



# The trickle-down effect of servant leadership on frontline employee service behaviors and performance: A multilevel study of Chinese hotels



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- We develop instruments to measure servant leadership at top- and middle-levels.
- A trickle-down effect from top- and middle-level leaders to service employees persists.
- Servant leadership encourages service-orientated behaviors and service quality.
- Service climate moderates the servant leadership and service-oriented behaviors relationship.

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## ABSTRACT

This study tests a trickle-down effect regarding how servant leadership flows from top-to middle-level leaders, resulting in frontline employees' service-oriented behaviors and service quality. Using multiple validations, we develop and test a measure of servant leadership at various levels in the hospitality industry. Drawing on data from 325 employee–supervisor pairs of workgroups in 9 Chinese, star-level hotels, results from hierarchical linear modeling support the service profit chain theory and trickle-down model of leadership by demonstrating influence of top- and middle-level servant leadership on frontline employees. Cross-level moderation analysis suggests service climate moderates the effect on service-oriented behaviors, but in an inverse direction.

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Life is service. The one who progresses is the one who gives his fellow human beings a little more, a little better service.

Ellsworth Milton Statler, founder of the Hotels Statler Company

## 1. Introduction

Given the importance of leadership to enterprise success, hospitality management scholars explore the topic variously regarding effectiveness (Asree, Zain, & Razalli, 2010; Dimmock, 1999;

Garrigós-Simón, Palacios-Marqués, & Narangajavana, 2008; Wang, Tsai, & Tsai, 2014; Yang, 2007). Among leadership theories, servant leadership is a particularly effective leadership style, regarded as leadership evolution in the hospitality industry (Brownell, 2010). A servant leader chooses to serve others (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002), which aligns with the *creating service excellence* mission in hospitality organizations (Brownell, 2010). Bennett proposes, “Servant leaders practice leadership as hospitality” (Brownell, 2010, p. 368). The traditional management perspective, which views staff members as instruments that serve customers and supervisors, no longer guarantees long-term success (Yang, 2007). Hotel managers are increasingly required to engender egalitarian leader–follower relationships by providing service to subordinates, including caring, facilitating, and coaching, to stimulate subordinates to contribute voluntarily to an organization

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(Brownell, 2010). A number of companies in hospitality and tourism industries adopt servant leadership principles in corporate philosophies, including Southwest Airlines, Ritz Hotel, Zingerman's Community of Businesses, and Two Chefs on a Roll (Brownell, 2010; Koch, 2004).

Despite the importance of servant leadership, studies of the topic in the hospitality industry remain few (Wu, Tse, Fu, Kwan, & Liu, 2013). Although numerous traits and attributes of servant leaders (e.g., diligence, reliability, honesty, self-management, effective listening, empowering, and directing) have been identified as competencies of hotel managers (Brownell, 2008; Chung-Herrera, Enz, & Lankau, 2003; Jeou-Shyan, Hsuan, Liu, Lin, & Tsai, 2011; Ladkin, 1999), there is limited focus on servant-specific leadership and its effects. Little research exists concerning the process by which servant leaders influence frontline employees' behaviors and performance. To fill these research gaps, we first validate a servant leadership measure for top- and middle-level managers in the hospitality industry. Little research provides measures of servant leadership that focus on this industry, or on the broader tourism context. Most research focuses on servant leadership at supervisor rather than top levels (Ehrhart, 2004; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008; Washington, Sutton, & Field, 2006; Wu et al., 2013). Given the disparities in requirements and functions among leaders at varying levels (Chen & Bliese, 2002), measurement of servant leadership might vary among levels. Thus, we develop and test a measure of servant leadership at various levels (i.e., departmental and general managers), which is especially applicable to hospitality and tourism industries.

Second, we explore the trickle-down effect of servant leadership on followers. Few studies include both top- and middle-level leadership in a single, empirical study (Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007; Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009). According to the trickle-down model of leadership (Mayer et al., 2009), the roles of leaders occupying various organizational levels are different, and the influence of leadership trickles down from top managers to immediate supervisors and employees. Combined with service profit chain theory (Heskett & Schlesinger, 1994), which suggests that the provision of good, internal services to employees spills over to good, external services to customers, we predict that a general manager's servant-leadership behaviors trickle down to department managers' servant-leadership behaviors, and further spill over to frontline employees' service behaviors and service quality regarding external customers. We test this proposition by developing a comprehensive framework to explain the effects of servant leadership at various levels, helping hospitality organizations leverage the influence of leadership on frontline service employees.

Third, this study examines moderation of service climate on the relationship between servant leadership and employees' service-oriented behaviors. From situational leadership theory, leader behaviors are effective in some situations but have no effect, or have dysfunctional effects, in others (Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1997, p. 117). Therefore, incomplete or inaccurate conclusions are possible if researchers do not consider the contexts in which leadership behaviors occur (Avey, Palanski, & Walumbwa, 2011). Extant research suggests service climate contextually influences the effect of supervisor leadership on employee service behaviors (Hui, Chiu, Yu, Cheng, & Tse, 2007; Liao & Chuang, 2007), but no study examines moderation of service climate on servant leadership, especially in top- and middle-level management. This study tests moderation of service climate on the effects of servant leadership at both top and middle levels of management to add empirical evidence to contemporary leadership research. This study responds to a neglected area of servant leadership research in the hospitality industry, and contributes to the topic of the trickle-down effect of

leadership on frontline employees. Although this study contributes theoretically, it is also practical since it offers an efficient instrument of servant leadership for administration in the hospitality industry, and advances hotel managers' understanding of their roles in promoting frontline service employees' service-oriented behaviors and service quality. Fig. 1 shows the conceptual model tested in this study.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

### 2.1. The concept and measurement of servant leadership

Greenleaf (1977) introduced servant leadership, which Spears (1995) extended, gaining increasing academic attention in the past two decades. According to Greenleaf (1977), servant leaders view themselves as servants and stewards rather than leaders or owners. Accordingly, a servant leader's motive is to serve first as opposed to lead (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Spears (1995) distills ten distinguishing characteristics of a servant leader: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building communities. A number of studies suggest that distinct from other typical leadership styles (e.g., transformational, charismatic, and self-centered), servant leadership stresses individual integrity and serving others, including employees, customers, and communities (Brownell, 2010; Graham, 1991; Liden et al., 2008; Tracey & Hinkin, 1996; Wu et al., 2013). In a leader–follower relationship, servant leadership changes the focus of a leader's influence on followers, emphasizing the ideal of service (Van Dierendonck, 2011; Wu et al., 2013) and the needs and personal growth of followers (Greenleaf, 1977; Patterson, 2003). This characteristic distinguishes servant leadership from employee-centered, leader–follower relationships. Brownell (2010) proposes that the servant leadership philosophy incorporates positive and appropriate aspects of many other leadership styles.

Due to lack of an accurate and empirically validated definition of servant leadership from Greenleaf, many interpretations of the phenomenon are possible (Van Dierendonck, 2011), resulting in no consensus regarding its measurement. Researchers develop their own measures based on idiosyncratic interpretations (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005; Ehrhart, 2004; Liden et al., 2008; Reinke, 2004; Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora, 2008; Wong & Davey, 2007). Some researchers develop multidimensional instruments such as Sendjaya, Sarros, and Santora's (2008) 6-dimension instrument, consisting of transforming influence, voluntary subordination, authentic self, transcendental spirituality, covenantal relationship, and responsible morality. Liden et al. (2008) develop a 7-dimension scale, including empowering, helping subordinates grow and succeed, putting subordinates first, emotional healing, conceptual skills, creating value for the community, and behaving ethically. Other researchers treat servant leadership as a unidimensional construct such as Reinke's (2004) 7-item scale and Ehrhart's (2004) 14-item measure.

Studies of servant leadership in hospitality and tourism industries are few. In one of only a few hospitality-specific studies, Wu et al. (2013) investigate the role of a direct leader's (i.e., supervisor level) servant leadership in Chinese hotels. Roles and responsibilities of leaders at various levels are different. Specifically, high-level leaders engage primarily in the strategic nature of work, and the responsibility of lower-level leaders is to perform decisions made by higher-level leaders, and contact with followers (Yukl, 2002). Accordingly, followers usually expect different things from leaders at different levels (Lord & Maher, 1991). Disparate leader traits are important for leaders at different levels (Casimir & Waldman, 2007). For example, traits of transformational leaders at

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