality operates as a boundary condition: the servant leadership–work reflection relationship is significantly stronger among high-proactive employees (effect = 0.768) than low-proactive employees (effect = 0.473), a difference confirmed in both field and experimental data.
3. Even among low-proactivity employees, the servant leadership–work reflection relationship remained statistically significant, suggesting servant leadership has a baseline effect regardless of personality, though its magnitude is substantially amplified by proactive disposition.

Practical Takeaways

- Organizations observing low voice behavior despite servant leadership practices may find that the personality composition of teams — specifically the proportion of proactive employees — influences how effectively servant leadership translates into reflective and vocal behavior.
- Structured reflection practices such as action reviews or team debriefs are identified in the article as potential organizational mechanisms for activating the cognitive pathway between leadership climate and voice behavior.

Frameworks Mentioned

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) — Bandura's theoretical framework positing continuous dynamic interaction between external environment, cognitive factors, and individual behavior; used here to explain how servant leadership (environment) influences voice behavior (action) via work reflection (cognition), moderated by proactive personality (individual factor).

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The study employs a rigorous three-wave time-lagged design to reduce common method bias, supplements field data with an experimental study (Study 2) to establish cleaner causal inference for the moderation hypothesis, and uses validated scales with adequate reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.70$). Monte Carlo bootstrapping with 20,000 iterations and confidence interval reporting follow current methodological standards. **Limitations:** The sample is drawn exclusively from China, restricting cross-cultural generalizability. All Study 1 measures are self-reported by employees, introducing potential self-report bias despite the time-lagged structure. The Study 1 sample is gender-skewed (67.7% female), and the authors acknowledge gender may influence voice behavior without fully accounting for it analytically. The very high correlations between variables — notably servant leadership and voice behavior ($r = 0.710$) and proactive personality and work reflection in Study 2 ($r = 0.799$) — raise concerns about discriminant validity, although CFA results support a four-factor structure. The experimental sample ($N = 107$) is modest, and the hypothetical scenario design may not fully replicate real workplace dynamics. Only one moderator and one mediator are examined, leaving the possibility of omitted variable bias. The article's practical implications section uses normative language inconsistent with neutral empirical reporting.

Organizational Practice

Organizations in China across manufacturing, service, internet, financial, and information technology sectors participated in a three-wave survey. Servant leadership was assessed at the team level via employee perception scales. Employees completed self-assessments of proactive personality, work reflection, and voice behavior at staggered monthly intervals. An experimental condition simulated a consulting firm team scenario to manipulate leadership and personality conditions for causal testing.

Strategic Implications

The findings indicate that the effectiveness of servant leadership on employee voice behavior is not uniform across all employees, suggesting that personality composition of teams is a relevant factor in predicting voice-related outcomes under servant leadership conditions. The identification of work reflection as a mediating cognitive mechanism points to the potential relevance of reflection-enabling practices as part of leadership development and team process design. The boundary condition of proactive personality implies that leadership style effects on voice behavior may interact with talent selection and team composition decisions in ways that performance management systems do not currently account for.

Validation Status: passed