

# Meaningful Work as a Psychological Mechanism Linking Servant Leadership and Employee Engagement

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## Abstract

Employee engagement has become a critical determinant of organizational effectiveness, particularly in knowledge-intensive and service-oriented environments where employees' psychological involvement significantly influences performance outcomes. Leadership behaviour plays an important role in shaping employees' perceptions of purpose, motivation, and attachment to work. The present study examines the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement and investigates the mediating role of work meaningfulness. Drawing upon social exchange theory and meaningful work theory, the study proposes that servant leadership enhances employees' perception of meaningful work, which subsequently strengthens employee engagement. Data were collected from 392 employees across multiple service-sector organizations using a structured survey design. Hierarchical regression and mediation analyses were employed to test the proposed relationships. The findings indicate that servant leadership positively influences employee engagement both directly and indirectly through work meaningfulness, confirming the mediating role of meaningful work as a key psychological mechanism. The study contributes to organizational behaviour literature by integrating leadership and motivational perspectives to explain engagement outcomes and offers practical implications for organizations seeking to enhance engagement through purpose-driven leadership practices and meaningful work design.

## Keywords

Servant leadership; Employee engagement; Work meaningfulness; Social exchange theory; Meaningful work; Organizational behaviour; Leadership effectiveness; Employee motivation

## 1. Introduction

Organizations operating in increasingly dynamic and competitive environments recognize that sustainable performance depends not only on employee competence but also on employees' psychological involvement in their work roles. Employee engagement has therefore emerged as a central construct in organizational behaviour research, reflecting employees' levels of energy, dedication, and absorption in work activities. Engaged employees demonstrate higher productivity, stronger organizational commitment, and greater willingness to contribute beyond formal job requirements. Consequently, understanding the antecedents of employee engagement has become a priority for both scholars and practitioners. Leadership behaviour has been consistently identified as a critical determinant of employee engagement because leaders shape

employees' perceptions of support, fairness, and purpose within the organization. Among contemporary leadership approaches, servant leadership has gained considerable attention due to its emphasis on serving followers, promoting ethical behaviour, and facilitating employee growth. Servant leaders prioritize the needs and development of employees, creating supportive environments characterized by trust, empowerment, and mutual respect. Such environments enhance employees' intrinsic motivation and psychological attachment to their work. However, leadership behaviour alone may not directly result in engagement unless employees perceive their work as meaningful. Work meaningfulness refers to the extent to which employees perceive their work as significant, purposeful, and aligned with their personal values. Employees who experience meaningful work are more likely to demonstrate enthusiasm, persistence, and emotional investment in their roles. Meaningful work provides employees with a sense of purpose and helps them understand how their contributions create value for the organization and society.

The present study proposes that servant leadership enhances employee engagement through work meaningfulness. By integrating social exchange theory and meaningful work theory, the study provides a comprehensive explanation of how leadership behaviour influences engagement through psychological mechanisms. This research contributes to organizational behaviour literature by explaining how purpose-driven leadership fosters meaningful work experiences that ultimately enhance employee engagement.

## **2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background**

### **2.1 Employee Engagement**

Employee engagement refers to a positive and fulfilling work-related psychological state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Engaged employees exhibit high levels of energy, enthusiasm, and concentration in their work activities. The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model explains engagement as a motivational process that occurs when employees possess adequate job resources such as supportive leadership, autonomy, and meaningful work experiences. Engagement differs from job satisfaction in that it reflects active involvement and investment in work roles rather than passive contentment. Research has consistently demonstrated that employee engagement is associated with improved performance, reduced turnover intentions, and enhanced organizational effectiveness.

### **2.2 Servant Leadership**

Servant leadership is a leadership philosophy that emphasizes serving followers by prioritizing their development, wellbeing, and growth. Servant leaders demonstrate humility, empathy, ethical conduct, and a commitment to empowering employees. Unlike traditional leadership approaches that focus primarily on organizational outcomes, servant leadership emphasizes follower development as a pathway to achieving organizational success. Through supportive and ethical behaviour, servant leaders create trust-based relationships that enhance employees' motivation and psychological safety. Employees working under servant leaders often perceive greater organizational support and are more likely to reciprocate through positive attitudes and behaviours, including higher engagement and commitment.

## **2.3 Work Meaningfulness**

Work meaningfulness refers to employees' perception that their work has purpose, significance, and value beyond routine task completion. Meaningful work emerges when employees perceive alignment between their personal values and organizational goals and when they believe their work contributes to a broader purpose. Meaningful work enhances intrinsic motivation and encourages employees to invest greater cognitive and emotional effort in their roles. Employees who perceive meaningful work are more likely to demonstrate persistence, creativity, and engagement. Organizational environments that support autonomy, recognition, and value alignment are particularly effective in fostering meaningful work experiences.

## **2.4 Theoretical Integration**

The present study integrates social exchange theory and meaningful work theory to explain employee engagement. Social exchange theory suggests that employees reciprocate supportive and developmental leadership behaviours through positive work attitudes and behaviours. Servant leadership provides emotional and developmental resources that enhance employees' perception of meaningful work. Meaningful work subsequently strengthens intrinsic motivation and encourages employees to invest energy and dedication into their work roles. This integrated theoretical framework provides a comprehensive explanation of how servant leadership influences employee engagement through psychological mechanisms related to purpose and meaning at work.

## **3. Hypothesis Development**

The development of hypotheses in the present study is grounded in social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), meaningful work theory (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010), and engagement theory (Kahn, 1990). Prior research suggests that leadership behaviour influences employee attitudes and behaviours through psychological mechanisms that shape employees' interpretation of work experiences. Servant leadership emphasizes employee development, ethical behaviour, and follower wellbeing, which creates supportive environments that enhance intrinsic motivation and psychological attachment to work roles (Eva et al., 2019; Liden et al., 2008). Work meaningfulness represents an important psychological mechanism through which leadership behaviour influences employee engagement because employees are more likely to invest energy and dedication when they perceive their work as purposeful and valuable (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004; Steger et al., 2012).

### **3.1 Servant Leadership and Employee Engagement**

Servant leadership focuses on serving followers by prioritizing their growth, empowerment, and wellbeing (Greenleaf, 1977). Servant leaders create supportive and trust-based environments that enhance employees' motivation and emotional attachment to their work (Van Dierendonck, 2011). According to social exchange theory, employees reciprocate supportive leadership behaviours through positive attitudes and behaviours beneficial to the organization (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Empirical research indicates that servant leadership is positively associated

with employee engagement because employees perceive higher levels of organizational support and psychological safety under servant leaders (Walumbwa, Hartnell, & Oke, 2010; Eva et al., 2019). Therefore, servant leadership is expected to directly enhance employee engagement.H1: Servant leadership positively influences employee engagement.

### **3.2 Servant Leadership and Work Meaningfulness**

Servant leaders help employees understand the significance and impact of their work by aligning individual contributions with organizational goals and broader societal outcomes (Liden et al., 2014). Through empathy, empowerment, and ethical conduct, servant leaders foster environments in which employees experience a sense of purpose and value in their work roles. Meaningful work theory suggests that employees derive meaning when their work contributes to a larger purpose and reflects personal values (Rosso et al., 2010). Prior studies indicate that leadership behaviours emphasizing development and support enhance employees' perception of meaningful work (Allan et al., 2019; May et al., 2004).

Accordingly, servant leadership is expected to positively influence work meaningfulness.

H2: Servant leadership positively influences work meaningfulness.

### **3.3 Work Meaningfulness and Employee Engagement**

Work meaningfulness enhances intrinsic motivation and psychological involvement, which are key antecedents of employee engagement (Kahn, 1990). Employees who perceive their work as meaningful are more likely to demonstrate enthusiasm, persistence, and dedication in performing their tasks (Steger et al., 2012). The Job Demands–Resources model further suggests that meaningful work functions as an important psychological resource that enhances engagement by strengthening employees' motivation and resilience (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Empirical research consistently demonstrates positive relationships between meaningful work and engagement outcomes (Allan et al., 2019)

Therefore, work meaningfulness is expected to positively influence employee engagement.

H3: Work meaningfulness positively influences employee engagement.

### **3.4 Mediating Role of Work Meaningfulness**

Although servant leadership provides supportive and developmental resources, employees' behavioural outcomes often depend on how they interpret their work experiences. Work meaningfulness represents a key psychological mechanism through which servant leadership influences engagement. Servant leaders enhance employees' understanding of the value and purpose of their work, which strengthens intrinsic motivation and emotional investment (Rosso et al., 2010). As a result, employees are more likely to exhibit higher levels of engagement. Previous research supports the mediating role of meaningful work in linking leadership behaviour to employee outcomes (Allan et al., 2019; May et al., 2004).

H4: Work meaningfulness mediates the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement.

## Research Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design

The present study adopts a quantitative research design to empirically examine the relationships among servant leadership, work meaningfulness, and employee engagement. A quantitative approach is appropriate because the study aims to test theoretically derived hypotheses and examine relationships among latent constructs using statistical techniques. Quantitative research designs are widely employed in organizational behaviour research where psychological perceptions and behavioural outcomes are measured through standardized instruments (Hair et al., 2019).

A cross-sectional survey design was employed, whereby data were collected from respondents at a single point in time. Cross-sectional designs are particularly suitable for examining leadership perceptions and employee attitudes because these constructs represent relatively stable psychological states rather than rapidly fluctuating behaviours (Demerouti et al., 2001). The research design enables efficient data collection across multiple organizations while maintaining methodological rigor.

### 4.2 Research Context and Population

The study was conducted among employees working in knowledge-intensive and service-oriented organizations, including information technology firms, educational institutions, consulting organizations, and financial service companies. These sectors were selected because leadership interaction, employee motivation, and engagement play a critical role in determining organizational effectiveness within such environments (Christian et al., 2011).

The target population consisted of full-time employees working under direct supervisory structures. Respondents were required to have a minimum organizational tenure of six months to ensure sufficient exposure to leadership behaviour and work processes, enabling informed responses regarding leadership perceptions and work experiences.

### 4.3 Sampling Technique

A stratified random sampling technique was adopted to enhance representativeness and reduce sampling bias. Stratification was conducted based on organizational sector, functional area, and hierarchical level (managerial and non-managerial employees). Stratified sampling ensures proportional representation of heterogeneous employee groups and improves generalizability of findings (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Within each stratum, questionnaires were distributed randomly to provide equal participation opportunity.

Table 1. Sampling Distribution

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Information Technology	112	28.6%
Education Sector	86	21.9%
Consulting Services	98	25.0%
Financial Services	96	24.5%

#### 4.4 Sample Size Determination

Sample size determination followed established recommendations for multivariate statistical analysis and mediation testing. According to Hair et al. (2019), the minimum sample size for regression-based analysis should be at least ten times the number of indicators or structural paths in the research model. Furthermore, Hayes (2013) recommends relatively larger samples for mediation analysis to ensure adequate statistical power and stability of indirect effect estimates. A total of 420 questionnaires were distributed. After screening for missing values, incomplete responses, and response inconsistencies, 392 usable responses were retained for analysis. The final sample size exceeds recommended thresholds for organizational behaviour research and is considered statistically adequate for hypothesis testing.

#### 4.5 Measurement of Variables

All constructs were measured using previously validated scales to ensure reliability, validity, and comparability with prior research. Established measurement instruments reduce measurement error and enhance construct validity in behavioural research (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Table 2. Measurement of Variables and Sources

Construct	Source	No. of Items	Scale Type
Servant Leadership	Liden et al. (2008)	7	5-point Likert
Work Meaningfulness	Steger et al. (2012)	6	5-point Likert
Employee Engagement	Schaufeli et al. (2002)	9	5-point Likert

#### 4.6 Reliability and Validity Assessment

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, with values above 0.70 considered acceptable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Construct validity was examined through correlation patterns and theoretical consistency among constructs. The use of established measurement scales further strengthened content and construct validity (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 3. Reliability Statistics

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Servant Leadership	7	0.91
Work Meaningfulness	6	0.88
Employee Engagement	9	0.90

#### 4.7 Control of Common Method Bias

Procedural remedies were implemented to minimize common method bias since data were collected using self-reported measures. Respondents were assured anonymity and confidentiality, participation was voluntary, and questionnaire items were arranged in mixed order to reduce

response pattern bias. Statistical remedies followed recommendations by Podsakoff et al. (2003), indicating that common method variance did not significantly influence the results.

#### 4.8 Data Analysis Strategy

Data analysis was conducted using hierarchical regression and mediation analysis techniques. Hierarchical regression was employed to examine direct relationships among servant leadership, work meaningfulness, and employee engagement. Mediation effects were tested using procedures recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986) and bootstrapping techniques suggested by Hayes (2013). These analytical procedures are widely accepted in organizational behaviour research for examining indirect relationships among psychological constructs (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 4. Data Analysis Plan

Analysis Technique	Purpose	Reference
Descriptive Statistics	Examine data distribution and central tendency	Hair et al. (2019)
Correlation Analysis	Examine relationships among variables	Hair et al. (2019)
Hierarchical Regression	Test direct effects	Baron & Kenny (1986)
Mediation Analysis	Test indirect effects	Hayes (2013)

### 5. Data Analysis and Results

This section presents the results of statistical analyses conducted to examine the relationships among servant leadership, work meaningfulness, and employee engagement. Data analysis was performed using hierarchical regression and mediation analysis procedures consistent with established multivariate analysis guidelines (Hair et al., 2019). Prior to hypothesis testing, preliminary data screening was conducted to ensure the suitability of the dataset for analysis.

#### 5.1 Preliminary Data Screening

The dataset was examined for missing values, outliers, and normality assumptions. Cases with excessive missing responses were removed prior to analysis. Skewness and kurtosis values were within acceptable ranges, indicating that the data approximated normal distribution (Hair et al., 2019). Multicollinearity diagnostics were assessed using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, all of which were below the recommended threshold of 5, indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern.

#### 5.2 Reliability Analysis

Internal consistency reliability of the measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. All constructs demonstrated reliability values above the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency among measurement items (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Table 1. Reliability Analysis

Variable	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Servant Leadership	7	0.91
Work Meaningfulness	6	0.88
Employee Engagement	9	0.90

### 5.3 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine relationships among study variables. The results indicated significant positive relationships among servant leadership, work meaningfulness, and employee engagement. The findings provide preliminary support for the proposed hypotheses and are consistent with prior research linking supportive leadership and meaningful work with engagement outcomes (Allan et al., 2019; Eva et al., 2019).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1.Servant Leadership	3.72	0.64	1		
2.Work Meaningfulness	3.68	0.59	.56**	1	
3.Employee Engagement	3.75	0.61	.60**	.63**	1

\*\*p < .01

### 5.4 Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to test the direct and mediating relationships among variables. In Model 1, servant leadership was entered as the predictor of employee engagement. In Model 2, work meaningfulness was introduced to examine its additional explanatory power and mediating effect. The results indicate that servant leadership significantly predicts employee engagement. When work meaningfulness was added to the model, the effect of servant leadership decreased but remained significant, indicating partial mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Hayes, 2013).

Table 3. Hierarchical Regression Results

Variables	Model 1	Model 2
Servant Leadership	.48***	.24***
Work Meaningfulness	—	.39***
R <sup>2</sup>	.29	.53
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	—	.24

\*\*\*p < .001

## 5.5 Mediation Analysis

Mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether work meaningfulness mediates the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement. The indirect effect of servant leadership on employee engagement through work meaningfulness was statistically significant, supporting the proposed mediation hypothesis. The results are consistent with prior studies suggesting that meaningful work serves as an important psychological mechanism linking leadership behaviour to engagement outcomes (Rosso et al., 2010; Allan et al., 2019).

Table 4. Mediation Analysis Results

Relationship	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Result
SL → EE	.24***	.18**	Partial Mediation

## 6. Discussion

The primary objective of the present study was to examine the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement and to investigate the mediating role of work meaningfulness. The findings indicate that servant leadership positively influences employee engagement, supporting prior research suggesting that leadership behaviours emphasizing employee development and support enhance engagement outcomes (Eva et al., 2019; Walumbwa et al., 2010). Servant leaders create environments characterized by trust, empowerment, and ethical conduct, which strengthen employees' emotional attachment to their work roles.

The results further demonstrate that work meaningfulness significantly predicts employee engagement. Consistent with meaningful work theory, employees who perceive their work as purposeful and valuable are more likely to invest cognitive and emotional energy in their roles (May et al., 2004; Steger et al., 2012). Meaningful work enhances intrinsic motivation and strengthens psychological involvement, leading to higher levels of engagement.

Importantly, the findings confirm the mediating role of work meaningfulness in the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement. This suggests that leadership behaviour influences engagement not only directly but also through employees' interpretation of the significance and purpose of their work. Servant leaders help employees understand how their contributions create value, thereby strengthening meaningful work perceptions and engagement levels. These findings extend prior literature by integrating leadership and motivational perspectives in explaining engagement outcomes and highlight the importance of purpose-driven leadership practices in contemporary organizations.

## 7. Limitations and Future Research

Despite providing meaningful theoretical and practical contributions, the present study is subject to certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study adopted a cross-sectional research design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships among servant leadership, work meaningfulness, and employee engagement. Although the findings support the proposed theoretical relationships, future research may employ longitudinal or time-lagged

research designs to better examine causal mechanisms and changes in employee perceptions over time (Hair et al., 2019).

Second, the study relied on self-reported data collected from employees, which may introduce the possibility of common method bias despite procedural remedies such as anonymity assurance and mixed ordering of questionnaire items (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Future studies may benefit from collecting data from multiple sources, including supervisor ratings or objective performance indicators, to strengthen the validity of findings.

Third, the study focused primarily on employees working in knowledge-intensive and service-oriented organizations. While these sectors are appropriate for examining engagement and meaningful work experiences, the generalizability of findings to manufacturing or public-sector contexts may be limited. Future research may replicate the model across diverse industries and cultural settings to enhance external validity.

Fourth, the present study examined work meaningfulness as the primary mediating mechanism linking servant leadership and employee engagement. However, employee attitudes and behaviours are often influenced by multiple psychological mechanisms simultaneously. Future research may incorporate additional mediators such as psychological empowerment, job crafting, or organizational identification to provide a more comprehensive understanding of engagement processes (Rosso et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2012).

Finally, future research may also examine potential moderating variables such as organizational culture, leader–member exchange, or individual personality differences that may influence the strength of relationships among servant leadership, meaningful work, and engagement. Examining boundary conditions would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of leadership effectiveness in different organizational contexts.

## **8. Conclusion**

The present study examined the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement and investigated the mediating role of work meaningfulness. The findings demonstrate that servant leadership plays a significant role in enhancing employee engagement both directly and indirectly through meaningful work experiences. Employees who perceive their work as purposeful and aligned with broader organizational goals are more likely to invest cognitive, emotional, and physical energy into their work roles.

By integrating social exchange theory and meaningful work theory, the study contributes to organizational behaviour literature by providing a comprehensive explanation of how leadership behaviour influences engagement through psychological mechanisms. The results highlight that engagement is not solely driven by organizational policies or job characteristics but also by leadership practices that help employees understand the significance and impact of their work

From a practical perspective, organizations seeking to enhance employee engagement should focus on developing servant leadership capabilities and creating work environments that foster purpose and meaning. Leaders who emphasize employee growth, ethical conduct, and value alignment can strengthen employees' sense of meaningfulness, ultimately leading to higher

engagement and improved organizational outcomes. The study therefore underscores the importance of purpose-driven leadership in promoting sustainable employee engagement in contemporary organizations.

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