

SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN SALES: EXPLORING ITS DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS ON SALESPERSON PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

Servant leadership has been the focus of increased research because of its association with important job attitudes and behaviors. This study expands prior research by examining how servant leadership influences outcomes among 272 business-to-business salespeople. Servant leadership was related directly to superior customer value, organizational identification, and ethical climate. It was related both directly and indirectly to performance. Implications for having sales managers who are viewed as servant leaders are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The uniqueness of a salesperson's job makes leadership especially important in the professional selling domain (Ingram et al., 2005). Salespeople often work away from other employees, including the sales manager. Because of their boundary spanning role, salespeople encounter contradictory demands between interests of the organization and clients. Given the distinctive role of the sales manager, marketing researchers have analyzed various leadership roles such as transformational/transactional leadership (Bass, 1977; Mackenzie et al., 2001; ethical leadership (Schwepker and Schultz, 2015), supportive leadership (Jaramillo and Prakash, 2008), leader member exchange (Schwepker, 2017) and how they influence salespersons' job attitudes and outcomes. During the last decade, marketing researchers have started to analyze how servant leadership influences salespersons' behaviors and organizational outcomes (e.g., Grisaffe et al., 2016; Jaramillo et al., 2015; Jaramillo et al., 2009; Schwepker, 2016). Servant leadership is an "(1) other-oriented approach to leadership (2) manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, (3) and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community" (Eva et al., 2019, p. 114).

The reason for the increased focus on servant leadership is based on research indicating that servant leadership provides incremental increases in employees' attitudes and behaviors beyond that of the leadership styles of transformational, transactional, authentic, and ethical (Grisaffe et al., 2016; Hoch et al., 2018). For example, Hoch et al. (2018) reported that, with respect to organizational commitment, servant leadership explained 15 percent more incremental variance beyond what was explained by transformational leadership. Servant leadership also was

found to explain 9 percent more variance in organizational citizenship behavior. In addition, servant leadership explained significant variance in both job satisfaction and job engagement. With respect to the various outcomes analyzed in the Hoch et al. (2018) study, these authors concluded “clearly, servant leadership was much better able to explain incremental variance in the outcomes than either authentic or ethical leadership” (p. 520).

This research on servant leadership has provided important insights. While prior sales force research has provided insights into the value of studying servant leadership, few studies have examined the relationship between either servant leadership and ethical climate or servant leadership and organizational identification. For example, Hoch et al. (2018), in their meta-analysis, reported that servant leadership was significantly correlated with organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and performance. However, they reported no study that analyzed the relationship between servant leadership and either organizational identification or ethical climate. Thus, additional research investigating outcomes of servant leadership is warranted. The literature review and support for the hypotheses are presented below.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Servant Leadership

Robert Greenleaf (1977) is often given credit for the development of servant leadership. The key to how Greenleaf defined servant leadership is his emphasis on the servant leader to be a servant first. He saw servant leadership as more than just managing. Greenleaf (1977) envisioned servant leadership as a method of how one lives his or her life. Servant leaders have a moral responsibility to help not only the organization to succeed but also their subordinates, and the organization’s clients and stakeholders (Ehrhart, 2004). Servant leaders place the needs of followers first rather than their own self-interest (Panaccio et al., 2015). Long-term organizational objectives will be achieved by first focusing on followers needs and ambitions and secondly on their own self-interest (Giolito et al., 2021). They communicate openly and honestly with employees about organizational goals and the importance of achieving those goals (Hu and Liden, 2011). Servant leaders are distinctive from other leaders in two ways: serving first and concentrating on others’ needs (Grisaffe et al., 2016). The emphasis on serving first is what distinguishes servant leadership from other leadership theories (Liden et al., 2014).

Servant leadership encompasses seven dimensions (Panaccio et al., 2015): (1) helping followers grow and succeed in their careers; (2) behaving ethically; (3) empowering followers to handle and solve problems; (4) making the satisfaction of subordinates needs a top priority; (5) paying attention to followers’ personal concerns; (6) developing subordinates conceptual skills so that they can perform their jobs more effectively; and (7) creating value for the community.

Van Dierendonck (2011) outlines how servant leadership is distinct from other major leadership theories. Unlike transformational leadership, which prioritizes organizational objectives and places a leader’s primary allegiance with the organization, servant leadership centers on the concerns of followers and emphasizes traits such as authenticity, humility, and interpersonal acceptance — traits not associated with transformational leadership. When comparing servant and authentic leadership, both share the characteristics of humility and

authenticity. However, when it comes to ethical leadership, while both servant and ethical leadership share a commitment to ethical behavior, fair decision-making, active listening to subordinates, and concern for employee welfare, servant leadership uniquely highlights interpersonal acceptance and authenticity. It also places a particular emphasis on guiding followers, a feature less pronounced in the ethical leadership model."

Overall, while servant leadership has similarities to other leadership theories, (Erhart, 2004; Eva et al., 2019), one of the major differences of servant leadership from the other leadership theories (authentic, ethical, and transformational), is its emphasis on the needs of followers and service to others (van Dierendonck, 2011; van Dierendonck et al., 2014). In contrast with the other leadership models that prioritize the leader's objectives, servant leadership prioritizes the needs and behaviors of employees, thereby fostering inspiration among employees. (Liden et al., 2014a).

The results reported by Grisaffe et al. (2016) and Hoch et al. (2018) have shown that servant leadership is distinct from other leadership theories and provides incremental variance in predicting employees' job attitudes and behavior over other leadership theories. Specifically, Hoch et al. (2018) reported that the various leadership theories indicate a highly significant relationship with job engagement, job satisfaction, trust in management, and organizational commitment. In contrast to the other leadership theories, transformational leadership has a higher association with job performance. Authentic, ethical, and servant leadership theories are more focused on role modeling by leaders, ethical behavior, extrarole behavior, and social learning.

Ethical Climate

Ethical climate is "prevailing perceptions of typical organizational practices and procedures that have ethical content" (Victor and Cullen, 1988: 101). It encompasses how individuals perceive what is right or wrong concerning their organization's work setting (Babin et. al, 2000). Many climates exist within an organization (Schneider, 1975). However, an organization's ethical work climate is significant since it effects employee's ethical behavior (DeConinck, 2011). It results from an organization's practices, procedures, policies, and leadership and influences organizational members' ethical decisions along with their job attitudes and behavior (Schminke et al., 2007). Employees develop an opinion of the organization's ethical climate when the organization's practices, procedures, and policies are applied consistently and shared among its employees (Kuenzi et al., 2020). Ethical climate differs from the organization's culture. Culture focuses on how the organization's social environment is developed, while climate involves how employees experience the environment (Kuenzi et al., 2020). Research has reported that ethical climate related to a variety and attitudes and behavior among both non-sales employees (e. g., Ambrose et al., 2008; Demirtas and Akdogan, 2015; Martin and Cullen, 2006) and salespeople (see the review by Tanner et al., 2015).

Developing an ethical work climate is important in all areas of the organization. But creating an ethical work climate is especially relevant to salespeople. Salespeople encounter ethical dilemmas that are not present in other jobs (Schwepker and Ingram, 1996). For example, salespeople often work without direct supervision and the nature of their job means they often

don't work around other employees and therefore are separated from the organization's culture (Oh et al., 2022). Their boundary spanning role and the emphasis on making quota make them more vulnerable to unethical behavior than other employees (Ferrell et al., 2007). For these reasons, creating an ethical work climate is extremely important.

Studies have recognized the crucial role of leadership in establishing an ethical climate, with a significant amount of this research centering on ethical leadership (e.g., Demirtas and Akdogan, 2015; Hansen et al., 2016; Kim and Vandenberghe, 2020; Kuenzi et al., 2020). However, research has now started to investigate how servant leadership influences perceptions of an ethical work climate. Intuitively, servant leadership should influence employee's perception about the ethical climate of their organization. Leaders are responsible for establishing the organization's ethical character through their enactment and enforcement of policies, practices, and procedures that encourage employees to behave ethically. Servant leaders adhere to principles of honesty, integrity, and morality (Liden et al., 2015). Its approach to leadership emphasizes the importance of both leaders and followers to behave morally and ethically (Sendjaya, 2015). Servant leaders adhere to high moral values, which then fosters an organizational ethical work climate by showing employees appropriate ethical behavior (Burton et al., 2017). A servant leader's emphasis on behaving ethically is an important reason that employees view him or her as a credible role model that leads to a stronger bond between them (Schaubroeck et al., 2011).

Only three studies have analyzed the relationship between servant leadership and ethical climate in a professional selling environment (Bande et al., 2020; Jaramillo et al., 2015; Schwepker and Schultz, 2015). These studies reported that servant leadership was significantly related to ethical climate. Bande et al., (2020) reported that servant leadership was related to ethical climate indirectly through supervisor trust. Jaramillo et al. (2015) found that servant leadership was related to two aspects of ethical climate (responsibility/trust and unethical peer behavior). These authors found that ethical climate mediated the relationship between servant leadership and performance. Last, in the Schwepker and Schultz (2015) study, servant leadership was related directly to value enhancing behavior performance and outcome performance. Ethical climate moderated the relationship between servant leadership and value enhancing behavior performance. When employees worked in a caring ethical climate (one where decisions by employees are driven by other employees' well-being) servant leadership had a stronger relationship with value enhancing behavior performance. Since only three studies have investigated the influence of servant leadership on salespersons' perceptions of an ethical climate, a need exists for additional research investigating the influence of servant leadership on salespersons' perception of an ethical climate. While the results of prior research are limited, support appears to exist for hypothesizing that servant leadership has a positive relationship with ethical climate.

H¹: Servant leadership is positively related to ethical climate.

Organizational Identification

Organizational identification has been defined as “perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) of which he or she is a member” (Mael and Ashforth, 1992: 104). It is a form of psychological attachment that happens when members accept the important features of the organization as features that define themselves (Dutton et al., 1994). Organizational identification has become one of the most important concepts in organizational behavior because of its link to significant attitudes and behaviors (Edwards, 2005).

The concept of organizational identification began with the work of social identity scholars (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 1979, 1985). Social identity theory examines the behavior of group members based on their perceived status differences and comparisons with members of other groups. An essential aspect of identification is the value a person attributes to membership in the organization (Tajfel, 1982). According to social identity theory, group classification involves three mental processes: (1) social categorization – the method that people classify themselves into different groups based on visible characteristics (e.g., gender, age, race), (2) social identification – the method that people use to identify as part of a group, which influences them to adopt and behave according to group norms and (3) social comparison – the method that people use to compare their group to other groups regarding social standing and prestige.

The extent to which a person identifies with a group determines the level the person applies the group’s characteristics to himself or herself and behaves in a similar way to other members of the group (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994). According to social identity theory, group members view themselves as distinct from members of other groups, which allows them to maintain group identity (Tajfel, 1982). When a person strongly identifies with the group, he or she behaves according to the group’s expectations (Olkkonen and Lipponen, 2006). Ashforth et al. state that organizational identification “is at the core of why people join organizations and why they voluntarily leave, why they approach their work the way they do and why they interact with others the way they do during that work” (2008, p. 334).

A key aspect of servant leaders is their emphasis on serving others outside of the organization, which is a distinctive characteristic of the organization. They also convey the organization’s emphasis on fostering a culture where employees can develop their skills, allow opportunities for personal growth, and acknowledge appreciation for their contributions to the organization’s success (Liden et al., 2008; Schaubroeck et al., 2011; van Dierendonck, 2011). Employees will view the organization as an attractive place to work, feel more valued, and identify more strongly with its goals and values when working for a servant leader. Employees identify more strongly when they view the organization as an attractive place to work (Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006).

Interestingly, few studies have investigated how servant leadership impacts employees’ organizational identification. For example, three studies using employees in China, (Zhang et al., 2012; Zhao et al., 2016; Zhu and Zhang, 2020) and one study that sampled 205 food employees in Pakistan (Chughati, 2016) reported that servant leadership was positively related to

organizational identification. Although only four studies have investigated the relationship between servant leadership and organizational identification, each study reported that servant leadership is positively related to organizational identification. Therefore, the following hypothesis is offered to be tested.

H²: Servant leadership is positively related to organizational identification.

Commitment to Superior Customer Value

Superior customer value refers to the perceived benefit or satisfaction that customers derive from a product or service relative to its cost (Lapierre, 2000). It stands as a cornerstone of business success, playing an integral role in fostering customer satisfaction, cementing loyalty, and ensuring retention (Keiningham et al., 2007; Trasorras et al., 2009). When customers perceive high value in products or services, they are more likely to remain loyal, make repeat purchases, and recommend the brand to others. This not only drives sales but also enhances the brand's reputation. Ultimately, delivering superior customer value is a key factor in the long-term success and sustainability of a business.

In a business-to-business environment, salespeople play a critical role in delivering superior customer value. Homburg et al. (2011) maintains that salespeople's behaviors are pivotal in understanding customer needs and tailoring solutions accordingly. This direct interaction, combined with the salesperson's in-depth product knowledge and ability to foster relationships, positions them as a key driver of customer value. In this study, we define the salesperson's commitment to providing superior customer value as "the strength of an individual's devotion to providing superior value to customers" (Schwepker, 2013).

Schwepker's studies (2013, 2015, 2017, and 2019) collectively suggest that the salesperson's commitment to superior customer value is not just a function of the product or service offered but is significantly influenced by the internal dynamics of an organization, including its ethical climate and the alignment of values between employees and the organization. This comprehensive understanding of customer value underlines its multifaceted nature, encompassing both tangible product features and the intangible aspects of organizational behavior and ethics. Schwepker's (2019) study further establishes the importance of aligning ethical values between salespeople and their organizations, which strengthens their commitment to providing superior customer value. Therefore, we posit that:

H³: Ethical climate is positively related to the salesperson's commitment to superior customer value.

How does leadership influence superior customer value? Only three studies have examined leadership style and superior customer value. Two of the studies reported that leader-member-exchange (LMX) (Schwepker, 2017) and ethical leadership (Schwepker and Ingram, 2016) were direct predictors of supervisor customer value. Only one study has tested the relationship between servant leadership and superior customer value. Schwepker (2016) reported that the relationship between servant leadership and supervisor customer value was mediated by other variables. Servant leaders make a salesperson's career development a priority. To be

promoted a salesperson needs to perform at a high level. Intuitively, salespeople will want to work for a sales manager who emphasizes their career development. In addition, servant leaders possess high ethical values (Liden et al., 2015). Thus, since servant leadership is highly correlated to both LMX and ethical leadership (Lee et al., 2020) and both leadership styles are related directly to superior customer value, intuitively servant leadership may be directly related to superior customer value.

Since only one study has investigated the relationship between servant leadership and superior customer value, a research question rather than a hypothesis will be stated.

R¹: Is the relationship between servant leadership and superior customer value direct or indirect through other variables?

Salesperson Performance

While Schwepker (2013) emphasized the role of an ethical climate in enhancing salespeople's commitment to delivering superior customer value, his work also linked it to improved sales performance. We define performance as a salesperson achieving annual goals. These two goals were achieving annual sales targets and keeping expenses at an acceptable level.

There is evidence to suggest that salespeople who deliver superior customer value consistently achieve robust performance metrics and are more likely to meet or surpass their sales quotas and objectives. For instance, Guenzi and Troilo (2007) highlight the significant role of sales and marketing integration in creating customer value, suggesting that when salespeople are supported by strong marketing strategies and a collaborative environment, they are more likely to understand and deliver on customer needs, leading to enhanced performance outcomes. Moreover, Schwepker (2015) found that salespeople who are more committed to customer value translates into superior sales performance and the attainment of sales goals. Therefore, we posit that:

H⁴: The salesperson's commitment to superior customer value is positively related to salesperson performance.

While research has reported that organizational identification is related to numerous employee job attitudes and behaviors (Greco et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2015), the relationship between organizational identification and job performance is uncertain. For example, in their meta-analysis, Lee et al. (2015) reported that the relationship between organizational identification and extra-role performance was higher when self-reported results were used versus other-rated measures. Various meta-analyses (Greco et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2015; Peng and Kim, 2020; Riketta, 2005) have reported that while the relationship between organizational identification and job performance is significant, the relationship between the two variables is small. Virtually no research has examined organizational identification and performance in a sales environment. In one study the relationship between organizational identification and performance was moderately significant ($r = .20$, Beeler et al., 2020) while in another study the correlation between organizational identification and performance was low ($r = .12$, Gabler et al., 2014). Although sparse research has investigated the relationship between organizational

identification and performance, these studies indicate that organizational identification is positively related to performance.

H⁵: organizational identification is positively related to salesperson performance.

METHODS

Sample

This study involved both sales managers and salespeople who they managed. A list of sales managers was purchased from a business that sells various email lists of businesses. A list of 400 sales managers were emailed explaining the study's purpose along with a copy of the questionnaire and requesting that their salespeople and they participate in the study. Each salesperson was requested to go online and complete the survey. Confidentiality was promised to each participant as the responses would be seen only by the researchers. Ninety-four of the sales managers and 272 of the salespeople agreed to participate.

Most of the salespeople were married (206, 76.1%) male (199, 73.2%) and possessed at least a two-year college degree (247, 90.8%). They averaged 10.5 years of sales experience and had worked for their current employer an average of 7.9 years. Their average income was \$84,576. The compensation for the salespeople is as follows: salary, commission, and/or bonus (74.6%), salary (15.1%), and commission (10.3%). They worked in a variety of industries including manufacturing, service, and wholesaling.

Demographic information for the sales managers is as follows: most of the sales managers (77, 81.9%) had completed at least four years of college; most of them were male (74, 78.7%); they had been employed as a sales manager for an average of 8.7 years; and the number of salespeople supervised ranged from 4 to 10 with the average number being 5.9.

Measures

The questionnaire items appear in the Appendix. All items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). *Commitment to Superior Customer Value* ($\alpha = .90$) was measured using the nine-item scale developed by Schwepker (2013); *Ethical Climate* was measured using two scales developed by Babin et al. (2000). The two scales measure responsibility/trust and peer behavior. The two scales were combined to form one scale based on the high correlation between them ($\alpha = .88$). *Servant Leadership* was measured using the 7 – item scale developed by Liden et al. (2015) ($\alpha = .87$). Two items were used to measure *Performance* ($\alpha = .82$). The sales managers were asked to rate each salesperson's performance regarding achieving annual sales targets and keeping expenses at acceptable levels. *Organizational identification* was measured using the six-item scale developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992) ($\alpha = 0.87$). The factor loadings were high for each variable: commitment to superior customer value .62 to .88; performance .73 to .83, ethical climate .59 to .79, organizational identification .61 to .85; and servant leadership .63 to .87.

RESULTS

The correlations, means, and standard deviations for the variables appear in the Table. The model with hypotheses and beta coefficients appears in the figure.

Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviation

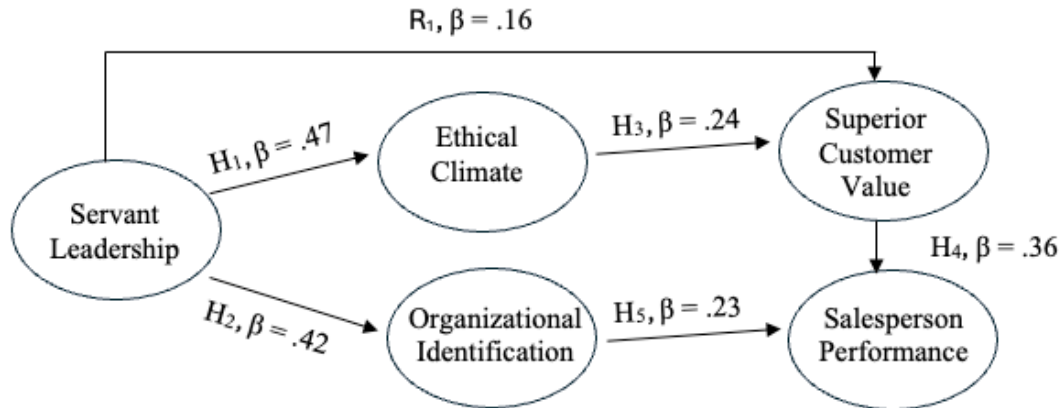
	1	2	3	4	5
Organ Iden.					
Performance	.29				
Servant Leadership	.41	.25			
Ethical Climate	.34	.26	.46		
Sup. Customer Value	.21	.40	.24	.24	
Means	26.5	9.8	35.9	47.6	37.8
Std. Deviations	7.1	2.2	6.9	10.2	14.5

LISREL 12 was used to analyze the data. Traditional fit indices were used to assess model fit: comparative fit index (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). First, the measurement model was assessed. The confirmatory factor analysis indicated a very good model fit ($\chi^2 = 841.65$, $df = 517$, $p < .001$, CFI = .94; SRMR = .041; RMSEA = .048). Based on the fit of the measurement model, the hypothesized was tested. The results of the test for the hypothesized model indicated a very good fit ($\chi^2 = 861.91$, $df = 521$, $p < .001$, CFI = .94; SRMR = .041; RMSEA = .048).

Support is found for all the hypotheses: Servant leadership is positively related to ethical climate; (Hypothesis 1) ($\beta = .47$, $t = 6.51$); servant leadership is positively related to organizational identification; (Hypothesis 2) ($\beta = .42$, $t = 5.81$); ethical climate is positively related to the salesperson's commitment to superior customer value (Hypothesis 3) ($\beta = .24$, $t = 3.60$); the salesperson's commitment to superior customer value is positively related to salesperson performance (Hypothesis 4) ($\beta = .36$, $t = 4.82$); and organizational identification is positively related to salesperson performance (Hypothesis 5) ($\beta = .23$, $t = 3.17$).

The research question involved the direct relationship between servant leadership and superior customer value. This model showed a significant difference between the hypothesized model. The fit of the second model did indicate a statistically significant improvement over the hypothesized model ($\chi^2 = 853.66$, $df = 521$, $p = .00$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .053, SRMR = .053 ($\Delta\chi^2 = 5.3$, $p < .025$). Thus, the relationship between servant leadership and superior customer value is both direct and indirect ($\beta = .16$, $t = 2.14$).

Hypothesized Model and Study Results



DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the role of servant leadership in influencing salespersons' ethical climate, organizational identification, and superior customer value. A secondary purpose of the study was to analyze how both servant leadership and superior customer value effects performance. The results have important implications for managing the sales force.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributed to the limited research showing that servant leadership influences perception of an ethical climate among salespeople (Bande et al., 2020; Jaramillo et al., 2015; Schwepker and Schultz, 2015). In only one of these studies was performance included and none of these studies included organizational identification. This study's results make an important contribution to existing research by showing the relationship among and how indirectly or directly they influence salespersons' performance.

This study confirmed prior research by showing that sales managers who are viewed as a servant leader directly influence ethical climate within the sales force. Servant leaders help their salespeople when they have a personal problem, allows them the freedom to handle difficult situations as they deem best, and importantly will not compromise ethical values to be successful. When these traits are visible in the sales manager, salespeople will view the sales manager as a servant leader. The important theoretical implication is that this study's results support prior research showing that the presence of an ethical climate leads to positive outcomes (Martin and Cullen, 2006).

This study also expands our understanding of the relationship between servant leadership and organizational identification. No study has ever analyzed the relationship between servant leadership and organizational identification with salespeople. The results indicate that salespeople will identify more with their organization's goals and values when they work for a servant leader. Research has found that organizational identification is related to a variety of important job attitudes and behaviors (Lee et al., 2015). In this study organizational identification was related to higher performance among the salespeople.

Another important finding of this study is that ethical climate impacts superior customer value. Achieving superior customer value is vitally important in achieving customer satisfaction and retaining customers (Trasorras et al., 2009). The long-term success of the business is dependent on delivering superior customer value. Salespeople have an important role in delivering superior customer value since they interact with customers directly. Clearly, an organization wants to determine ways for salespeople to emphasize superior customer value. This study's results indicate that servant leadership impacts superior customer both indirectly through ethical climate and directly. These results once again show the importance of servant leadership in the sales force.

The last important theoretical implication of the study's results is that servant leadership is directly related to superior customer value. Only one study (Schwepker, 2016) included both servant leadership and superior customer value. However, in the Schwepker (2016) study, the direct relationship between servant leadership and superior customer value was not tested. Therefore, this study is the first one to show that servant leadership influences superior customer value directly.

Managerial Implications

The results also have several implications for managing the sales force. First, creating an ethical climate is crucial for organizations that aim to attract and retain clients (Ingram et al., 2007). Ethical behavior impacts not only customers but also employees and society, making the development of such a climate a vital task for sales managers (Tanner et al., 2015).

An ethical climate is particularly important in a professional selling environment. Salespeople perceive the organization's climate as ethical when they are treated fairly, prioritize their clients' interests, uphold high moral standards, see fellow salespeople acting ethically, and act in the best interests of the organization rather than their own self-interest. Unfortunately, research suggests that the ethical behavior of salespeople is often viewed as lacking (Ingram et al., 2007). Thus, finding ways to enhance ethical behavior among the sales force is essential.

Creating an ethical climate is very important for salespeople since, unlike other employees, they are under pressure to make quota and often work without direct supervision.

As firm representatives, their behavior significantly impacts its success. To make sales they may be tempted to engage in unethical behavior. This study indicates that sales managers who practice servant leadership can positively influence the ethical behavior of the sales force. An ethical climate is more likely to emerge when sales managers do not compromise their ethical behavior, prioritize career development for their salespeople, and place the interests of their team

ahead of their own. Hiring sales managers who are servant leaders can yield long-term benefits for the organization.

The second practical implication is that servant leadership directly influences superior customer value and indirectly salespersons' job performance through organizational identification and superior customer value. Salespeople perform at a higher level when they identify strongly with the company's goals. Since obtaining and retaining clients is the role of the sales force, understanding variables related to increased job performance is critical. This study indicates that a servant style of leadership is one of the variables that can indirectly influence the performance of the sales force. The servant leader enhances organizational identification and encourages the sales force to emphasize superior customer value by assisting their salespeople to succeed in their career, attending to their personal needs, and by developing their conceptual skills, which leads to higher job performance.

Third, social exchange theory and the norm of reciprocity (Blau, 1964) say that people will repay in kind when someone else has done something for them. Servant leaders care about their subordinates' well-being. When working for this type of sales manager, the sales force will feel an obligation to reciprocate that fair treatment with increased effort to increase the organization's goals leading to greater job performance and revenue for the company (Hoch et al., 2018).

Since these results show that sales managers who are perceived as servant leaders by the salespeople they manage influence behavior, how do organizations select sales managers who possess the traits of a servant leader? Most sales managers are selected based on their performance as a salesperson. This practice most likely will need to be modified. Rather than just relying on performance as a sole criterion for promotion to a sales management position, organizations should develop other methods such as employing surveys and interviews to select sales managers. Perhaps this change needs to start during the initial hiring phase for salespeople rather waiting until a sales management position opens. Surveys evaluating people who possess the traits of a servant leader will need to be developed along with training people on interviewing techniques to identify appropriate people to hire. The human resource department needs to be heavily involved. Last, senior management must be willing to support a program of hiring and promoting people who possess the traits of servant leaders. Long-term benefits will accrue by doing so.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

Like all studies, this one has several limitations. First, the data were cross-sectional. A cross-sectional design has a limitation of not being able to make causal conclusions. It represents a single measurement of cause and effect. The study's results can show that a causal relationship exists, but not why it exists. In the future, the model should be tested with one organization using a longitudinal design. Second, this study examined only servant leadership. Thus, a comparison of other leadership theories (transformational, ethical, and authentic) and their ability to influence ethical behavior cannot be done. Future research could examine which of these leadership theories has the greatest influence on creating an ethical climate. Third, this study was conducted in the United States. In contrast, two of the three prior research studies investigating

the relationship between servant leadership and ethical climate were conducted in Spain. Therefore, the results from those studies might differ from those of Schwepker and Schultz (2015) and this study, which were conducted with American salespeople.

Fourth, this study was the first one to investigate how servant leadership impacts employees' organizational identification with a sample of American workers or salespeople. Thus, these results may be specific to this sample of employees. Therefore, the results may be specific to salespeople. Future research needs to test the hypotheses in this study with another sample of salespeople or employees working in a non-sales related occupation.

Fifth, this study examined only task performance. Beyond just examining task performance, future research could also analyze organizational citizenship behaviors. Does a servant leader in a sales organization contribute to salespeople willing to engage in organizational citizenship behavior (behavior that is not formally recognized by the organization, but contributes to its functioning)? Last, this study examined only outcomes of servant leadership. Future research could examine antecedent variables such as extroversion, organizational culture, and altruism and how they impact servant leadership. Virtually no research has investigated antecedent variables to servant leadership. Thus, understanding how servant leadership develops cannot be determined. Can organizations train managers to be servant leaders? Are traits of a servant leader learned prior to employment?

In conclusion, this study indicates that servant leadership is an important style of leadership influencing salespersons' job attitudes and behavior, especially regarding perceptions of an ethical climate and performance. This study's results show that servant leadership is an important form of leadership when managing salespeople.

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APPENDIX – QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS

Organizational Identification

1. When somebody criticizes your company, it feels like a personal insult.
2. I am very interested in what others think about my company.
3. When I talk about this company, I usually say “we” rather than “they.”
4. This company’s successes are my successes.
5. When someone praises this company, it feels like a personal compliment.
6. If a story in the media criticized this company, I would feel embarrassed.

Superior Customer Value

1. I feel strongly about improving the value provided to our organization’s customers.
2. I enjoy discussing issues related to delivering superior customer value with people in my organization.
3. I gain a sense of personal accomplishment in providing superior value to my customers.
4. I completely understand the importance of providing superior value to our customers.
5. I often discuss customer value-related issues with people outside of my organization.
6. Providing superior value to our customers should be the number one priority of my organization.
7. I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected in order to help my organization deliver superior value to our customers.
8. The way I feel about providing customer value is very similar to the way my organization feels about it.
9. I really care about the value provided to customers by my organization.

Servant Leadership

1. My leader can tell if something work-related is going wrong.
2. My leader makes my career development a priority.
3. I would seek help from my leader if I had a personal problem.
4. My leader emphasizes the importance of giving back to the community.
5. My leader puts my best interests ahead of his/her own.
6. My leader gives me the freedom to handle difficult situations in the way that I feel is best.
7. My leader would NOT compromise ethical principles in order to achieve success.

Ethical Climate

1. All employees here are held accountable for their actions.
2. Employees here act first to further their customers’ interests.
3. People always get treated justly here.
4. Employees here are truly committed to high moral standards in their treatment of others.
5. Employees here have performed unethical acts.
6. I’ve seen other employees do things that bother me from a moral viewpoint.
7. Some of the people I work with do things that I feel are unethical.
8. Generally, employees here simply act to protect their own self-interest.
9. Employees here do things based on “CYA” (protect yourself) principle).
10. Employees here sometimes take revenge out on customers.