

## **Sales manager servant leadership and duty orientation's impact on salesperson job outcomes**

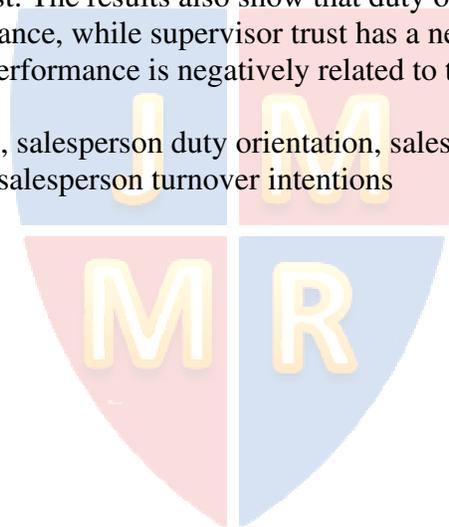
James DeConinck, Ph.D.  
Western Carolina University

Julie Johnson-Busbin, Ph.D.  
Western Carolina University

### **ABSTRACT**

This study examined the extent that servant leadership impacts salesperson performance and turnover intentions among a sample of industrial salespeople. This study seeks to expand the body of knowledge by examining both servant leadership and duty orientation in the same model. Our findings show that the effects of servant leadership are mediated through duty orientation and supervisor trust. The results also show that duty orientation has a direct and positive effect on job performance, while supervisor trust has a negative effect on turnover intentions. As expected, job performance is negatively related to turnover intentions.

Keywords: Servant leadership, salesperson duty orientation, salesperson supervisor trust, salesperson job performance, salesperson turnover intentions



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## INTRODUCTION

For decades, salesforce research has delved into the complexities and nuances of leadership theory. Researchers examining this area have scrutinized various theories such as transformational and transactional leadership (Bass, 1997; Mullins and Syam, 2014; Schwepker and Good, 2010), leader-member exchange (Durrat, Atinc, and Babin, 2016), ethical leadership (DeConinck, 2015; Schwepker, 2015), and path-goal theory (Jaramillo and Mulki, 2008) to gain valuable insights into their implications for salesforce leadership. In recent years, however, there has been a growing interest in researching how servant leadership affects the attitudes and behaviors of salespeople (e.g., Grisaffe, VanMeter, and Chonko, 2016; Jaramillo, Bande, and Varela, 2015; Jaramillo et al., 2009; Schwepker, 2016; Westbrook and Peterson, 2022). The purpose of this study is to expand on prior research in this area by examining the relationship between servant leadership and various job-related outcomes.

This study makes two important contributions to the current servant leadership research. First, servant leadership has been the focus of increased attention because of its significant relationship to employees' attitudes and job outcomes and its ability to explain the additional variance of these attitudes and outcomes beyond other styles (ethical, authentic, transformational) of leadership (Grisaffe et al., 2016; Hoch et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020). This study seeks to extend the body of knowledge by examining a connection between servant leadership and duty orientation, an area that has yet to be studied.

Second, this study examines the relationship among servant leadership, performance, and turnover intentions. Does servant leadership have a direct relationship with the performance and turnover intentions of salespeople? Or is the relationship mediated by other variables? Few studies have examined whether servant leadership has a direct relationship with these two important job outcomes or included all three variables in a single study. The authors seek to develop an understanding of the complex dynamics impacting these relationships in this largely understudied area.

Thus, this study examines the influence of servant leadership through duty orientation and supervisor trust on the performance and turnover intentions among a sample of industrial salespeople. Support for the hypothesized relationships is provided in the literature review.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Servant Leadership

The concept of servant leadership was developed by Robert Greenleaf (1977). He posited that servant leadership was more than just managing. Greenleaf (1977) maintained that a leader's most important priority was to provide service to the community and employees. According to Greenleaf (1977), the key difference between a servant leader and other forms of leadership is an emphasis on concern for others. A servant leader is a servant first and then a leader. Servant leaders view the needs of followers as more important than their own interests (Panaccio et al., 2015). The servant leader has two distinct characteristics, "serving first, and selflessly focusing on others' needs" (Grisaffe et al., 2016, p. 43).

A widely accepted recent definition of servant leadership is offered by Eva et al., 2019, p.114). They define servant leadership as 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.” This is consistent with how the authors define servant leadership in this paper.

By embracing servant leadership, individuals can cultivate deeper relationships with those they lead. Personal integrity and obligations that go beyond the organization are important aspects of servant leadership. Servant leadership stresses developing long-term relationships with subordinates, which leads to increased loyalty, trust, and commitment. Servant leaders encourage followers to behave ethically, help them grow and succeed, put the welfare of subordinates first, adhere to followers’ concerns, possess the knowledge to assist followers in performing their jobs, effectively demonstrate concern for the well-being of others, and empower followers to handle and solve problems (Liden et al., 2008).

Servant leadership is like other leadership theories (transformational leadership and ethical leadership) in its emphasis on the needs of followers, trust, empowerment, honesty, and ethical behavior (Erhart, 2004; Eva et al., 2019; Russell and Stone, 2002; Stone, Russell, and Patterson, 2004). However, unlike other leadership theories which emphasize organizational goals, the needs of followers is the primary emphasis of servant leadership (van Dierendonck et al., 2014). Its emphasis on service to others rather than self-service is what distinguishes servant leadership from other leadership theories (van Dierendonck, 2011).

Empirical research indicates that servant leadership is unique from other leadership theories (Erhart, 2004; Grisaffe et al., 2016; Liden et al., 2008; Schaubroeck, Lam, and Peng, 2011). Three recent literature reviews have shown that servant leadership is correlated with various employee attitudes and behaviors (Hoch et al., 2018; Grisaffe et al., 2016; Lemoine, Hartnell, and Leroy, 2019). Additionally, servant leadership has been shown to play a more significant role in employees’ job attitudes and behavior as compared to other leadership theories. Hoch et al.’s (2018) recent meta-analysis examined the incremental variance explained by ethical leadership, servant leadership, transformational leadership, and authentic leadership. While the four leadership theories are highly correlated, servant leadership was found to be distinct from the other three leadership theories.

### **Duty Orientation**

Duty orientation is a psychological state where a person has an obligation to an organization or group. It consists of three important elements (Hannah et al., 2014), which are duty to mission (utilizing additional sacrifice and effort to accomplish the group or organization’s tasks and mission, duty to members (faithfully serving organizational or group members), and duty of codes (behave ethically and respect the team’s code of conduct that the group has established). Collectively, these three elements will induce individuals to behave according to their duties within the organization or group (Hannah et al., 2014). They will behave in ways that are beneficial to the group, although they may receive no benefit from behaving in this manner (Moon et al., 2008). When employees possess elevated levels of duty orientation, they will focus on issues related to their team or organization through the viewpoint of their duty to other team or organizational members. In contrast to employees with low levels of duty orientation, employees with elevated levels of duty orientation will behave in a way that benefits their team or organization (Hannah et al., 2014).

## **Supervisor Trust**

Supervisor trust is defined as ‘the amount of confidence salespeople have in the fairness and integrity of their leader’ (MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Rich, 2001, p. 122). Trust has been studied for many years involving both non-sales employees (see the meta-analysis by Dirks and Ferrin, 2002) and salespeople (e.g., DeConinck, 2011; Badrinarayanan and Chaker, 2021; Flaherty and Pappas, 2000; Mulki, Jaramillo, and Locander, 2006). Supervisor trust has been the focus of much research because of its significant relationship with many employees’ job attitudes and behaviors. For example, regarding sales research, trust in the sales manager is linked to ethical behavior (Jaramillo, Bande, and Varela, 2015), job satisfaction (Pomirleanu and Babu, 2015), organizational justice (Brashear, Manolis, and Brooks, 2005), organizational identification (DeConinck, 2011), and turnover intention (Mulki, Jaramillo, and Locander, 2006).

## **The Relationship Among Servant Leadership, Duty Orientation, and Supervisor Trust**

No study has analyzed the relationship among duty orientation, servant leadership and supervisor trust in the same study. While the relationship between duty orientation and supervisor trust has been examined and the relationship between servant leadership and supervisor trust has been studied, there is no research on the relationship between servant leadership and duty orientation.

However, three studies have reported that ethical leadership has a significant, positive relationship with duty orientation (Eva et al., 2020; Hannah et al., 2104; Moss et al., 2020). Several aspects of ethical leadership overlap with components of servant leadership (van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011). For example, both leadership styles emphasize ethical behavior, trustworthiness, integrity and caring for people. Some of these same traits are shared by both servant leadership and duty orientation. In addition, both servant leadership and duty orientation emphasize the importance of ethical behavior, helping subordinates succeed, and caring about their subordinates. Thus, while no empirical research exists investigating the relationship between servant leadership and duty orientation, theoretically, since both variables measure some of the same leader characteristics, support exists for hypothesizing that salespeople working for sales managers who are servant leaders will display greater duty orientation. Therefore, the authors posit that:

H<sub>1</sub>: Servant leadership is positively related to duty orientation.

Many studies have examined the relationship between various leadership types and supervisor trust (see the meta-analyses by Banks et al., 2016; Bedi, Alpaslan, and Green, 2016; Dirks and Ferrin, 2002; Ng and Feldman, 2015). Kiker, Callahan and Kiker (2019), in their meta-analysis, reported that servant leadership was significantly correlated with supervisor trust. The results of these studies provide support for hypothesizing that servant leadership is related to supervisor trust. Therefore, the authors posit that:

H<sub>2</sub>: Servant leadership is positively related to supervisor trust.

Job performance is important in all areas of business but is especially vital for salespeople given the unique characteristics of their job. As such, it has been an important area of

research for almost 40 years (Churchill et al., 1985; MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Ahearne, 1998; Barksdale et al., 2003; Jaramillo, Mulki, and Marshall, 2003; Verbeke, Dietz, and Verwaal, 2011). An understanding of the factors that drive sales performance and how these vary across different contexts is essential for both managers and researchers in sales and marketing.

Theoretically, a salesperson who has a high level of duty orientation should perform at a higher level. Employees who report a high level of duty orientation support the organization, are willing to make personal sacrifices to support the organization's mission and make a sincere effort to get the job done even under difficult circumstances. They go beyond what is normally expected of them to help the organization. However, only one study could be found that tested this relationship. Eva et al. (2020), using a sample of Chinese employees reported that duty orientation was related positively to increased job performance. While this study did not examine salespeople, the authors maintain that theoretically, the relationship should remain. Therefore, the authors posit that:

H<sub>3</sub>: Duty orientation is positively related to job performance.

In their meta-analysis Dirks and Ferrin (2002) reported that supervisor trust has a significant correlation ( $r = -.40$ ) with turnover intentions. Subsequent research also has reported a significant relationship between supervisor trust and turnover intentions (DeConinck, 2011; Ertürk and Vurgun, 2015; Mulki, Jaramillo, and Locander, 2008). Therefore, the authors posit that:

H<sub>4</sub>: Supervisor trust is related positively to turnover intentions.

An abundance of research has analyzed how job performance influences turnover intentions. Consistent with this research, the authors posit that:

H<sub>5</sub>: Job performance is related negatively to turnover intentions.

## Research Questions

Two research questions will be examined in this study. First, this study will analyze how servant leadership influences performance. The extent to which servant leadership influences performance is unclear. Three meta-analyses (Chaudhry et al., 2021; Hoch et al. 2018; Lee et al., 2020) have analyzed the correlation between performance and servant leadership. Similar results were reported in each meta-analysis: Chaudhry et al.  $r = .19$ , Hoch et al.  $r = .20$ , Lee et al.  $r = .23$ ). These results indicate a modest correlation between performance and servant leadership. A critical finding of the Lee et al. (2020) study was that trust in the supervisor mediated the relationship between the two variables.

Very few studies have included both servant leadership and performance in a study involving salespeople. The results reported by Varela et al., (2019), Jaramillo et al., (2009) and Jaramillo, Bande, and Varela (2015) showed that other variables mediated the relationship between servant leadership and performance.

However, two other studies (Schwepker and Schultz, 2015; Westbrook and Peterson, 2022) reported that servant leadership has a direct relationship with a salesperson's performance. Since the results of the five studies that have included both servant leadership and performance

are uncertain concerning the association between performance and servant leadership, more research is needed to understand this relationship.

R<sub>1</sub>: Is the relationship between servant leadership and salespersons' performance direct or indirect through other variables?

The second research question involves investigating how servant leadership influences turnover intentions. Few studies could be found that examined the association between the two variables. Neither the Hoch et al. (2018) nor the Lee et al. meta-analyses reported a correlation between servant leadership and turnover intentions. Chaudhry et al. (2021) reported a significant, but modest correlation between servant leadership and turnover intentions ( $r = -.26$ ).

Only three studies involving salespeople have included both variables in their study. Both Jaramillo et al., (2009) and Schwepker and Schultz (2015) reported that other variables mediated the relationship between servant leadership and turnover intentions. However, Westbrook and Peterson (2022) reported a direct relationship.

Few studies exist investigating if servant leadership influences turnover intentions. The fact that these studies reported different results, additional research examining the relationship between servant leadership and turnover intentions is warranted. The following research question will be analyzed.

R<sub>2</sub>: Is the relationship between servant leadership and turnover intentions direct or indirect through other variables?

## METHODS

### Sample and Procedure

A list of sales managers (400) was purchased by a company specializing in direct mailing lists. The purpose of the study was explained to the sales managers along with asking for their participation and participation from their salespeople in completing an online survey. Each person was promised confidentiality. A total of 76 sales managers (19%) and 203 salespeople (53.4% of possible responses) completed their parts of the questionnaire.

The demographic profile of the salesperson sample is as follows: the average age of the salespeople was 38.6; they had an average of 9.4 years of sales experience; about 60 percent of the salespeople had worked with their present company between 1 and 6 years (121); and about 70 percent were male. Most of the salespeople had some college – 62.1 percent had a four – year degree, 12.3 percent had a graduate degree, and 25.6 percent had taken some college courses including completing a two-year degree. The compensation of the salespeople was salary (26.1%), commission (13.3%), and salary, commission, and/or bonus (60.6%). The average age of the sales managers was 44.4; most were male (56, 76.6%); they had been employed as a sales manager for about an average of 11 years, and most of them (62, 81.6%) had either a four-year or graduate degree.

## Measures

*Servant Leadership* was measured using the 7 – item short scale developed by Liden et al. (2015) ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ). The Hannah et al. (2014) 12-item scale was used to measure *Duty Orientation* ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ). *Performance* was measured using two items. Each sales manager rated the performance of their salespeople concerning meeting sales quota and their sales expense quota ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ). Supervisor trust is measured using six items from the scale developed by Robinson (1996) ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ). *Turnover intentions* were measured using three items developed by DeConinck and Stilwell (2004) ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ).

## Construct Validity

Hair, Babin, Anderson, and Black (2018) recommend testing construct validity using three methods. First, the variance extracted for each variable ranged from .62 (duty orientation) to .85 (turnover intentions). Second, all standardized factor loadings be above .5 or higher. The standardized factor loadings for each construct were as follows: servant leadership .68 to .77; duty orientation .75 to .81; supervisor trust .79 to .85; performance .71 to .93; and turnover intentions .88 to .96. Third, the variance extracted estimates among the factors was greater than the square of the correlations, which indicates discriminant validity.

## Common Method Bias

Two steps were employed to deal with the potential problem of common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The first step involved dispersing the items randomly in the survey. The second step involved using Harmon's one-factor test. The results indicated that 19.3 percent of the variance was explained, which is below the suggested 50 percent level. Although the value of using Harmon's one-factor test to detect common method bias has been voiced (Podsakoff et al., 2003), one recent one study reported that Harmon's one-factor test "can detect biasing levels of CMV under conditions commonly found in survey-based marketing research" (Fuller et al., 2016, p. 3197).

## RESULTS

The means, standard deviations and correlations are in Table 1. The results were analyzed using LISREL 12. The fit of the model was evaluated using the chi-square test, the comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). These fit indices are traditionally used to evaluate the fit of structural equation models (Hooper, Coughan, and Mullen, 2008; Kline, 2005; Hair, Babin, and Krey, 2017).

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) meet or exceed commonly suggested cutoff values as proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999) ( $\chi^2 = 621.79$ ,  $df = 395$ ,  $p = .00$ , CFI = .95, Std. RMR = .043; RMSEA = .052). Based on the very good fit of the CFA model, the hypothesized model was assessed. The results for the hypothesized model also indicated a very good fit ( $\chi^2 = 644.33$ ,  $df = 400$ ,  $p = .00$ , CFI = .95, Std. RMR = .05, RMSEA = .051).

Support was found for each hypothesis. Servant leadership is related positively to duty orientation ( $H_1$ ,  $\beta = .26$ ,  $t = 3.54$ ); servant leadership is related to positively to supervisor trust

( $H_2$ ,  $\beta = .52$ ,  $t = 7.04$ ); duty orientation is related positively to performance ( $H_3$ ,  $\beta = .27$ ,  $t = 3.42$ ); supervisor trust is related negatively to turnover intentions ( $H_4$ ,  $\beta = -.21$ ,  $t = 2.98$ ); and performance is related negatively to turnover intentions ( $H_5$ ,  $\beta = -.27$ ,  $t = 3.23$ )

A second model was tested to evaluate the two research questions: the direct relationship between servant leadership and salespersons' performance and servant leadership and turnover intentions. The fit of the revised model with two paths from servant leadership to performance and servant leadership to turnover intention was not significantly different than the hypothesized model ( $\Delta \chi^2 = 4.24$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $NS$ ). Thus, the revised model was rejected. The relationship between servant leadership and both performance and turnover intentions is mediated by other variables in the model.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our research found two constructs that mediate the relationship between supervisor servant leadership and salesperson job performance/turnover intentions. These constructs are the salesperson's duty orientation and the level of trust between the salespeople and their supervisors. Sales managers who embrace the concept of servant leadership can help foster a sense of duty orientation among their sales team. The idea behind this approach is to create an environment where employees feel valued, respected, and supported in their work. Salespeople will be more likely to take initiative and be more motivated to achieve results. This style of management can also encourage collaboration within the team as well as with other departments or customers. As such, it helps cultivate a culture that values challenging work and dedication while creating an atmosphere conducive for success. In addition, when salespeople see examples from their manager on how to serve others first before themselves, they may adopt similar behaviors which leads to greater accountability and commitment towards achieving goals set forth by the company.

The role of a sales manager is to ensure that their team reaches its goals, but this can be difficult when there is not an established trust between the salespeople and the management. Fortunately, by using a servant leader management style, sales managers can help improve trust among their team members and create an environment where everyone works together for success. Servant leadership focuses on creating opportunities for growth and development within teams, which allows individuals to take ownership of their work while also considering how it fits into the larger picture. By emphasizing on collaboration instead of competition between team members, leaders can foster an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding that helps build strong relationships among colleagues. Additionally, recognizing individual accomplishments creates further motivation for employees as they feel valued in what they do. Through these practices, a sales manager can encourage stronger communication within a team while helping develop better problem-solving skills which leads to increased productivity overall.

Unfortunately, a servant leadership approach may not come naturally to all sales managers. Companies should consider implementing training by experienced professionals on how best to lead with this technique to ensure its success within their team. By implementing proper training, sales managers can learn how to effectively communicate with their staff while still maintaining control over the team's goals and objectives - ensuring both productivity and morale remain high throughout the organization. As such, training to help improve sales managers' servant leadership style should include teaching them how to lead with empathy, how to create an environment in which everyone can contribute their ideas freely, and how to

recognize individual successes within the team. Additionally, this training should focus on helping managers build strong relationships with their teams so that they can work together effectively toward common goals. With a clear understanding of what is expected from them and support from their leader, sales teams will be better equipped for success.

### **Limitations and Future Research Opportunities**

This study, like all research, has some limitations. First, the data are cross-sectional. Future research can test the model within a single organization. Second, this study examined only the outcomes of servant leadership. Future research could include antecedent variables such as religiosity and moral identity into their models and investigate additional outcome variables such as organizational justice and ethical work climate. Moral identity is related to ethical leadership. Is it also an antecedent variable to servant leadership? Does religiosity play a role in sales managers who are perceived to be servant leaders? Third, this research investigated the relationship between turnover intentions and servant leadership. However, is servant leadership related to actual turnover? Future research should investigate if servant leadership is related directly to actual turnover. Another potentially interesting area of research is examining gender differences in servant leadership. For example, do men or women make better servant leaders in a professional selling environment? Fourth, this study was the first one to include both servant leadership and duty orientation in a model. Additional research is needed to confirm this study's results.

In conclusion, this study has shown the importance of examining how servant leadership influences salespersons' trust in their sales manager, duty orientation, performance, and turnover intentions in a professional selling environment. The results show that servant leadership directly influences salespersons' trust in their sales manager and duty orientation. It indirectly affects their performance and turnover intentions. The results from this study indicate the importance of servant leadership in the salesforce.

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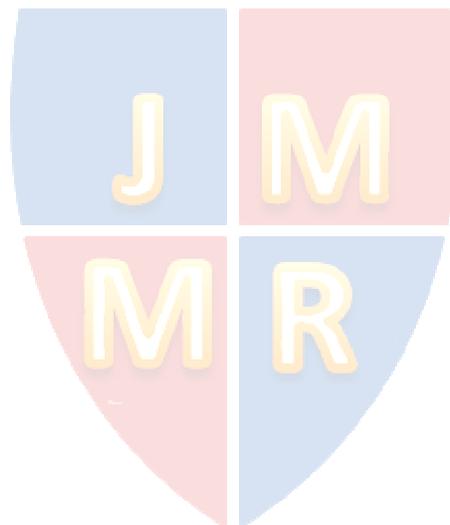


Table 1  
Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations

	DO	SL	P	TOI	TR
Duty Or.					
Servant le.	.25				
Perform	.24	.19			
TO intent.	-.25	-.22	-.32		
Sup. Trust	.29	.51	.30	-.27	
Mean	37.3	24.6	7.2	7.1	21.8
Std. Dev.	9.6	6.0	1.7	3.5	5.1

