

Rosen Research Focus | Dr. Fevzi Okumus

MOTIVATING EMPLOYEES THROUGH SERVANT LEADERSHIP



Leadership style is a critical ingredient in establishing a work environment most conducive to positive customer–employee engagement.

Meeting customer expectations is critical for success within the hospitality industry and frontline employees play a key role in delivering customer satisfaction. Leaders who display a servant leadership style put the interests of employees and the organization above their own. To investigate how this leadership style influences employee motivation and behavior, Dr. Fevzi Okumus, UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management, and his collaborators have put forward and evaluated a model of the interrelationships between servant leadership and employee engagement, job satisfaction, and absenteeism. They found that leaders evidencing this style positively impacted work engagement and absenteeism. Their findings offer important insights for hospitality management practices.

Creating a positive experience for customers within the hospitality industry requires frontline employees to perform their roles with enthusiasm and commitment. Positioning frontline employees to behave in a way that meets customers' expectations requires managers to motivate and inspire their employees, who are often contending with multiple demands and stresses in the work environment. So how can managers encourage and support this behavior? Dr. Fevzi Okumus at the UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management and his co-authors put forward the idea that leadership style is a critical ingredient in establishing a work environment most conducive to positive customer–employee engagement. Specifically,

servant leadership has been shown to have a beneficial impact on employee performance and work behavior.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Servant leadership places the interest of the employees and the organization above the interests of the leader. It emphasizes meeting the expectations and commitments of the organization. A leadership style such as this makes employees feel that they are prioritized in terms of their interests and growth, and often results in a heightened work ethic and enhanced work engagement among employees. Servant leaders place ethics and honesty at the forefront of their behavior, and exhibit role-model behaviors (such as integrity and following through on

their promises), which employees can then emulate in the work environment. Research shows that this leadership style has many benefits for employees and the organization, including enhanced employee dedication, role performance, and role satisfaction. Importantly, servant leadership can also influence employees to go above and beyond what is required within their roles (for example, discretionary effort). Their study explains that servant leadership benefits the organization by improving employee morale and customer relationships and is thus a leadership style well aligned with the hospitality industry.

THE INTERPLAY OF FACTORS IMPACTED BY SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Many mediators influence the direct impact of servant leadership on employee behavior. Distinguishing and understanding the complexity of these interrelationships is important to obtain a clear picture of the significance and range of interacting relationships within the work environment that can influence employee performance. To this end, Okumus and his collaborators designed

a study to understand how employees' emotional responses to servant leadership influenced their performance outcomes, and the extent to which work engagement versus job satisfaction mediated this outcome. The study was thus designed to answer some of these complex questions that that previous studies have not yet elucidated.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP, WORK ENGAGEMENT, AND JOB SATISFACTION

A conceptual model was designed to determine the impact of different factors on the relationship between servant leadership, and the impact of servant leadership on work performance. The model was based on an examination of existing literature and theory and included the following factors: servant leadership; employee engagement; absenteeism; job satisfaction; in-role performance; and extra-role performance. Firstly, the model proposed that servant leadership enhances work engagement, job satisfaction, in-role performance, and extra-role performance, and reduces employee absenteeism. Secondly, it proposed that employees with high levels of work

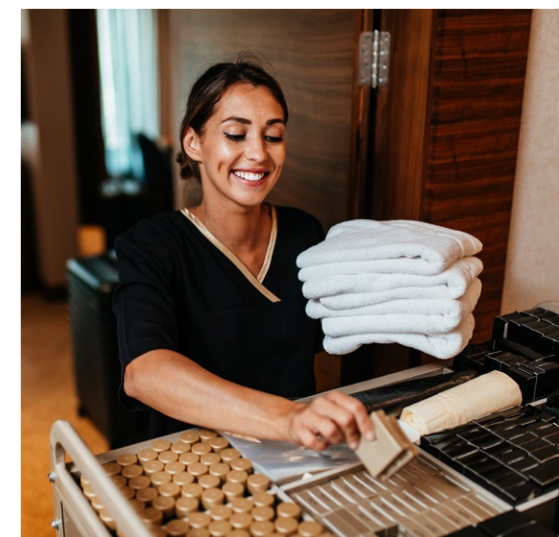
engagement would display high job satisfaction, in-role performance, extra-role performance and lower absenteeism. Thirdly, that employees with high levels of job satisfaction would show high levels of in-role performance, extra-role performance and low absenteeism. The research team set a number of hypotheses to understand the mediating influence and interrelationships between work engagement and job satisfaction on absenteeism and performance, within a context of servant leadership.

HYPOTHESES

The first hypothesis was that servant leadership would have a more positive impact on work engagement than on job satisfaction. Secondly, that work engagement would mediate the effect of servant leadership on job satisfaction, meaning that servant leadership activates work engagement which in turn results in higher job satisfaction. The third hypothesis, linked to social exchange theory, proposed that employees with high levels of job satisfaction would show high levels of in-role performance, extra-role performance,



Highly engaged workers led by people displaying a servant leadership style reciprocate positively back into the organization through devoting energy to their work, taking pride in their work, and evidencing reduced absenteeism.



THIS RESEARCH HAS IMPORTANT IMPLICATIONS FOR THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY, NOTABLY THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN BOOSTING WORK ENGAGEMENT AMONG FRONTLINE HOTEL EMPLOYEES.



When employees feel that there is a relationship built on trust and that their interests are taken into consideration, they tend to reciprocate with higher levels of work engagement.

and low absenteeism. Social exchange theory proposes that there are rules of exchange between employers and employees, and that employees respond to employers by reciprocating behaviors. Their study explains that when employees feel that they are receiving socio-emotional benefits from their employers, such as career opportunities and growth, they tend to reciprocate by demonstrating positive emotions and behaviors towards their employers.

Next, the team used the theory of job-demands resources which considers the positive impact of supportive resources in the work environment on employee motivation. The team hypothesized that work engagement would have a more positive impact on in-role performance and extra-role performance than would job satisfaction. In terms of the mediating impacts on absenteeism, a research hypothesis was posed that the mediating influence of work engagement on the relationships between servant leadership and absenteeism would be stronger than the mediating impact of job satisfaction on this relationship. The researchers developed a final hypothesis, that the mediating impact of work engagement on the relationships between servant leadership and job performance (both in-role and extra-role) would be stronger than the mediating impact of job satisfaction.

DATA COLLECTION

To test the model and the hypotheses, frontline employees with two set criteria were selected for participation. These were that the employees experienced intense interactions with customers and were full time in their



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SERVANT LEADERSHIP PLACES THE INTEREST OF THE EMPLOYEES AND THE ORGANIZATION ABOVE THE INTERESTS OF THE LEADER.

roles. The participants were recruited from three international 4-star and 5-star hotels and they completed the research surveys anonymously and voluntarily. The surveys were conducted in three research waves with a time lag of one week, starting with the servant leader survey, followed by the work engagement items, and finally the job satisfaction and absenteeism items. Supervisor ratings were obtained for in-role performance and extra-role performance. Confirmatory factor analysis was employed to determine the psychometric properties of the surveys and structural equation modelling was used to evaluate the relationships within the model.

The findings confirmed a good fit between the model and the data and supported all hypotheses, confirming that the positive impact of servant leadership on work engagement was greater than the impact on job satisfaction. Similarly, the hypothesis that work engagement would have a greater impact on absenteeism than job satisfaction was also supported. This finding is important in confirming that while work engagement significantly influences absenteeism, job satisfaction does not have an impact on absenteeism. There was also evidence that work engagement influenced in-role performance and extra-role performance more than job satisfaction. In addition, the findings revealed that female employees and those with the longest tenure tended to display higher levels of work engagement.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

This research has important implications for the hospitality industry, notably the positive impact of servant leadership in boosting work engagement among frontline hotel employees. When employees feel that there is a relationship built on trust and that their interests are taken into consideration, they tend to reciprocate with higher levels of work engagement. Job satisfaction also benefits from servant leadership both directly

and indirectly through the impact on work engagement. Importantly, highly engaged workers led by people displaying a servant leadership style reciprocate positively back into the organization through devoting energy to their work, taking pride in their work and evidencing reduced absenteeism. The findings thus support social exchange theory, as well as the theory of job-demands resources. This study concludes by observing that hotel employees with high levels of work engagement are goal-oriented and have the energy required to perform positively within their roles to meet and exceed the expectations of customers.

RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Dr. Fevzi Okumus and his collaborators investigated the effect of servant leadership on hotel employees' behavioral consequences.

REFERENCES

Ozturk, A., Karatepe, O.M., & Okumus, F. (2021). The effect of servant leadership on hotel employees' behavioral consequences: Work engagement versus job satisfaction. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 97 (102994). doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2021.102994

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PERSONAL RESPONSE

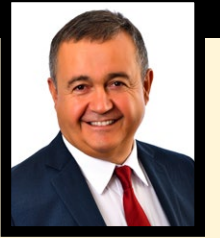
How can hospitality managers apply these findings to motivate their employees?

// Hospitality managers at all levels should follow and practice servant leadership principles and practices in their day-to-day operations and show that they really care for and support their team members. Many hospitality employees quit their jobs because of their immediate supervisors or managers. Supervisors and managers are one of the reasons that hospitality employees are disengaged and leave their jobs. Therefore, servant leadership is crucial to engage, develop, motivate, and keep hard-working and loyal employees in the hospitality industry. //

How can hotel management support the development of a servant leadership ethos?

// Hospitality businesses should train and incentivize their supervisors and managers not only about servant leadership principles but also implementing servant leadership principles and practices in their day-to-day operations. //

Fevzi Okumus



Dr. Fevzi Okumus is the CFHLA Preeminent Chair Professor within the Hospitality Services Department at UCF's Rosen College of Hospitality Management. His main teaching and research areas include strategic management, leadership, hospitality management, and lodging. He has over 300 academic publications. According to [Google Scholar](https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=...), his publications received over 17,600 citations and he has an h-index of 63. He is the Editor-in-Chief of the *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* (IF: 9.321) and the *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights*. He is a frequent speaker at international conferences and has received numerous prestigious research awards and recognitions.

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