

SERVANT LEADERSHIP, PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT AND WORK ENGAGEMENT: A CASE STUDY IN THE PORTUGUESE AIR FORCE

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the role of psychological empowerment in the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement among military personnel of the Portuguese Air Force. This case study employed a quantitative methodology through the administration of a questionnaire to the entire population of the Portuguese Air Force (including officers, sergeants, enlisted personnel, civilians, and trainees), resulting in a total sample of $n=499$. The questionnaire included the Servant Leadership Survey, the Psychological Empowerment Scale and the Work and Well-Being Survey to evaluate work engagement. The results indicated that the three variables are significantly and positively correlated, and that Psychological Empowerment is an effective mediator in the relationship between Servant Leadership and Work Engagement, mediating this relationship by 74%. The contribution of this research lies in the empirical evidence provided regarding the role of Psychological Empowerment as a mediator in the relationship between Servant Leadership and Work Engagement within a military context. Additionally, it aims to expand the empirical understanding of the concept of Servant Leadership, which remains limited within the Portuguese population and even more so in the military setting.

Keywords: Servant Leadership; Psychological Empowerment; Work Engagement; Mediation Model.

1. INTRODUCTION

In modern society, there is a growing trend towards the progressive adoption of technological innovations, which requires organizations to acquire greater agility and adjust their responsiveness to keep pace with the current rapid pace. This organizational agility can be achieved through effective leadership and transformation of culture and management (Petermann & Zacher, 2020).

Leadership has been highlighted as an essential element for both employee engagement (Koveshnikov et al., 2020; Mazzetti & Schaufeli, 2022) and for strengthening their commitment to the organization (Rahmadani et al., 2020). Servant leadership is a style of leadership that emphasizes the ability of servant leaders to empower and promote the development of individuals while holding them accountable for the outcomes of their actions. Both servant leadership and psychological empowerment are considered effective ways to improve employee work engagement and reduce turnover intentions (Hunning et al., 2020; Islamy et al., 2023; Moreno et al., 2021). Given the relationships found between these concepts in the literature, this study established the following Central Research Question (CRQ): What is the relationship between Servant Leadership, Psychological Empowerment, and Work Engagement among military personnel and civilians of the Portuguese Air Force?

Thus, the General Objective (GO) is to analyze the relationship between Servant Leadership, Psychological Empowerment, and Work Engagement among military personnel and civilians in the Portuguese Air Force.

From this general objective, four specific objectives (SO) are derived:

SO1 - Analyse the correlation between servant leadership and work engagement;

SO2 - Analyse the correlation between servant leadership and psychological empowerment;

SO3 - Analyse the correlation between psychological empowerment and work engagement;

SO4 - Determine whether the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement is mediated by psychological empowerment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 LEADERSHIP

In the 21st century the focus has shifted towards increasing motivation and social responsibility to ensure success and profit in today's organizations (Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011; Kunz, 2020). Leadership has been identified as a crucial factor for employee engagement (Luthans, 2002; Mazzetti & Schaufeli, 2022) and for their commitment to the organization (Rahmadani et al., 2020).

In this context, servant leadership emerges as a leadership style that, compared to others, shares several similarities with transformational leadership but primarily differs by going beyond the motives of leaders or followers (Barbuto, 2006).

In a military context, the dichotomy between the concepts of command and leadership is noteworthy. Although related and sometimes confused, they present significant differences. The concept of command is based on a rigid hierarchical structure, where orders are transmitted with the expectation of immediate and unquestioning execution (Wong et al., 2003). In contrast, leadership focuses on the motivation and engagement of subordinates, promoting a sense of purpose and commitment.

In the military environment, leaders are expected to demonstrate flexibility and the ability to adapt to changes, encouraging innovation and strengthening the resilience of their teams (Millet et al., 1986).

2.2 PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT

Psychological empowerment can be defined as a multifaceted construct that encompasses dimensions such as a perceived sense of control, competence, and internalization of goals, integrating a proactive approach to life, critical thinking about the socio-political context, and a perception of personal control (Oladipo, 2009; Zimmerman, 1995).

A positive and significant association between servant leadership and psychological empowerment has already been established in the literature (Ghalavi & Nastiezaie, 2020; Van der Hoven et al., 2021).

Psychological empowerment has also been identified as a mediator in the relationship between servant leadership and other variables, such as organizational citizenship behaviors (Ghalavi & Nastiezaie, 2020), innovative work behavior (Faraz et al., 2019), and work engagement under conditions of high uncertainty (De Sousa & Van Dierendonck, 2014).

2.3 WORK ENGAGEMENT

According to Schaufeli et al. (2006), work engagement is described as a positive and fulfilling work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. This engagement in work is related to the physical and psychological well-being of employees, as highlighted by Kahn (1990). Worker engagement is generally described by three main dimensions: vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Vigor refers to the energy and resilience employees exhibit in their

activities, as well as their willingness to persist even in the face of challenges (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Dedication is defined as "a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge" (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p.74). Finally, absorption is the state of total concentration and immersion in work, where time passes quickly and the employee has difficulty detaching from their tasks (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p.75).

As a process of continuous improvement, there will be moments when employees do not feel engaged in their tasks. To prevent this, it is important for organizations, teams, and individuals to remain vigilant and be capable of continuously improving the work environment over time (Bakker, 2022). In this context, the role of leadership is crucial in its relationship with employee engagement, and proven to be positively correlated (Jiang et al., 2020).

2.4 RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Several studies indicate that managers exhibiting servant leadership behaviors can enhance employee work engagement through a culture of support and collaboration, as demonstrated by De Sousa and Van Dierendonck (2014), and that the same occurs in military contexts as presented by Moreno et al. (2021). Additionally, the perceived meaning associated with servant leadership plays a mediating role in its positive effects on work engagement, strengthening the relationship between this leadership style and the level of employee work engagement (Khan et al., 2021). In the work conducted by Vrcelj et al. (2022), their results suggest that military personnel led by servant leaders exhibit higher levels of job satisfaction compared to those working under traditional leadership styles. Given this, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: The adoption of a servant leadership style by management is positively correlated with the work engagement of military personnel.

Servant leaders promote the psychological empowerment of their followers by granting them autonomy and stimulating individual initiative, thus contributing to the strengthening of their psychological empowerment (Tripathi et al., 2021). Servant leadership establishes a favorable work environment that supports the emotional health and well-being of military personnel. This supportive climate strengthens morale and resilience, both crucial elements for effectiveness in military operations (Jit et al., 2017). This satisfaction is particularly important in military environments, where professionals face specific challenges and pressures inherent to the military condition (Jiang, 2024). Considering the arguments presented and various studies on this relationship of concepts (Jiang, 2024; Jit et al., 2017; Tripathi et al., 2021; Vickery et al., 2021), the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2: The adoption of a servant leadership style by management is positively correlated with the psychological empowerment of military personnel.

Psychological empowerment significantly contributes to professional outcomes, demonstrating that when employees feel empowered, they exhibit greater work engagement and dedication (Macsinga et al., 2015). A high level of psychological well-being is directly related to increased work engagement, indicating that mentally healthy and fulfilled employees tend to demonstrate greater involvement and commitment in their tasks (Islamy et al., 2023). In the military context, when professionals recognize that their contributions influence organizational outcomes, job satisfaction is significantly enhanced (Deepak, 2024). The ability to make autonomous decisions and manage their own tasks is essential for promoting job satisfaction among military personnel (Wang & Lee, 2009). Considering the above as well as various studies on this relationship of concepts (e.g., Dealisa & Widodo, 2024; Deepak, 2024; Islamy et al., 2023; Juyumaya, 2022; Macsinga et al., 2015; Qatrunnada & Parahyanti, 2019; Wang & Lee, 2009), the following hypothesis is formulated:

H3: The psychological empowerment of military personnel is positively correlated with their work engagement.

The concept of psychological empowerment encompasses essential factors for intrinsic motivation, functioning as a mediator between leadership styles and work engagement (Qatrunnada & Parahyanti, 2019). Furthermore, the authors mention that empowered individuals tend to demonstrate deeper engagement in their activities. De Klerk and Stander (2014) point out that psychological empowerment can act as a partial mediator in the link between servant leadership and work engagement. Although it has been included as a mediating variable in multiple recent studies (De Sousa & Van Dierendonck, 2014; Faraz et al., 2019; Ghalavi & Nastiezaie, 2020), psychological empowerment had not, until now, been extensively studied as a mediator in the relationship between servant leadership and the work engagement of military personnel. Therefore, considering the above, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

H4: There is a mediating effect of psychological empowerment in the relationship between the adoption of a servant leadership style by management and the work engagement of military personnel.

3. DATA, METHOD, AND VARIABLES

Given the nature and objective of this study, a questionnaire survey was chosen for data collection. The method used for this study was the hypothetical-deductive method (Creswell and Guetterman, 2018). The data were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29.

3.1 DATA

The target population for this research consisted of all military and civilian personnel serving within the organizational structure of the Portuguese Air Force (FA): officers (from the rank of Cadet to Colonel), sergeants, enlisted personnel, civilians, and trainees (students of the Air Force Academy). The administration of the questionnaire began on July 16, 2024, and ended on October 16, 2024. Of the 516 questionnaires received, 17 were excluded (seven declined to participate in the study and ten were due to incorrect completion). The final sample ($n=499$) is characterized by military and civilian personnel with an average age of 35.77 years, ranging from 18 to 64 years old ($SD=11.66$). The population is divided into 65.9% male and 34.1% female.

3.2 CHARACTERIZATION OF THE DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT

The instrument used in this research was a questionnaire survey divided into four distinct sections. The first section consists of questions characterizing the sample (age, gender, rank, specialty, length of service). The second section used the Servant Leadership Survey developed by Van Dierendonck et al. (2017). The third section used the Psychological Empowerment Scale developed by Spreitzer (1995). The fourth section applied the Work and Well-Being Scale developed by Schaufeli et al. (2006). The response format was closed, using a Likert scale response format ranging from "Strongly disagree" (1) to "Strongly agree" (6) for servant leadership. For psychological empowerment, the scale ranged from "Strongly disagree" (1) to "Strongly agree" (7). Schaufeli et al. (2006) developed the Work and Well-Being Scale, a 17-item scale to measure work engagement. A closed Likert-type response format of 7 points was used, ranging from "Never/None at all" (0) to "Always/Every day" (6).

4. RESULTS

4.2 CORRELATIONAL ANALYSIS

A correlational analysis was conducted among the different variables with the aim of measuring the intensity and direction of their relationships. For this purpose, the Pearson correlation coefficient was used, which precisely evaluates this aspect. According to Marôco (2014), this coefficient ranges from -1 to +1, indicating whether the variables change in the same direction (positive relationship) or in opposite directions (negative relationship). The correlations above 0.9 indicate a very strong correlation, between 0.7 and 0.9 indicate a strong correlation, between 0.5 and 0.7 moderate and between 0.3 and 0.5 weak. From the analysis of Table 1, it is possible to verify that all correlations are significant and positive ($p < 0.01$). It is also evident that the highest correlation occurs between the variables Psychological Empowerment and Work Engagement with a moderate correlation (0.690).

Table 1

Correlational analysis between variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Servant Leadership	-		
2. Psychological Empowerment	0.525**	-	
3. Work Engagement	0.445**	0.690**	-
Note. n =499, ** $p < 0.01$ the correlation is significative (2 extremities)			

4.2 LINEAR REGRESSION

Linear regression Stepwise was conducted to confirm the effect of psychological empowerment and servant leadership in the work engagement. The models are valid and without restrictions.

Table 2 allows us to infer that servant leadership and psychological empowerment contribute 48.6% to the explanation of the variance in work engagement.

Table 2

Summary of the mediation model

Model	R	R square	R adjusted square	Standard Estimate Error	Durbin-Watson
1 ¹	0.445 ^a	0.198	0.197	1.16	
2 ²	0.697 ^b	0.488	0.484	0.93	1.90

Notes. ¹ Predictors: (Constant), Servant Leadership
² Predictors: (Constant), Servant Leadership, Psychological Empowerment

4.4 MEDIATION MODEL – WORK ENGAGEMENT

To examine the mediating role of psychological empowerment in the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement, a mediation model was tested using the PROCESS macro (v. 4.2.0) for SPSS, employing Model 4 (Hayes, 2018). To assess indirect effects, 95% bootstrap confidence intervals were applied, based on 5000 bootstrap resamples (Hayes, 2018). The data were also checked for linear model assumptions. Overall, the histogram and P-P plots did not reveal significant violations of normality and homoscedasticity assumptions. Additionally, assumptions of multicollinearity ($VIF < 5$; $Tolerance > 0.02$) and autocorrelation among residuals (Durbin-Watson values close to two) were met (Hayes, 2018).

To analyze the indirect effects of psychological empowerment in the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement, a mediation model was tested through path analysis. The results reveal a positive and significant association between servant leadership and psychological empowerment ($\beta = 0.4650$; $t = 13.76$; $p < 0.0001$, 95% CI [0.3981, 0.5314]; $R^2 = 0.276$), indicating that higher levels of servant leadership are associated with higher levels of psychological empowerment. A positive

and significant association was also observed between psychological empowerment and work engagement ($\beta = 0.8257$; $t = 16.67$; $p < 0.0001$, 95% CI [0.7283, 0.9230]; $R^2 = 0.4861$), meaning that higher levels of psychological empowerment are associated with higher levels of work engagement.

The aim was to investigate the extent to which psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement. The mediation effect (indirect effect) was significant $\beta = 0.3839$ (95% BCa CI = 0.3054, 0.4672). The psychological empowerment variable mediated approximately 74.42% of the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement. Additionally, the total effect (c) of servant leadership on work engagement is significant ($\beta = 0.5160$; $t = 11.08$; $p < 0.0001$, 95% CI [0.4245, 0.6074]; $R^2 = 0.1982$), as well as its direct effect (c') ($\beta = 0.1320$; $t = 3.0116$; $p < 0.01$, 95% CI [0.0459, 0.2182]; $R^2 = 0.4861$). In other words, the results show a direct association of servant leadership on work engagement, even considering the mediating effect of psychological empowerment. Thus, the observed indirect effect represents a partial mediation by psychological empowerment, indicating that only part of the impact of servant leadership on work engagement can be attributed to the presence of higher levels of psychological empowerment.

5. DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the results obtained in the present investigation will be discussed, considering the hypotheses formulated in the literature review chapter.

Test of H1: Hypothesis 1 stated that the perceived adoption of a servant leadership style by management is positively correlated with the work engagement of military personnel. Considering the results obtained in the correlation section between variables (Table 1), it can be verified that a servant leadership style by management, as perceived by subordinates, is associated with higher work engagement experienced by them.

Based on the analysis, H1 is supported: the perceived adoption of a servant leadership style by management is positively correlated with the work engagement of military personnel ($r = 0.45$). A perception of servant leadership by management explains 20% of the variation in work engagement ($R^2 = 0.20$), where an increase in servant leadership also results in an increase in work engagement ($r > 0$), with the correlation considered moderate (Marôco, 2014). This result aligns with the literature, where according to Hunning et al. (2020) and Moreno et al. (2021), the adoption of a servant leadership style can be an effective strategy for increasing work engagement as well as reducing turnover intentions.

Test of H2: Hypothesis 2 stated that the perception of a servant leadership style adopted by the respondents' reference leader would be positively correlated with their psychological empowerment. Considering the results obtained in the variable correlation section (Table 1), it can be observed that servant leadership, as perceived by subordinates, is associated with a higher level of psychological empowerment experienced by them.

Based on the analysis conducted, Hypothesis 2 is supported: the perception of a servant leadership style adopted by the leader is positively correlated with the psychological empowerment of military personnel ($r = 0.53$). The perception of servant leadership explains 28% of the variance in psychological empowerment ($R^2 = 0.28$), where an increase in servant leadership also results in an increase in psychological empowerment ($r > 0$), with the correlation being considered moderate (Marôco, 2014). This result aligns with the existing literature, as according to Tripathi et al. (2021), servant leaders enhance the psychological empowerment of their followers by granting them autonomy and encouraging individual initiative, contributing to the strengthening of their psychological empowerment. Additionally, servant leadership positively impacts self-evaluation, which in turn leads to increased job satisfaction. This

connection suggests that military personnel led by servant leaders may experience greater personal appreciation and a stronger sense of fulfilment in their roles (Tischler et al., 2016).

Test of H3: Hypothesis 3 stated that the psychological empowerment experienced by military personnel is positively related to their work engagement. Considering the results obtained in the variable correlation section (Table 1), it can be observed that psychological empowerment is associated with an increase in work engagement.

Based on the analysis conducted, Hypothesis 3 is supported: the psychological empowerment of military personnel is positively correlated with their work engagement ($r = 0.69$). Psychological empowerment explains 48% of the variance in work engagement ($R^2 = 0.48$), where an increase in psychological empowerment is associated with an increase in work engagement ($r > 0$), with the correlation being considered strong (Marôco, 2014). This result aligns with the existing literature, as according to Qatrunnada and Parahyanti (2019), psychological empowerment encompasses key factors for intrinsic motivation, acting as a mediator between leadership styles and work engagement.

Test of H4: Hypothesis 4 stated that psychological empowerment was expected to mediate the relationship between perceived servant leadership and work engagement. Considering the results obtained in the linear regression section (Table 2), it can be observed that psychological empowerment positively influences the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement. An increase in work engagement is associated with an increase in perceived servant leadership, with psychological empowerment playing a mediating role in this positive relationship.

Based on the analysis conducted, Hypothesis 4 is supported: psychological empowerment is expected to mediate the relationship between the perception of servant leadership adoption by leaders and the work engagement of military personnel.

This result aligns with the existing literature, as psychological empowerment can act as a partial mediator in the link between servant leadership and work engagement. This suggests that the ability of servant leadership to foster greater engagement is influenced by the degree of psychological empowerment perceived by employees (De Klerk & Stander, 2014).

6. CONCLUSION

Considering the well-established relationship in the literature between servant leadership, psychological empowerment, and work engagement, this study aimed to analyze how a servant leadership style (adopted by leaders throughout the hierarchical chain) can positively impact the work engagement of those being led (subordinates) and how psychological empowerment may play a positive and mediating role in this relationship. The study followed a deductive reasoning approach, structured on a case study research design, adopting a quantitative research strategy implemented through the administration of questionnaires to a sample of 499 military personnel and civilians. The study was structured based on a case study research design.

Regarding Objective 1 (OE1) - analyzing the correlation between servant leadership and work engagement - it was found that servant leadership has a positive relationship with work engagement, with both being significantly correlated. This, in turn, is also a factor in retaining employees within the organization, thereby reducing intentions to leave (Hunning et al., 2020; Moreno et al., 2021).

Regarding Objective 2 (OE2) - analyzing the correlation between servant leadership and psychological empowerment - it was found that servant leadership has a positive and significant relationship with psychological empowerment. Servant leaders are capable of promoting and strengthening the psychological empowerment of their followers by granting them autonomy and encouraging individual initiative (Tripathi

et al., 2021). Servant leadership also reinforces trust within military units, a factor considered critical for successful command and mission execution. By prioritizing individual development over purely organizational objectives, servant leaders are able to build cohesive teams that are better equipped to achieve mission goals. This approach has proven effective in forming high-performance teams that excel in mission accomplishment (Vickery, 2016).

Regarding Objective 3 (OE3) - analyzing the correlation between psychological empowerment and work engagement - it was found that psychological empowerment has a positive and significant relationship with work engagement. Psychological empowerment significantly contributes to professional outcomes, demonstrating that when employees feel empowered, they exhibit higher work engagement and dedication (Macsinga et al., 2015).

Regarding Objective 4 (OE4) - determining whether the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement is mediated by psychological empowerment - it was found that psychological empowerment can act as a positive and significant mediator in this relationship. The ability of servant leadership to foster greater engagement is dependent on the degree of psychological empowerment perceived by followers (De Klerk & Stander, 2014).

The theoretical contribution of this study is based on the empirical evidence found regarding the role of psychological empowerment as a mediator in the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement in a military context. Furthermore, it seeks to contribute to the literature on the concept of servant leadership, which remains scarce within the Portuguese population and even more so in the military context.

As practical implications, it is essential to promote continuous investment in leadership training and skills development throughout a leader's career, with a particular focus on areas such as Communication, Teamwork, Decision-Making, and Management.

The limitations of this study include the cross-sectional nature of the data. To overcome this limitation, future research should incorporate longitudinal studies, allowing for the testing of effect directions and yielding more robust results that support the establishment of causal relationships between the formulated hypotheses. Additionally, all instruments used in this study relied on self-report measures, which may be subject to biases such as inaccurate memories or responses influenced by individual perceptions, with no possibility of external validation. Despite this, it is important to highlight that the conclusions obtained are consistent with the existing literature, reinforcing the credibility of the results.

For future research, it is recommended to include a greater number of demographic variables, such as the age and gender of the reference leader, as well as a larger and more diverse sample in terms of ranks or categories. Additionally, incorporating objective measures of work engagement, such as individual performance evaluations, and analyzing them alongside perceived psychological empowerment and the degree of servant leadership adoption would enhance the study's comprehensiveness.

Furthermore, the associations examined in this study represent an innovative contribution, as they had not been previously investigated within a Portuguese military population.

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