



# Servant leadership as antecedent of trust in organizations

Servant  
leadership

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643

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study sets out to examine the impact of servant leadership (SL) on followers' trust in their leaders.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Data from 555 employees of two educational institutions were obtained using measures of servant leadership behaviors and followers' trust in their leader.

**Findings** – Servant leadership is a significant predictor of trust with covenantal relationship, responsible morality and transforming influence as the key servant leadership behaviors significantly contributing to followers' trust in their leaders. Subordinates who perceived high servant leadership behavior in their leaders had significantly higher trust levels compared with those who perceived low servant leadership behavior in their leaders.

**Research limitations/implications** – While the relationship between leadership and trust has attracted scholarly interests for many years, the underlying process of how trust in the leader-follower relationships is developed remains unknown. The current study addresses this gap in the literature by empirically testing the linkages between servant leadership behavior and followers' trust in their leaders.

**Practical implications** – The study suggested specific trust-building behaviors in which leaders should continually engage: articulation of a shared vision, role-modeling, demonstration of concern and respect for followers, and integrity-infused decisions and actions.

**Originality/value** – The current study represents the first large-scale attempt that empirically tests the linkages between servant leadership behavior and followers' trust in their leaders.

**Keywords** Leadership, Trust

**Paper type** Research paper

The subject of trust has been growing in stature and of increasing interest for contemporary organizations as evident in its burgeoning literature (Burke *et al.*, 2007; Dirks and Ferrin, 2002; McEvily *et al.*, 2003a; Sheppard and Tuchinsky, 1996). Previous works in the area of trust suggests that it is a fundamental factor for cooperation within organizations and in everyday interactions between people (Brower *et al.*, 2000; Das and Teng, 1998; Hosmer, 1995; Madhok, 1995; Rousseau *et al.*, 1998; Shockley-Zalabak *et al.*, 2000). However, the divergence in views concerning trust revolves around how trust is conceptualized and formed, as well as its evolution in organizations (Atkinson and Butcher, 2003). Similar to other broad concepts, the variations in what constitutes trust is exacerbated by the fact that scholars from different disciplines tend to focus on particular elements of the concept (Lewicki *et al.*, 1998; Whitener *et al.*, 1998). Despite the theoretical progress in the area of trust, there is still a dearth of empirical evidence to support the numerous theories that have emerged (McEvily *et al.*, 2003a, b). We believe that one of the significant gaps that still exist in



the literature on trust concerns the process of trust development in interpersonal and (hence) organizational settings (Atkinson and Butcher, 2003; McEvily *et al.*, 2003a, b; Shockley-Zalabak *et al.*, 2000). To this end this paper contributes towards theory development that reflect the particular social context of management (Atkinson and Butcher, 2003), namely servant leadership context.

### Trust in leader

We acknowledge Atkinson and Butcher's (2003) claim that it is virtually impossible to have a universal definition of trust since it is a socially constructed phenomenon. Notwithstanding their own claim, Atkinson and Butcher (2003) argued that from the variations of how trust is conceptualized, it contains three similar elements, that is, the "volitional acceptance of vulnerability and risk" (Atkinson and Butcher, 2003; Meyerson *et al.*, 1996). To date we believe that one of the most robust conceptualizations of trust, which contained two and implied elements of how trust is conceptualized by Atkinson and Butcher (2003), was presented by Rousseau *et al.* (1998): "Trust is a psychological state comprising the intention to *accept* vulnerability based on *positive expectations* of the intentions or behavior of another" (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998, p. 395; italics added). A recent review of trust in leadership literature confirmed our definition of choice as the most integrative definition of trust in leadership (Burke *et al.*, 2007). In other words, to trust is "to place oneself in a position of personal risk based on expectations that the trustee will not behave in a way that results in harm to the trustor" (Atkinson and Butcher, 2003, p. 289).

In this study, we adopt Atkinson and Butcher's (2003) conceptualization of trust in the context of trust development in managerial relationships, and specifically focus on trust in one's direct leader as opposed to trust in organization. Trust in leader is typically defined as the willingness of a subordinate to be vulnerable to the behaviors and actions of his or her leader which are beyond the subordinate's control (Mayer *et al.*, 1995), whereas trust in organization is the general perception of employees on the organization's trustworthiness (Gambetta, 1988). While the two constructs are related, they are empirically distinct, each with its own set of antecedents and outcomes (Tan and Tan, 2000). This distinction is important because it implies that, for example, an employee may decide to trust the organization on the basis of the trust he or she has in the leader, or when such generalization of trust does not occur, the employee only trusts his or her leader but not the organization.

We propose in this study that exchange behaviors which occur between leaders and followers facilitate the formation of followers' trust in their respective leaders. Tan and Tan's (2000) empirical study confirmed previous finding that leader's ability, benevolence, and integrity are specific antecedents of trust in leader. We argue that these three dimensions are part of servant leadership behaviors. Therefore, in accordance with Atkinson and Butcher's (2003) work the trust that is developed between a supervisor and his or her subordinate resembles a motive-based trust since the subordinate develops this trust within a servant leadership context. At the same time the context also contains task orientation on the part of the leader, thus the trust that is developed between a leader and his or her subordinate is one that is competence-based, in relation to leadership. In other words, we also argue that servant leadership comprises other dimensions of leadership behaviors which also foster followers' trust in leaders. As such we are exploring new grounds by testing and developing theories of trust that reflect the particular social context namely, servant leadership.

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## Servant leadership

The construct of servant leadership has been conceptually linked to many positive attributes increasingly seen as important fabrics of many organizations today such as servanthood (De Pree, 1989; Greenleaf, 1977; Russell, 2001), authenticity (Autry, 2001; Jaworski, 1997), morality (Graham, 1991, 1995), and spirituality (Fairholm, 1997; Palmer, 1998). The following core characteristics of servant leadership represent a departure from earlier and more popular leadership approaches. First, servant leadership is not so much about leadership than it is about servanthood. It begins with a discovery of felt and existing needs that propel one to reach out to those needs. Hence, servant leadership is not a particular supervisory style one chooses to use when it is convenient or personally advantageous. Rather it is a conviction of the heart that constantly manifests whenever there is a legitimate need to serve in the absence of extenuating personal benefits. The humble positions as servants to others are voluntarily assumed and the acts of service wholeheartedly performed for the sake of others. Second, the focus of the servant leadership relationship is on the followers, not the organizations. Rather than being preoccupied with mobilizing followers to achieve “performance beyond expectations”, which is the number one and ultimate priority for transformational leaders (Bass, 1985), servant leaders emphasize followers’ holistic needs, development, and autonomy (Graham, 1991). The commitment to this core value enables followers in servant leadership relationships to “grow healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants” (Greenleaf, 1977, pp. 13-14). Third, servant leadership entails the custody of moral agency and moral accountability. As implied above, servant leaders exercising their influences among their followers through transformative subordination, that is servant leaders affirm and submit to the diverse individual aspirations of the followers who are also regarded as moral agents. Overall, we propose that the servanthood-focused, follower-centric, and moral-laden servant leadership approach will create stronger trust effects in followers towards their leaders relative to other leadership approaches. To that end, this study provides empirical evidence of the direct link between servant leadership behaviors and followers’ trust.

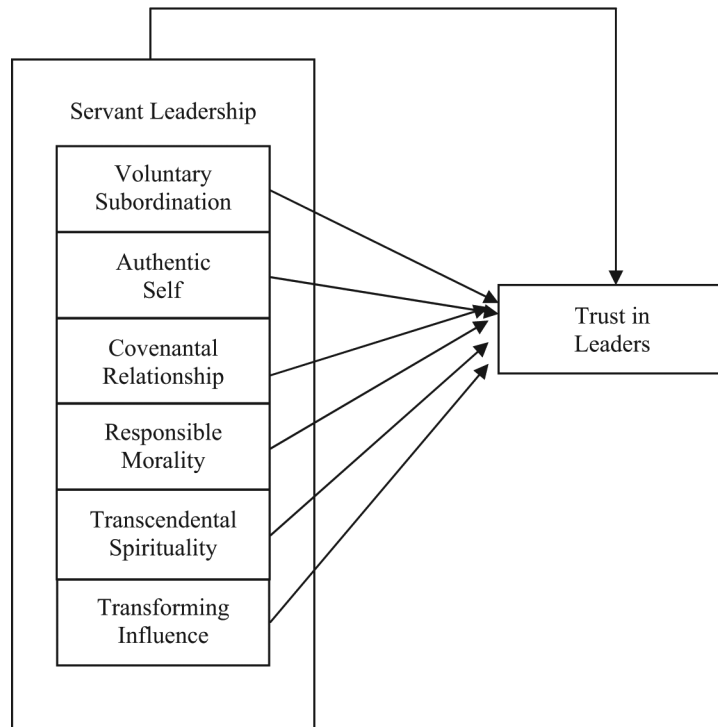
## Servant leadership and trust

While conceptual diversity on the understanding of trust across multiple disciplines exists (Bigley and Pearce, 1998; Wicks *et al.*, 1999), trust has been found to be associated with leadership. Numerous research have highlighted the important link between leadership behavior and trust within organizations (Arnold *et al.*, 2001; Brower *et al.*, 2000; Butler, 1991; Butler *et al.*, 1999; Dirks and Ferrin, 2002; Gillespie and Mann, 2004; Gomez and Rosen, 2001; Jones and George, 1998; Joseph and Winston, 2005; Jung and Avolio, 2000; Mayer and Davis, 1999; Mayer *et al.*, 1995; Podsakoff *et al.*, 1990, 1996; Whitener *et al.*, 1998). However, none of these studies specifically address the correlational link between specific leadership behaviors and the formation of followers’ trust toward their leaders.

While the notion of trust is not exclusively attached to servant leadership and may be considered a key element in all leadership models, servant leadership has been particularly considered as strongly associated with trust (De Pree, 1997; Joseph and Winston, 2005; Melrose, 1995; Russell, 2001), that is through servant leader exhibit and translate “their personal integrity into organizational fidelity” (De Pree, 1997, p. 127). Greenleaf (1977) maintained that trust is a building block for servant leaders, who in

turn foster environments of trust. In their study of leaders in for-profit and not-for profit organizations in America and West Indies, Joseph and Winston (2005) reported positive correlation between employees' perceived level of organizational servant leadership and leader trust, and between their perceived level of servant leadership and organizational trust. To the best of our knowledge, this study was the only study that provided preliminary empirical evidence of the link between servant leadership and trust. However, how servant leaders engender followers' trust in leaders was not addressed in previous studies. The hypothesized model examined in the study is shown in Figure 1.

A plethora of anecdotal evidence from the corporate sector pointed to the same direction. Jack Lowe (1998), CEO of TD Industries, a US-based mechanical contractor ranked as one of the best companies to work for by *Fortune* magazine, was a case in point (Levering and Moskowitz, 2001). Heralded as a strong believer and practitioner of servant leadership, Lowe embraced the servant leadership philosophy as the foundation of trusting relationships in the organization (Levering and Moskowitz, 2001). Lowe believed that a high-trust culture among employees provides an organization with an ability to respond to the constantly changing business environment without having to hassle with constant internal resistance to change (Lowe, 1998). At the more individual level, Lowe (1998) proposed that there are two ways leaders establish relationships with any new individuals. One is by treating them with suspicion until they prove themselves that they are trustworthy; the second, by assuming that they are trustworthy until they prove they are not. The visible



**Figure 1.**  
The hypothesized model  
in the study

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manifestation of servant leaders' trust on others is akin to the latter by virtue of the leader's willingness to delegate responsibilities and share authority with them (Wilkes, 1998). Based on this rationale, we develop the following hypothesis:

*H1.* Servant leadership predicts followers' trust in direct leaders.

The present study examines the impact of servant leadership behaviors on followers' trust in their direct leaders. As such, borrowing Brower *et al.*'s (2000) view that trust is partly built on behaviors, we argue that a subordinate's trust in the leader is based on the leader's servant leadership behaviors. This does not imply that the leader automatically trusts the subordinate. Regardless of the leader's trust in the subordinate, it is still the leader's behaviors that engender the subordinate's trust in the leader. When servant leaders put followers' needs and interests above those of themselves, maintain consistency between words and deeds, engage in moral dialogue with followers, and instill a sense of purpose and meaning in followers, they accumulate the trust of their followers.

In this study we employed the construct of servant leadership developed by Sendjaya *et al.* (2008) which comprises six different dimensions:

- (1) voluntary subordination;
- (2) authentic self;
- (3) covenantal relationship;
- (4) responsible morality;
- (5) transcendental spirituality; and
- (6) transforming influence.

The multidimensionality of servant leadership had been empirically verified in earlier studies, in which content validity was established through extensive reviews of the literature from pertinent fields such as religious theology, and organizational leadership; content analysis of interview data; and content expert validation (see Sendjaya *et al.*, 2008). The following sections outline the conceptual link between the six dimensions of servant leadership and followers' trust in leaders.

#### *Voluntary subordination and trust*

Voluntary subordination refers to the self-sacrificial behavior of the leader, which demonstrates his or her self-concept and primary intent. It carries the notion that one voluntarily abandons his or her personal rights and interests in service to others. The readiness to renounce the superior status attached to leadership and to embrace greatness by way of servanthood is a hallmark of servant leadership. Servant leaders' natural inclination to serve others sacrificially emanate from their self-concept as servants first, not leaders first. Lewicki and Bunker (1995) suggested since trust implies the willingness to be vulnerable (Mayer *et al.*, 1995), followers' sense of trust in a leader is instilled when they believe that the leader does not behave in a self-serving manner. The above discussion suggests that a leader's self-sacrificing behaviors couple with their belief in the subordinate as describe in voluntary subordination are likely to instill followers' sense of trust in leaders:

*H2a.* Voluntary subordination predicts followers' trust in the leader.

*Authentic self and trust*

Authentic self refers to the idea that leaders indicate his or her position in relation to others in a truthful and transparent manner through humility and accountable behaviors. Based on extant work in the area of leadership and trust cited above, most notably Podsakoff *et al.* (1990, 1996), we believe that exchange behaviors between leaders and members are the root of trust development between parties in organizations. In particular, supportive and open communication that underlies authentic self facilitates trust. A number of empirical works supports our view, for example, Bercerra and Gupta's (2003) indicated that interactions and communication operates as a source of information for interacting parties whereby the parties utilize the information gained through the interactions to form the foundations of trust for one another. This finding corroborated earlier works that looked at communication openness and accuracy of information as factors that facilitates trust. In particular, Butler (1991) empirically found that managers who openly communicated with their employees, that is, exchanged thoughts and ideas enhanced overall perceptions of trust. Shockley-Zalabak *et al.*'s (2000) recent work supports the idea that communication openness develops trust in organizations. This finding corroborates Mishra's (1996) model of organizational trust, where (communication) openness was found to be the most frequently referred component of trust at an organizational level. Based on the link between trust and open communication we develop the following hypothesis:

*H2b.* Authentic Self predicts followers' trust in leaders.

*Covenantal relationship and trust*

The third major construct of servant leadership, covenantal relationship, refers to behaviors of the leader that foster genuine, profound, and lasting relationships with employees. Covenants are intensely personal bonds of individuals who engage in intrinsically motivated efforts to achieve common objectives which may not be identified in advance (De Pree, 1989). In covenant-based relationship, the mutual commitment exemplified by leaders and followers are characterized by shared values, open-ended commitment, mutual trust, and concern for the welfare of the other party (Bromley and Busching, 1988; De Pree, 1989; Elazar, 1980; Graham and Organ, 1993), which would create positive attitudes toward the organization and leads to desirable outcomes, such as creativity, commitment, and participation (Daft and Lengel, 2000).

Since trust is a relational construct, in leader-member exchange it involves the member acting as a trustor and leader as the trustee whereby either one or both willingly accepts an element of personal risk. Brower *et al.* (2000) argued that a high leader-member relationship tends to be characterized by mutual trust that goes beyond the employment contract. Although they acknowledge that leaders and members often have perceptions of trust that do not converge. It is also implied that trust is built between leader and member through a series of interpersonal exchanges (Gomez and Rosen, 2001), therefore, through some type of covenant between the leader and member. Based on the above discussion we develop the following hypothesis:

*H2c.* Covenantal relationship predicts followers' trust in leaders.

*Responsible morality and trust*

Morality is a necessary element in leadership (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999; Price, 2003; Sergiovanni, 1992), and is central to servant leadership (Ciulla, 1995; Graham, 1991).

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The moral orientation that servant leaders possess is demonstrated through their moral reasoning and moral action. They promote post-conventional moral reasoning in organizations, as well as encouraging others to engage in it (Graham, 1995). Servant leadership also fosters leader-follower relationships that elevates leaders and followers to their better selves morally and ethically (Greenleaf, 1977). Graham (1991) argued that servant leadership employs relational power which facilitates good moral dialogue between leaders and followers. The capacity for engaging others in moral dialogue is useful not only to examine the ethics of the organization, but also to examine the ethics of the leaders themselves. As servant leaders always appeal to higher ideals, moral values, and the higher-order needs of followers (Yukl, 1990, p. 210), they are more likely to ensure that both the ends they seek and the means they employ can be morally legitimized, thoughtfully reasoned, and ethically justified (Sendjaya, 2005). We argue that this moral and ethical orientation of servant leaders will instill a sense of trust of followers toward their leaders:

*H2d.* Responsible morality predicts followers' trust in leaders.

#### *Transcendental spirituality and trust*

The fifth major construct of servant leadership, transcendental spirituality, refers to behaviors of the leader, which manifest an inner conviction that something or someone beyond self and the material world exist and make life complete and meaningful. Religiousness, interconnectedness, sense of mission, and wholeness (holistic mindset) are the four elements that make up spirituality (see Fairholm, 1997; Mitroff and Denton, 1999). While workplace spirituality research is still at the embryonic stage (for latest works in the area, see for example Fry, 2005; Paloutzian and Clark, 2005), the concept has been positively associated with better leadership (Conger, 1994), and other organizational behaviors (Biberman and Whittey, 1997; Fort, 1995; Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003; Nash, 1994; Neck and Milliman, 1999). Fairholm (1997, p. 31) argued that "spiritual leadership provides that holistic, integrated life." We propose that the spiritual component of servant leadership engenders trust in followers as followers perceive that the leader's decisions and actions are based on the belief that they would contribute to the clarity of purpose and sense of wholeness in the followers' lives. When followers are consciously aware that their sense of well-being is being taken into consideration by the leader, their faith in the leader grows:

*H2e.* Transcendental Spirituality predicts followers' trust in leaders.

#### *Transforming influence and trust*

Central to the idea of servant leadership is its transforming influence on people surrounding the leader. Research in transformational leadership suggested that there is a positive link between transformational behaviors and trust. Jung and Avolio (2000), for example, found that transformational leadership had positive effects on trust. In a similar vein, Greenleaf (1977, p. 27) established that servant leadership is demonstrated whenever the people who are served by servant leaders are positively transformed in multiple dimensions, including emotionally, intellectually, socially, and spiritually. Greenleaf (1977) suggested that servant leadership produces multiplying effects in others as they turn the people they serve into servant leaders. As such, servant leaders possess a commitment to and derive satisfaction from the growth of others, believing that people have an intrinsic value beyond their contribution as

workers or employees. These views are shared by Graham (1991), who maintained that servant leadership is contagious. Moreover, as this personal transformation occurs collectively and repeatedly, it stimulates positive changes in organizations and societies (Russell and Stone, 2002). We believe that one of the positive effects of a leader's transforming influence is trust, thus offer the following hypothesis:

*H2f.* Transforming influence predicts followers' trust in leaders.

## Methods

### *Procedure and sample*

To examine the relationship between servant leadership behavior and trust, a survey questionnaire was distributed among teaching faculty and administration staff of two educational institutions in Indonesia, both of whom have leaders they interact with on a frequent basis and report to. The selection of the sector and context for this study was driven by the following reason peculiar to leadership studies. While understanding the local culture in which the leaders operate is critical for effective leadership, most leadership theories were developed and tested in the Western context (Shahin and Wright, 2004) and many were built on key underlying assumptions which are partially irrelevant, inappropriate, or even counterproductive to other parts of the world (Beyer, 1999; Blunt and Jones, 1997; Shahin and Wright, 2004). Hence, in line with Tsui *et al.*'s (2007) recommendation to conduct studies in non-Western developing countries, we deliberately chose to examine the extent to which servant leadership influences followers' trust in Indonesia. The extent to which servant leadership exists and predicts trust in a high power distance and group orientated culture such as Indonesia (House *et al.*, 2004), a lesser-known setting for leadership research studies, is yet to be discovered.

Apart from the convenience sampling reason, the education sector was chosen given its not-for-profit orientation. In contrast to organizations in the for-profit sector, educational institutions with their more long-term perspectives and balanced approach to performance provide a more positive context for servant leadership to take root and flourish. This study then not only provides more empirical evidences on the applicability of servant leadership in the not-for-profit sector but also sheds more insights on its effectiveness in the not-for-profit sector in Indonesia *vis-à-vis* that in other countries. Further studies might then take a similar approach in the for-profit contexts.

The respondents provided self-report data on their perceived level of the leaders' servant leadership behaviors and trust in these leaders. In the first educational institution, a private university, the survey questionnaires were sent to employees' mailboxes in packets. Completed surveys were mailed by respondents in pre-addressed envelopes to the administration officer who forwarded them to the researchers. In the second institution, a private school, the questionnaires were distributed during a corporate training seminar program and forwarded to the researcher on completion. In both cases, assurance of anonymity and confidentiality were given prior to the survey administration along with a letter of support from top management. While the study sample is limited to the Indonesian institutions given cost and time restrictions, it is a convenient sample representative of the industry encompassing teaching and administrative staff in both tertiary and secondary/primary educational institutions. As such the degree of representativeness of the sample was reasonably high, allowing us to generalize the findings of this study to the education industry and beyond.

A total of 555 respondents participated in the survey representing a response rate of 58.4 per cent. As indicated in Table I, 63 per cent of the sample was female; 95.3 per



**Table I.**  
Summary of sample  
characteristics

	Percent
Response rate	58.4
Gender	
Male	37
Female	63
Age	
Under 30	30.6
30-39	48.7
40-49	16.0
50-59	4.5
60 and above	0.2
Job categories	
Teaching staff	69.6
Administration	30.4
Level of education	
Less than high school	1.9
High school degree	8.9
Some college degree	10.5
Bachelor degree	61.8
Master's degree	16.2
PhD or equivalent	0.8
Average job tenure (years)	6.2 (s.d. = 5.7)
Average tenure with direct leader (years)	3.8 (s.d. = 3.3)

cent of the respondents were under 50 years of age, with almost half of those were in the 30-39 age bracket; 69.6 per cent of the group was teaching staff, with 89.3 per cent of the respondents having obtained a college degree, and 17 per cent of those had advanced degrees (Master's or PhD). Survey participants have been working in their current position for an average of slightly over six years. Respondents have reported to their current immediate leader on average, for almost four years.

### Measures

*Servant leadership behavior scale (SLBS).* The SLBS was employed to measure servant leadership. It is a 35-item measure comprising six behavioral dimensions:

- (1) *Voluntary subordination* (e.g. consider others' needs and interests above his or her own).
- (2) *Authentic self* (e.g. Is not defensive when confronted).
- (3) *Covenantal relationship* (e.g. treats people as equal partners in the organization),
- (4) *Responsible morality* (e.g. Takes a resolute stand on moral principles).
- (5) *Transcendental spirituality* (e.g. helps me to find a clarify of purpose and direction).
- (6) *Transforming influence* (e.g. minimize barriers that inhibit my success) (Sendjaya *et al.*, 2008).

The psychometric validities of the SLBS have been demonstrated in previous validation studies (Sendjaya *et al.*, 2008), which provided multiple tests for the measure in terms of its internal consistency, reliability, factor structure, content validity, and

discriminant validity. The first study built the content validity of the measure on the basis of a literature review, content analysis of interview data, and content expert validation, resulting in the operationalization of the six dimensions of servant leadership behaviors outlined above. The second study confirmed the proposed six one-congeneric models using structural equation modeling on the basis of survey data among 277 part-time graduate students. Finally, the third study validated the measure using the responses of 192 managers and employees. The internal consistency reliabilities of all the six factors exceeded the recommended level of 0.70 on Cronbach's coefficient alpha (Nunnally, 1978), ranging from 0.84 to 0.95. Discriminant validity of the measure has been established through competing model analyses, with chi-square difference tests revealing that the correlated six-factor model is the best fitting and parsimonious model ( $X^2/df = 2.34$ ; CFI = 0.89; RMR = 0.06; RMSEA = 0.08).

*Trust in/loyalty to the leader.* The six-item measure of followers' trust as faith in and loyalty to the leader developed by Podsakoff *et al.* (1990) was utilized in the present study. Although there are other measures of trust (Rotter, 1967; Cook and Wall, 1980; Bromiley and Cummings, 1993), Podsakoff *et al.*'s (1990) measure focuses specifically on trust between followers and their leaders. The six items of Podsakoff *et al.*'s (1990) measure are as follows:

- (1) I feel quite confident that my leader will always try to treat me fairly.
- (2) My manager would never try to gain an advantage by deceiving workers.
- (3) I have complete faith in the integrity of my manager/supervisor.
- (4) I feel a strong loyalty to my leader.
- (5) I would support my leader in almost any emergency.
- (6) I have a strong sense of loyalty toward my leader.

As such the scale measured trust in a direct leader (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002).

**Results**

Table II presents the means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities for the six factors of servant leadership and trust. The internal consistency reliabilities of both the six factors of servant leadership and trust exceeded the recommended level of 0.70 Cronbach's coefficient alpha (Nunnally, 1978). Generally every one of the six factors demonstrated high alphas, ranging from 0.77 (Responsible morality) and 0.90 (Voluntary subordination). The trust scale demonstrated 0.81 coefficient alpha. The six factors were also highly correlated ranging from 0.77 and 0.87. This finding confirms

**Table II.**  
Means, standard deviations, correlations and reliabilities of servant leadership factors and trust

Variables	Mean	SD	A	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Voluntary subordination	3.60	0.82	0.90						
2 Authentic self	3.38	0.80	0.85	0.86*					
3 Covenantal relationship	3.60	0.82	0.88	0.86*	0.86*				
4 Responsible morality	3.67	0.80	0.77	0.86*	0.81*	0.82*			
5 Transcendental spirituality	3.46	0.81	0.86	0.83*	0.77*	0.78*	0.83*		
6 Transforming influence	3.50	0.81	0.83	0.87*	0.83*	0.82*	0.87*	0.86*	
7 Trust in the leader	4.59	0.79	0.81	0.47*	0.42*	0.47*	0.49*	0.46*	0.50*

**Note:** \* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

results from previous studies that servant leadership is multifaceted and interrelated holistic construct that signify a selfless life (Sendjaya *et al.*, 2008). This finding provides empirical support for the notion that servant leadership is a profound philosophy of leadership behaviors (Bass, 2000) which informs and shapes all areas of leaders' behaviors. The alignment between the beliefs that servant leaders possess and the practices of leadership that servant leaders exhibit, each feeding back on the other through critical reflection, is reflected in the coherence among the observable behaviors of the six servant leadership dimensions.

Correlation analyses indicate that all six dimensions of servant leadership were positively and moderately correlated to trust, ranging from 0.42 to 0.50. The highest correlation was found between the transforming influence dimension and trust (0.50), whereas the lowest between the authentic self dimension and trust (0.42).

In order to explore the effect of servant leadership behaviors on trust we performed a regression with the overall score of servant leadership, as well as, the six factors of servant leadership as independent variables and trust as the dependent variable. Results of these analyses are presented in Tables III-V. Servant leadership was found to be a significant predictor of trust  $\beta = 0.51$ ;  $F(1, 553) = 191.31$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; accounting for 26 per cent of the variability of trust towards the direct leader. Hence, *H1* that servant leadership predicts followers' trust in direct leader was confirmed in this study. Of the six factors, Covenantal relationship ( $\beta = 0.16$ ), Responsible morality ( $\beta = 0.20$ ) and Transforming influence

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>
Servant leadership	0.53	0.51	13.83*

**Table III.**  
Servant leadership trust regression analysis

**Notes:** \*  $p < 0.01$ . Overall statistics: *Multiple R* = 0.51,  $R^2 = 0.26$ , *Adjusted R<sup>2</sup>* = 0.26, *F* = 191.31

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>
Voluntary subordination	0.05	0.05	0.48
Authentic self	-0.13	-0.13	-1.63
Covenantal relationship	0.16	0.16	1.99*
Responsible morality	0.20	0.20	2.41**
Transcendental spirituality	0.03	0.03	0.40
Transforming influence	0.22	0.23	2.50**

**Table IV.**  
Six factors of SLBS to trust regression analysis

**Notes:** \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ . Overall statistics: *Multiple R* = 0.52;  $R^2 = 0.27$ ; *Adjusted R<sup>2</sup>* = 0.26; *F* = 33.91

Variable	Eigenvalue	Tolerance	VIF	Condition index
Voluntary subordination	0.02	0.14	7.15	13.58
Authentic self	0.01	0.20	5.10	22.00
Covenantal relationship	0.01	0.20	5.11	29.45
Responsible morality	0.01	0.20	5.36	30.69
Transcendental spirituality	0.01	0.23	4.43	33.41
Transforming influence	0.01	0.16	6.38	35.06

**Table V.**  
Collinearity diagnostics

( $\beta = 0.23$ ) significantly contributed to trust, with transforming influence being the major contributing dimension in trust towards the leader (see Tables IV and V). These findings provide support to *H2c*, *H2d*, and *H2f*, and partial support to *H2a*, *H2b*, and *H2e*. Overall, the six factors explained 27 per cent of the variance in trust. Based on the high correlations among the six factors, collinearity statistics were conducted during the regression. The collinearity statistics shown in Tables IV and V indicated that some degree of multicollinearity was present. However, all the tolerance index were above 0.10 and variance inflation factors were all well below 10, as such, not problematic (Cooper and Schindler, 2003; Everitt, 1996; Kleinbaum *et al.*, 1988).

To test if different levels of perceived SL behaviors affected the levels of subordinates trust in their leader we created a three-level SL variable based on the overall SL score: low-SL (at the 25th percentile with SL mean score of 2.48,  $n = 138$ ), moderate-SL (between the 26th to the 74th percentile with SL mean score of 3.64,  $n = 275$ ) and high-SL (at the 75th percentile with SL mean score of 4.36,  $n = 142$ ). A MANOVA was then performed using the three-level SL variable (low-, moderate- and high-SL) as the independent variable, with overall SL score, the six SL dimensions and Trust as dependent variables. Results showed a significant effect  $F(16, 1090; \text{Wilks' Criterion}) = 88.69, p < 0.001$ . The univariate statistics showed that all the six SL dimensions (Voluntary subordination, Authentic self, Covenantal relationship, Responsible morality, Transcendental spirituality, and Transforming influence), overall SL score and Trust were significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). All the pairwise comparisons showed that the three different levels of SL (low-SL = 2.48, moderate-SL = 3.64 and high-SL = 4.36) were significantly different to each other ( $p < 0.001$ ), all the six SL dimensions were all significantly different to each other ( $p < 0.001$ ) as a function of SL levels (low, moderate and high) and the levels of trust (low-SL = 4.00; moderate-SL = 4.65; high-SL = 5.0) were also significantly different ( $p < 0.001$ ) as a function of the three different levels of SL. In other words, it indicated that differing levels of SL exhibited by leaders predicted differing levels of trust subordinates have in the leader. This finding therefore supports *H1* and *H2a* through *H2f*.

## Discussion

The importance of trust in contemporary organizations has been recognized in recent years. Unfortunately, our understanding of how to develop and maintain trust in the leader-follower relationships, as well as empirical evidence of factors that facilitate trust, has not grown as rapidly as its recognition in recent years. To address this gap in the literature, the current study examined the relationship between servant leadership behaviors and followers' trust in their leaders. Our findings extend the validity of the SLBS and trust theories in two ways. First, the current study represents the first large-scale attempt that empirically tests the linkages between servant leadership behavior and followers' trust in their leaders. Second, the study extends prior research on the psychometric properties of the SLBS by examining the concurrent validity of the measure.

The results contribute to extant leadership literature by demonstrating that servant leadership is a significant predictor of trust. This finding is consistent with our expectation that affect-laden issues, such as trust, are often key outcomes of outstanding leadership (Pillai *et al.*, 1999). More specifically, regression analyses provide empirical support for linkages between servant leadership and trust and confirm earlier work on servant leadership using a smaller sample (Joseph and Winston, 2005). The correlation

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between servant leadership and trust may be explained by the fact that servant leadership enhances followers' perceptions of leader trustworthiness (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002; Joseph and Winston, 2005). Whitener *et al.* (1998) concluded five categories of behavior captured the variety of factors that influence employees' perceptions of managerial/ supervisory trustworthiness, namely behavioral consistency, behavioral integrity, sharing and delegation of control, communication, and demonstration of concern, all of which are captured in of the "Covenantal relationship", "Responsibility morality" and "Transforming influence" dimensions of servant leadership.

Several alternative explanations must be considered in relation to the above findings. First, trust might not necessarily be the outcome of servant leadership, instead a reciprocal relationship between trust and servant leadership behaviors is also probable (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002; Mayer *et al.*, 1995). While it is plausible that servant leadership may be both cause and consequence of trust in leadership, we would like to think that the former prevails, consistent with Dirks and Ferrin's (2002) conclusion of their meta-analytic review of trust in leadership studies that both relationship-based and character-based leadership behaviors affect trust. Another plausible explanation is that the relationship between trust and servant leadership may be in the opposite direction, in that those who trust their leaders may attribute to them servant leadership qualities. Hence, trust had a prime effect on subordinates' perceptions of their leader's servant leadership behavior. These alternatives may incur treats to validity, hence should be addressed in future research by way of testing various causal models depicting these interrelationships.

It is interesting to note that in this study each of the servant leadership dimensions influenced trust in different ways. Three out of six dimensions of servant leadership (Covenantal relationship, Responsible morality and Transforming influence) were found to correlate positively and significantly to trust. The strongest contributing factor towards trust in the leader was transforming influence. This finding confirms our prediction (i.e. *H2f*), and lends support to other scholars' assertion that trust is directly related to leadership behaviors which are transformational in nature, such as articulating a shared vision that followers can collectively identify with, setting a personal example, and appealing to commonly shared values (Bass, 1985; De Pree, 1989; Graham, 1991; Greenleaf, 1977; Podsakoff *et al.*, 1990). Other behavioral elements embodied in transforming influence that may also have contributed to trust include leaders demonstrating individualized concern and respect for followers (Jung and Avolio, 2000); as well as perceived fairness of leadership actions (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002).

This finding provides further evidence beyond that from the GLOBE study that the self-sacrificial model of servant leadership is effective in the context of the Indonesian paternalistic culture in fostering followers' trust in leaders. That leadership behaviors associated with transforming influence significantly predict trust make much cultural sense. In the context of Indonesia where hierarchical patterns of relationship are observed, leaders have latitudes to exert their influence on and assume authority over their followers, and followers in turn readily accept that as a given. This deep-seated cultural underpinning propels followers to trust in the intent and capacity of their leaders.

Covenantal relationship also correlated positively and significantly with trust whereby employees would have felt valued and supported by their leaders who demonstrate shared values, open-ended commitment, and concern for the welfare of their followers (Bromley and Busching, 1988; De Pree, 1989; Elazar, 1980; Graham and Organ, 1993). Previous studies indicated that employee perceptions of covenantal relationships are positively associated with organizational citizenship behaviors (Van

Dyne *et al.*, 1994) and ethical work climates (Barnett and Schubert, 2002). This study extends these findings and shows that *Covenantal Relationship* also predicts trust, hence providing full support to *H2c*. Culturally speaking, in societies like Indonesia where group harmony is of utmost importance, leaders who make conscious and constant efforts to respect their followers for who they are, treat them as partners, and affirm their confidence in them are much more likely to engender a strong sense of camaraderie in the leader-follower relationship.

The next dimension of servant leadership that significantly correlated to trust was responsible morality, which refers to behaviors of the leader that elevate both leaders' and employees' moral convictions and actions. This finding confirms our expectation (see *H2d*) that when servant leaders engage their followers in moral dialogue to examine the ethics not only of the organization, but also of the leaders themselves, followers' trust in the leaders are likely to grow. This finding also lends more support to the literature on the importance of morality for leaders to inspire trust in their followers (Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Burns, 1978; Ciulla, 1995; Graham, 1991). In the context of Indonesia where ambiguous practices replete with corruption, collusion, and nepotism are found deep within the country's thick business vein, this finding might imply that leaders who promote moral reasoning and exemplify moral behaviors are perceived as distinctively rare and superior to those who are morally indifferent. Followers responded positively by projecting a higher trust onto these morally responsible leaders, although they were likely to inflate their responses in light of the morally corrupt context.

Overall, our findings complemented those from previous studies which highlight the importance of trust in direct leader. Dirks and Ferrin (2002) found that trust in direct leader had an equal or more significant bearing on organizational outcomes such as performance and job satisfaction than trust in organizational leadership. More recently, Burke *et al.* (2007) argued that the impact of trust in leadership (or lack of it) can result in tremendous positive or negative consequences within organizational contexts. Burke *et al.* (2007) proposed specifically that the perceptions of leader accountability, integrity, justice, and value congruence will facilitate followers' trust in leaders. Since these dimensions are embedded within the construct of servant leadership, our study lends some support for these predictions, and ascertains the usefulness of the servant leadership approach in organizations, particularly where trust in leaders are deficient. Given the impacts of individuals' trust in their leaders, it is therefore of the organizations' interest to cultivate the aforementioned leadership behaviors within the servant leadership construct that will engender trust. Chief among those behaviors are articulation of a shared vision, role-modeling, demonstration of concern and respect for followers, and integrity-infused decisions and actions. To ensure that organizations do not elevate people who lack moral integrity which would undermine followers' trust, the philosophy and measure of servant leadership can be used as a guide to assess, select, and promote organizational leaders.

### Limitations

There are several limitations of this study which deserve mention. First, the study utilized two samples from two educational institutions in Indonesia. While these two samples were located in two different geographic areas (i.e. Jakarta and Surabaya), the fact that both were taken in Indonesia may to a certain extent mitigate concerns about generalizability of the findings. The findings are also prone to certain cultural biases that may be attached to Indonesia (i.e. high collectivism).

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Second, both Joseph and Winston's (2005) and our study were conducted in the education sector, hence may not translate well into the commercial sector. The meaning of servant leadership behaviors may be perceived differently in a university, a manufacturing firm, a consulting company, or a charity organization. Future research should attempt to address these concerns by replicating the findings of the present study on an appropriate target population, particularly one comprising respondents of different industries and cultural backgrounds.

Third, the data may be artificially inflated by same source variance as since they come from the same respondents. To deal with method biases, future studies should employ procedural remedies involving designs in which multiple methods of measurements were administered among different sources of information (i.e. self-report and leader ratings). Another limitation of the study was that we did not distinguish between the notion of relationship-based and character-based trust (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002). Although Podsakoff *et al.*'s (1990) measure of trust has elements of relationship- and character-based trust, it does not differentiate between the two types of trust. Similarly, we only measured trust in direct leaders as opposed to trust in organization. We believe, however, that future research should address this theoretical diversity, as it would allow the identification of particular behaviors that contribute to the different types of trust in organizations.

### **Recommendations for future research**

In this study we demonstrated that covenantal relationship, responsible morality and transforming influence behaviors from a direct leader contributed to follower's trust towards the leader. However, some the non-observed relationships from our study may require further examinations. For example the inverse relationship (although not significant) between authentic self and trust is puzzling. One would expect leaders who behave authentically by showing integrity, humility, accountability, vulnerability, and a secure sense of self might engender followers' trust. It is possible that followers actually question the leader's motives and/or perceive a hidden agenda, although the contrary interpretation is much more likely. An alternative explanation is that the direction of effect is an artifact of multicollinearity and suppression. Along the same line, the tentative support found between voluntary subordination and trust, as well as between transcendental spirituality and trust requires further examinations. We expected that leaders who put followers' needs and interests above those of the leaders (voluntary subordination); and leaders who help followers to have a sense of purpose, meaning, and direction at work (transcendental spirituality) would elicit trust from the followers. The non-observed relationships between these servant leadership behaviors and trust in the leader definitely bear further investigation.

Although this study showed that servant leadership behaviors contributed to trust, the question of whether these behaviors contribute to follower's performance remain open. As such, future research can address this practical perspective by examining the link between servant leadership behaviors to performance outcomes. Future research can also use a longitudinal research design to examine how trust is built over time and/or whether variations in leader behavior affect both trust and performance. Another implication for future research is to investigate the link between participatory management style and servant leadership, that is, either the moderating and/or mediating effect of servant leadership on participatory management style and trust.

To conclude, it is important to note that this study is exploratory in nature and the results generated need to be replicated in various settings. Nevertheless, this study opens up an avenue for the development and testing of theory regarding the effects of servant leadership on other dependent variables, such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behavior. We suspect that servant leadership would invariably predict these variables, and that such empirical testing would further enlighten our understanding of how servant leadership behavior can contribute to the effectiveness of individuals and organizations.

### Conclusions

This study empirically links particular leadership behaviors to followers' trust in the direct leader. The study makes several significant contributions to the literature in the fields of leadership and trust. It empirically linked the under studied servant leadership construct with trust. Our study extends Joseph and Winston (2005) as well as Liden *et al.*'s (2005) works by empirically demonstrating that servant leadership behavior does contribute to building trust in the leader. The findings corroborated Joseph and Winston's (2005) work in the West Indies, thus our work in Indonesia externally validates the link between servant leadership and trust. Specifically, the study showed that certain leadership behaviors associated with servant leadership are more likely to engender followers' trust in the leader, such as articulating a shared vision that followers can collectively identify with, setting a personal example, appealing to commonly shared values, demonstrating shared values, open-ended commitment, concern for the welfare of their followers, and engaging in moral dialogue to examine the ethics of the organization and of the leaders themselves. Hence, these findings also addressed Dirks and Ferrin (2002) question on how leaders actually gain followers' trust.

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