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The Mediating Role of Culture: Servant Leadership and Faculty Loyalty in Saudi Public Universities

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the complex relationship between servant leadership and faculty loyalty in Saudi public universities. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 30 faculty from 6 institutions, it examines how cultural dimensions (hierarchy, collectivism) inform attitudes toward servant leadership and subsequent loyalty. It illustrates a complicated relationship between leadership and faculty in this mostly unique higher education environment. The findings suggest the power of cultural factors to shape response to leadership style and faculty buy-in. Although societal, governance, and academic cultures in most countries align with servant leadership due to its holistic approach through civic engagement and emphasis on community and service-based cooperation, hierarchical structures and traditional university power dynamics are one of the few barriers to the study's implementation. The study underscores the need for contextual sensitivity, but with concrete and fresh insights that could inform future bespoke leadership development strategies and processes in Saudi higher education in particular. It posits that servant leadership can enhance and develop a positive academic community, which is a contributing factor in achieving Saudi Vision 2030's goals of human capital development.

Keywords: *Servant Leadership, Faculty Loyalty, Higher Education, Culture, Qualitative Study.*

Introduction

Given the competition in higher education, institutions must maintain qualified faculty to compete in their respective fields. Though many factors contribute to faculty retention, leadership styles are critical to creating a supportive and engaging work environment. This study examines the linkage between servant leadership and faculty loyalty in Saudi public universities, each of which has its own respective cultural features.

Servant leadership, which involves putting the needs of followers first and enabling others to perform at their highest level (Van Dierendonck, 2011), is related to favorable organizational outcomes such as higher employee satisfaction and commitment (e.g., Ding et al., 2012; Donia et al., 2016; Liden et al., 2014). Nonetheless, its specific impact on faculty loyalty within the higher education sector of Saudi Arabia is yet to be explored in detail, particularly in a qualitative way (Altheeb, 2020). Servant leadership is not a new phenomenon, yet in the context of Saudi universities, it is still significantly under-investigated (Saad Alessa, 2021). This is particularly relevant because of the embedded cultural characteristics within such institutions with hierarchical structures and traditional values that may shape social acknowledgment of servant leadership (Altheeb, 2020; Rahman et al., 2020).

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Background on Saudi Culture

Before exploring the potential impact of culture on the servant leadership-faculty loyalty connection, it is helpful to highlight a few key characteristics of Saudi Arabian culture.

Hierarchy and Authority: Saudi culture values hierarchy and respects authority (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000). This type of leadership can shape the leadership dynamic in universities, as faculty typically expect a more directive style. Yet, with its main focus on follower empowerment, the servant leadership model potentially provides a different model that can still be useful in this context.

Collectivism: Collectivistic Saudi society values the harmony of groups and loyalty to family and the community (Hofstede, 2001). This can impact faculty members' institutions, commitment, and sense of belonging. The concept of servant leadership, which prioritizes community and the relationship with others, could be aligned with this way of being.

Religious values: Islam is crucial in Saudi Arabia and shapes the values and behavior of faculty. The servant leadership style, which focuses on ethical conduct and serving people, aligns with many of Islam's principles and is seen and perceived favorably by faculty (Saad Alessa, 2021). This cultural context is key to interpreting the research's findings and applying the best leadership practices at Saudi public universities.

Research Problem: Despite the widely recognized role of faculty loyalty in achieving organizational performance in Saudi public universities, the extent to which leadership styles—specifically servant leadership—promote this outcome remains less known. The contextual relevance and importance of such leadership in this unique cultural context have also been studied less. This gap is important because faculty loyalty, commitment, and job satisfaction may be influenced by the cultural values and expectations of their home country, such as views on hierarchy and collectivism, which can affect how servant leadership is perceived and experienced by faculty members.

Significance of the Study: The findings of this study have important implications for leadership development, organizational effectiveness, and faculty turnover strategies at Saudi public universities. They emphasize that the present study can:

1. **Inform leadership development initiatives:** The findings can assist university leaders and policymakers in understanding the importance of servant leadership principles and how to appropriately and effectively implement them to enact servant leadership in ways that resonate with faculty members' cultural values.
2. **Strengthen institutional efficiency:** Higher loyalty levels may improve the quality of faculty members' teaching and research output, improving the efficiency of Saudi universities.
3. **Enhance faculty retention:** Understanding what keeps faculty members loyal to institutions can help universities design policies and programs that foster a sense of belonging and mitigate the effects of brain drain or competition with rival institutions, whether nationally, internationally, or online.

The objective of the study: The main goal of the current qualitative research is to investigate the connection between both servant leadership and faculty loyalty in the special cultural context of public universities in Saudi Arabia, particularly with the research goal to:

1. Investigate the perceptions and experiences of Saudi public university faculty members

2. Explore how this perception affects their loyalty, commitment, and job satisfaction.
3. Analyze the role of cultural background and expectations in shaping faculty members' understanding regarding servant leadership and its implications and effect on their relationship with their organizations.

To reach these objectives, this paper investigates the following three main research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How do faculty members in public universities in Saudi Arabia perceive and experience servant leadership within their cultural context?

RQ2: How do faculty members' perceptions regarding servant leadership influence their loyalty, commitment, and job satisfaction within their institution?

RQ3: In what ways do cultural background and expectations mediate the relationship between servant leadership and faculty loyalty in public universities in Saudi Arabia.

Literature Review

This section reviews the literature on servant leadership, faculty loyalty, and cultural factors that may shape their relationships, particularly within Saudi public universities.

Servant Leadership: Servant leadership, a concept first proposed by Greenleaf (1977), is defined as a leader serving the needs of followers and encouraging them to achieve their utmost potential. According to Spears (2002), servant leaders possess 10 key characteristics: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Liden et al. (2014) highlighted the ethical aspects of servant leadership, while Eva et al. (2019) emphasized its role in enhancing organizational citizenship behavior. At an organizational level, servant leadership has also been positively associated with employee satisfaction, commitment, and performance across sectors (Wong & Laschinger, 2013; Heffernan & Squires, 2018).

Faculty Loyalty: Faculty loyalty is the level of commitment faculty members have for their institutions. Broadly, it can be understood as a multidimensional construct that encompasses: (1) affective commitment (i.e., emotional attachment), (2) continuance commitment (i.e., perceived cost of leaving); and (3) normative commitment (i.e., obligation to stay) (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Aspects such as leadership (Knapp et al., 2002), organizational culture (Peterson et al., 2010), job satisfaction (Hagedorn, 2000), and work-life balance (Gmelch et al., 2001) all play a role in loyalty among faculty members. Faculty loyalty has been associated with beneficial outcomes for universities, including lower turnover (Tett & Meyer, 1993), greater research productivity (Enders & Schlueter, 2003), and better teaching quality (Coates & McCormick, 2001).

Cultural Context

Saudi Arabian culture is based on Islamic traditions and values, where collectivism, respect for authority, and community are highly valued (Nydell, 2006). These cultural aspects may greatly impact the organizational climate and expectations among Saudi organizations, including universities. These features include:

1. **Hierarchy and Authority:** Saudi society is hierarchical, with clear lines of authority and respect for elders and those in positions of power (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000). It can

shape the way faculty views and engages with leaders. Other researchers argue that, while Arab culture tends to be more receptive to more directive leadership styles (Ali, 2005), the underlying philosophy of servant leadership can work very well in an Arab context if culturally adapted to meet local norms (Al-Olayan & Karande, 2000).

2. **Collectivism (Enforces acceptance):** Collectivism focuses on being loyal to the family and community and harmony among group members (Hofstede, 2001). Such a collectivist orientation can influence faculty members' sense of belonging and/or commitment to their institution, affecting how valued faculty feel in the workplace. These cultural values could potentially align with servant leadership, which, with its emphasis on relationships and community, could be an attractive leadership style in a collectivist culture.

3. **Religious Values:** Islam is crucial in Saudi society, affecting social norms and behavior. Servant leadership, which emphasizes ethical behavior and serving others, resonates with several Islamic principles and could be viewed positively by faculty members (Ali, 2014).

Servant Leadership and Faculty Loyalty: Although the link between servant leadership and employee loyalty has shown significant results across various fields (Sendjaya et al., 2008), limited research has focused on this relationship in the context of Saudi Arabian higher education (Altheeb, 2020; M.A. Rahman et al., 2020). While servant leadership has the potential to cultivate trust and commitment among workers in Arab organizations (Al-Wehaibi, 2014), empirical studies are needed to explore the moderation effect of culture on servant leadership (Al-Waqfi et al., 2018), especially because cultural context influences such relationships (den Hartog & Koen, 2007). To this end, the purpose of this study is to fill the gap and investigate the perception and experience of faculty members regarding servant leadership in Saudi public universities and the impact such perceptions have on loyalty and commitment to institutions.

Methods

Positionality and Reflexivity: As an insider in the Saudi higher education community, positionality is both an asset and a challenge for the researcher. Because the researcher possesses an innate comprehension of Saudi universities' cultural context, power dynamics, and intricacies, she has access to participants and can build rapport. Such insider status enables a more nuanced understanding of the cultural and social contexts that may shape faculty members' perspectives on servant leadership and loyalty (Tracy, 2013).

Nonetheless, this positionality also requires nuanced attention to possible biases and ethical quandaries. To confront these issues, the researcher employed a reflexive stance, examining the different facets of the research process. This entailed adhering to the following practices (Merriam et al., 2015; Berger, 2015):

1. **Transparency:** Clearly revealing the researcher's positionality and possible biases to subjects.
2. **Engaging in self-reflection:** Continuously reflecting on one's assumptions and interpretations at play in the data collection and analyses (Creswell, 2014).
3. **Criticality:** Challenging the researcher's views and interpretation so that analysis is firmly based on data and not clouded by preconceived ideas (Berger, 2015).

Research Method and Data Gathering: This study was qualitative, thus, data were collected through semi-structured interviews. In this sense, qualitative research is best for exploring multi-

faceted social phenomena, such as the association between servant leadership and faculty loyalty in a specific national context (Creswell, 2014). The semi-structured nature of the individual interviews enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives and flexibility in emerging themes.

Sampling and Participants: A purposive snowball sampling technique was used to recruit 30 participants from six state universities in Saudi Arabia. This method was chosen because it effectively identified and recruited participants with specific knowledge and experiences, particularly in contexts where trust and access may be challenging (Wellington, 2015).

To ensure diversity in the sample, the researcher initially identified potential participants from various departments and levels of seniority within each university. These initial participants were then asked to refer colleagues who might be willing to share their experiences. This snowballing approach allowed for a wider range of perspectives to be included in the study. Table 1 provides detailed information about the total number of participants, including their positions at the university.

Number of Designations	University Name (U)	Total Number of Participants in Each Setting					
		Vice Presidents	Deans	Vice Deans	Heads of the Department	Staff of Faculty	Total of the Participants
1	A University	1	1	1	1	1	4
2	B University	1	1	1	1	1	4
3	C University	1	1	1	1	1	4
4	D university	1	1	1	1	1	4
5	E University	1	1	1	1	1	4
6	F University	1	1	1	1	1	4
	6	6	6	6	6	6	30

Table 1. Framework of Sampling

Data Collection Procedures: Data were collected using semi-structured interviews that provided structure and flexibility to elicit in-depth information about emerging themes (Roulston, 2010; Miles & Huberman, 2014). Both face-to-face and telephone interviews were performed for a duration of two hours. All conversations were recorded and transcribed for later analysis. Data collection was conducted over a six week period.

Data Analysis: Data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework to develop patterns and themes. The inductive examination helped to derive some key insights related to the research questions, thereby adding rigor and precision to the results.

Ethical Considerations: The study was approved by the King Saud University Research Ethics Committee, and all procedures were performed in accordance with the university's ethical guidelines. The research was conducted in line with ethical guidelines established by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, 2022), viewing anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntariness of participation as key to ensuring ethical practice. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were given ample opportunity to ask questions.

Findings and Discussion

Based on the responses of the 30 research participants, the study discusses the relationship between servant leadership and faculty members’ loyalty in the higher education sector of Saudi Arabia.

Pseudonyms were created with the notations “University (U) + the respective individual university letter (A/B/C/D/E/F),” “type of participant (Leader/L, Academic staff/AF),” “Positions (Leaders/Vice-Presidents/VP),” “participant number (1/2/3/4/5),” and “interview date.” Thus, for the initial type of case study site, the participants would be called “UALVP1, 06/2024,” “UBSF1, 06/2024,” and “UFLD1, 06/2024.” Table 2 presents job titles and the data used for the interview.

	Pseudonym	Assigned	References	Meaning
University	U	U	UBLVP1, pers. comm., March 6, 2024	In the second setting, Academic leaders were interviewed on March 6, 2023
The six settings of the case study	A/B/C/D/E/F	A		
Type of participation: leaders typically represented with L; academic staff represented with S	L for academic leaders at any level of leadership FS for academic staff	B		
Position	LVP: Vice-president LD: dean			

	LVD: vice-dean			
	LHOD: head of the department			
	FS: faculty staff			
Numbers of participants	1/2/3/4/5			
Medium	Pers. comm.			
Date of the interview	Month Date, Year	March 6, 2024		

Table 2. Format of Pseudonym

Findings

Following the interviews and data collection, the following findings, supported by interviewee quotes, were established for the three RQs.

RQ1: How do faculty members in Saudi public universities perceive and experience servant leadership within their specific cultural context?

Main Findings of RQ1

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quotes
Emphasis on Humility and Service	Leaders put the needs of their followers first and genuinely want to serve others (Servant Leadership), which was highlighted by faculty members.	“An effective leader prioritizes their constituents, providing support and facilitating success” (UCFSP1, May 7, 2024). “Humility is very important... A leader should not feel above us. A leader should work with us” (UALVPP1, April 8, 2024).
Value of Empowerment and Development	Faculty members value leaders who trust them to take ownership, make decisions, and grow their skills and potential.	“I feel valued when my leader empowers me to grow and gives me the autonomy to do my best work” (UFLVPP1, May 9, 2024). “A servant leader encourages growth... they create opportunities for us to learn and advance in our careers” (UDLVPP1, May 12, 2024).
Importance of Open Communication and Collaboration	The faculty members said they favor open communication, active listening, and collaborative decision-making.	“A leader should be open to and able to listen to our problems and suggestions....Working together is very important... timely leaders, a servant leader brings us into the process and listens to our input” (UALDP1, May 6, 2024). “Collaboration is essential; a servant

		leader engages us in the decision-making process and appreciates our contributions” (UBFSP1, May 15, 2024).
Challenges to Servant Leadership in a Hierarchical Context	Some participants noted that the hierarchical structure of Saudi universities can sometimes create challenges for implementing servant leadership effectively. However, few participants pointed out that the hierarchical nature of Saudi universities sometimes leads to difficulties in the application of the servant leadership concept.	“They’re a very hierarchical culture, so it’s hard for people at the top of the organization to truly be servant leaders without feeling like they’re losing power or without appearing weak” (UELVPP1, April 11, 2024). “Sometimes it’s top-down decisions with little consultation. ... that can be frustrating with faculty members who want to be more involved” (UAFSP1, May 8, 2024).
Servant Leadership and Its Cultural Resonance	Despite the barriers, various participants believed that servant leadership’s core principles aligned well with Islamic values and cultural norms in Saudi Arabia.	“The concept of serving others is at the heart of our faith... so, a person who lives this principle finds a lot of respect within our faith” (UBLDP1, May 10, 2024). “Servant leadership stresses community and collaboration, which are core values of our culture” (UCLVPP1, May 17, 2024).

Discussion of RQ1: The results reveal a nuanced understanding of servant leadership among faculty members in Saudi public universities, recognizing its focus on humility, service, empowerment, and collaboration. They respect and appreciate leaders who understand their needs, promote their growth, and bring them to the table when it comes to decision-making. Nonetheless, the hierarchical nature of universities in Saudi Arabia can pose barriers to fully implementing servant leadership, as leaders need to navigate the cultural landscape that often contradicts the servant leadership philosophy. Although challenges may surface when implementing servant leadership in Saudi Arabia, such as differences between Western and Islamic values, the principles of servant leadership align well with Islamic values and cultural norms in Saudi society. This indicates a strong potential for servant leadership, which can foster a positive and supportive academic environment.

RQ2: How do faculty members’ perceptions of servant leadership influence their loyalty, commitment, and job satisfaction within their institution?

Main Findings of RQ2

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quotes
Increased Loyalty and Commitment	Faculty members also reported that being the recipient of servant leadership cultivated greater loyalty and commitment to their institution.	“When I believe I am supported and valued by my leader, I am more likely to remain with the university for the long term” (UB LHODP1, May 15, 2024). “Servant leadership creates a sense of community... it helps me feel that I belong, that I have something to contribute and it is important” (UCLVD1, May 2, 2024).
Enhanced Job Satisfaction	Servant leadership was said to lead to increased job satisfaction and an overall more positive work environment, depending on the participant	“Being led by a servant leader minimizes stress and makes me feel more whole in my work” (UBLVPP1, May 17, 2024). “My leader empowers me and trusts my judgment, which keeps me motivated and satisfied with my work” (UFLDP1, April 17, 2024).
Motivation and Productivity	They felt more motivated and productive working under servant leaders	“Servant leaders inspire us to do our best work... they create an environment where we can thrive” (UFFSP1, April 17, 2024). “I am more likely to bend over backwards if I feel my leader cares about my well-being and success” (UDFSP1, May 18, 2024).

Discussion of RQ2: The results indicate that servant leadership positively affects Saudi public university faculty loyalty, commitment, and job satisfaction. Additionally, faculty members who witness servant leadership from their leaders are more likely to feel valued and supported in their institution, subsequently enhancing commitment and overall job satisfaction. Overall, this indicates that servant leadership potentially promotes a positive work environment in higher education equivalents in Saudi Arabia, along with a greater guarantee of retention and successful organizational aspects.

RQ3: How do cultural background and expectations mediate the relationship between servant leadership and faculty loyalty in Saudi public universities?

Main Findings of RQ3

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quotes
Hierarchy and Respect	Participants recognized that the hierarchical structure of Saudi culture truncated their expectations of leaders yet perceived room for servant leadership to operate within that grid.	“We are used to a certain formality and respect for authority... but a servant leader can still be effective by earning the right to be trusted and respected through their actions” (UELHOD P1, May 22,

		2024).
Collectivism and Community	The focus on being collectivist and community-oriented in Saudi culture matched the collaborative and relational nature of servant leadership.	“In our culture, the concept of servant leadership in particular resonates with the way in which we have historically interacted with one another, as well as with members of the communities we serve” (UEFSP1, May 3, 2024).
Religious Values and Ethical Conduct	The stress and emphasis on ethical conduct and service in servant leadership were considered aligned and compatible with Islamic values.	“Servant leadership encompasses a lot of the principles we espouse in Islam — like humility, compassion, justice” (UCLDP1, April 7, 2024).

Discussion of RQ3: The present study’s findings indicate significant evidence regarding how culture and expectation shape how servant leadership controls faculty loyalty in Saudi public universities’ framework. It is true that the hierarchical nature of Saudi culture might have some effect on the expectation of leadership. However, it also works for servant leadership in that one achieves trust and respect based on one’s actions, which align with the values of the culture. The cultural concept of collectivism and community in Saudi Arabia aligns with servant leadership’s collaborative and relationship-oriented aspects. Furthermore, the compatibility of the servant leadership approach with Islamic values makes it more appealing and, thus, more likely to be embraced in Saudi universities.

Limitations of the Study

The study has some limitations that need to be addressed. First, the sample size was modest and restricted to six public universities in Saudi Arabia; thus, the results may not be generalizable to other institutions or cultural settings.

Recommendations

Based on its results, the study offers the following recommendations:

Leadership Development: Ministries and universities should create leadership development programs focusing on servant leadership principles and outline how to adjust these to Saudi markets’ cultural settings.

The culture of an organization that inspires servant leadership: A university environment must strive to promote service, collaboration, and employee rights.

Future research: Longitudinal studies could be conducted to assess the lasting effects of servant leadership on faculty retention, research output, and institutional standing in Saudi educational institutions. A longitudinal study can shed light on the impact of servant leadership on faculty loyalty over time. Forthcoming comparative studies might assess the effectiveness of servant leadership in other cultural contexts in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Conclusion

The implications of the study help further understanding of servant leadership and how it can promote faculty loyalty among Saudi public universities. Results indicate that when servant

leadership is applied in a culture-sensitive manner, it promotes a positive and constructive atmosphere in the workplace, which helps to acquire and maintain competent academics. These insights hold significant implications for leadership enhancement programs, organizational effectiveness, and the collective progression of Saudi Arabian higher education

This approach helps foster a positive and encouraging atmosphere that promotes faculty retention, ultimately benefiting the overall progress of higher education in Saudi Arabia. It can ultimately do so by aligning itself with Saudi Vision 2030, which acknowledges the necessity of investing in human capital and creating an economy based on knowledge.

Specifically, this study sheds light on the significance of servant leadership in enhancing faculty loyalty among employees working in Saudi public universities. Adapting the principles created for servant leadership to address the unique cultural context of the university is essential for university leaders in fostering a thriving academic community where faculty members are valued, supported, and engaged in institutional success. This can further enhance the field of higher education and help achieve more of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 aspirations.

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