



Employee Perspectives on the Implementation of Servant Leadership in a Local Automotive Company in Indonesia: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

The dynamic transformation of the business environment has encouraged organizations to adopt leadership models that are flexible and human-centered. This study examines the implementation of servant leadership from the perspective of employees in a local automotive company operating in Bandar Lampung, Indonesia. Rooted in Greenleaf's (1970) framework, servant leadership emphasizes leaders' commitment to serving employees through ten core characteristics, including listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to employee growth, and community building. This research employs a qualitative phenomenological approach with a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis, and were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2020). The findings reveal that servant leadership is only partially implemented within the organization, with four characteristics conceptualization, foresight, healing, and community building being consistently practiced. Key barriers to full implementation include the predominance of indirect communication patterns, a stronger emphasis on short-term business targets over human resource development, and the absence of systematic leadership training programs. The study concludes that the application of servant leadership in non-corporate local firms requires contextual adaptation, particularly in organizations characterized by family-oriented management structures and the socio-cultural dynamics of Indonesian business practices. These findings contribute to the servant leadership literature by highlighting the contextual limitations and practical challenges of implementing human-centered leadership models in small and medium-sized enterprises in emerging economies.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Employee Perspective, Local Company, Qualitative Case Study, Indonesia

1. Introduction

The accelerating pace of change in contemporary business environments has compelled organizations to reconsider traditional leadership models and adopt approaches that emphasize flexibility, ethics, and human-centered management. Beyond strategic planning and operational efficiency, organizational success increasingly depends on leadership styles that foster trust, engagement, and sustainable employee development. In this context, leadership approaches grounded in empathy, service, and interpersonal relationships have gained growing scholarly and practical attention.

Employees constitute a critical organizational asset, particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), where close interpersonal interactions and informal communication structures often shape daily operations. Leadership styles that prioritize employee well-being, empowerment, and personal growth are therefore especially relevant in such organizational settings. One leadership paradigm that aligns closely with these principles is servant leadership, which conceptualizes leaders primarily as servants to their followers rather than as authority figures exercising hierarchical control.

Originally articulated by Greenleaf (1977), servant leadership emphasizes leaders' moral responsibility to serve employees through behaviors such as listening, empathy, awareness, stewardship, and commitment to individual growth. Subsequent conceptual refinements, notably by Spears (2020), have operationalized servant leadership into ten core characteristics that capture its humanistic and relational orientation. Empirical studies have demonstrated that servant leadership is associated with positive organizational outcomes, including higher job satisfaction, organizational commitment, trust in leadership, and improved performance (Liden et al., 2021; Eva et al., 2023).

Despite the growing body of research on servant leadership, existing studies are predominantly situated in large organizations, public institutions, or formal corporate environments. Empirical evidence from local, non-corporate firms particularly family-oriented SMEs in emerging economies remains limited. This gap is noteworthy, as leadership practices in such organizations are often shaped by informal authority, intergenerational dynamics, and culturally embedded norms that may influence how servant leadership is interpreted and enacted in practice.

Recent studies in the Indonesian context have begun to explore servant leadership in specific sectors, such as education and manufacturing, reporting its positive influence on employee motivation, commitment, and performance (Permatasari et al., 2024; Yuzalmi et al., 2024; Zahra et al., 2024). However, these studies largely rely on quantitative approaches and focus on outcome relationships, offering limited insight into how servant leadership is experienced, perceived, and selectively practiced at the organizational level. In particular, the extent to which the core dimensions of servant leadership are fully or partially implemented in local business settings remains underexplored.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the implementation of servant leadership from the perspective of employees in a local automotive service company in Indonesia. The organization represents a typical non-corporate SME characterized by a relatively flat organizational structure, intensive face-to-face interactions between leaders and employees, and family-oriented management practices. Such a context provides a rich empirical setting for examining how servant leadership principles are translated into everyday leadership behaviors and how employees interpret these practices within their work experiences.

Using a qualitative phenomenological case study approach, this research seeks to capture employees' lived experiences and perceptions of servant leadership within their organizational context. Rather than assessing servant leadership solely as a prescriptive ideal, the study explores which dimensions of servant leadership are meaningfully enacted, which are constrained, and what organizational factors shape these outcomes. By doing so, this study contributes to the servant leadership literature in three ways. First, it extends empirical understanding of servant leadership in SMEs and local firms in emerging economies. Second, it highlights the contextual and cultural factors that mediate the application of servant leadership in family-oriented organizations. Third, it provides practical insights for leaders seeking to adapt human-centered leadership models to non-corporate business environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Leadership and Human-Centered Management

Leadership has long been conceptualized as the process through which individuals influence, motivate, and guide others toward the achievement of organizational goals. Contemporary leadership theories have evolved beyond trait- and behavior-based approaches to emphasize relational, ethical, and human-centered dimensions of leadership. Modern leadership paradigms including transformational, authentic, and servant leadership highlight the importance of empowerment, shared vision, and the development of followers as central elements of effective leadership.

Empirical research consistently demonstrates that leadership style plays a crucial role in shaping employee motivation and performance. Studies conducted in Indonesian organizational contexts indicate that leadership and work motivation jointly explain a substantial proportion of employee performance variance, underscoring the interdependent relationship between leadership behavior and employee engagement. These findings reinforce the relevance of leadership models that prioritize intrinsic motivation and employee development, particularly in labor-intensive service and manufacturing sectors.

2.2. Conceptual Foundations of Servant Leadership

Servant leadership was originally articulated by Greenleaf as a leadership philosophy grounded in a fundamental desire to serve others before exercising authority. This perspective reframes leadership as a moral and relational practice rather than a positional function. Subsequent scholars have expanded this conceptualization by emphasizing servant leadership as a holistic approach to organizing work, sharing power, and fostering individual and collective growth.

Contemporary definitions converge on several core principles of servant leadership, including empathy, authenticity, ethical behavior, empowerment, and community building. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that servant leadership represents a distinct leadership construct with robust explanatory power for employee well-being and organizational outcomes. Rather than focusing solely on performance metrics, servant leadership emphasizes the long-term development of employees and the creation of supportive organizational environments.

2.3. Dimensions and Characteristics of Servant Leadership

The operationalization of servant leadership has been advanced through several multidimensional frameworks. One influential model identifies ten core characteristics, including listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to employee growth, and community building. These characteristics collectively capture the relational, ethical, and future-oriented nature of servant leadership.

Alternative measurement models have further refined servant leadership into validated dimensions such as emotional healing, empowerment, ethical behavior, conceptual skills, accountability, humility, and stewardship. Although these models differ in structure, they consistently emphasize the leader's role in supporting employee well-being, enabling autonomy, and fostering trust-based relationships. Importantly, empirical studies suggest that servant leadership dimensions may not be uniformly enacted in practice, with certain characteristics being more salient or feasible depending on organizational context.

2.4. Perspective in Leadership Research

The employee perspective has gained increasing importance in leadership research, as employees are the primary recipients of leadership behavior and directly experience its effects in daily work interactions. Assessing leadership from the viewpoint of employees provides a more grounded and less biased understanding of leadership practices than leader self-reports alone. Employees' perceptions capture how leadership behaviors are interpreted, internalized, and translated into motivation, satisfaction, and commitment.

Research indicates that employee-centered assessments of leadership offer critical insights into relational dynamics, communication quality, and perceived fairness within organizations. In qualitative leadership studies, the employee perspective is particularly valuable for uncovering implicit norms, informal practices, and contextual constraints that may not be evident through quantitative measurement instruments.

2.5. Organizational Context and the Implementation of Servant Leadership

The implementation of servant leadership is highly context-dependent and shaped by organizational culture, structure, and resource availability. Organizational cultures that emphasize hierarchy, control, and authority may be less conducive to servant leadership practices, which prioritize equality, dialogue, and empowerment. In contrast, flatter organizational structures and relationally oriented cultures may facilitate the enactment of servant leadership behaviors.

Several studies identify key enabling factors for servant leadership implementation, including top management support, leader values and competencies, organizational learning mechanisms, and alignment between servant leadership principles and organizational culture. Conversely, barriers to implementation frequently include rigid hierarchical structures, limited leadership training, resource constraints, and resistance to change from both leaders and employees.

In the Indonesian context, cultural norms emphasizing respect for authority, conflict avoidance, and social harmony present both opportunities and challenges for servant leadership. While these norms may support relational sensitivity and collective orientation, they can also inhibit open dialogue and participatory decision-making. Empirical evidence suggests that servant leadership practices may be perceived as weak or ineffective when they conflict with entrenched expectations of authoritative leadership, particularly in traditional or family-oriented organizations.

Leadership practices in local and entrepreneurial business contexts are often shaped by informal structures, resource constraints, and owner-centered decision making. Studies on entrepreneurial retailing in Indonesia suggest that organizational competitiveness in local firms relies not only on formal strategies but also on managerial practices embedded in daily interactions and value chain coordination (Sakti et al., 2022). This contextual characteristic reinforces the need to examine servant leadership as a situationally adapted practice rather than a universally implemented leadership model.

Additional challenges include the risk of leader burnout, as servant leaders may experience tension between organizational demands and their commitment to serving employee needs. Without adequate organizational support and leadership development programs, servant leadership may become unsustainable in high-pressure business environments. Resistance from alternative leadership styles within the same organization can further complicate the consistent application of servant leadership principles.

2.6. Research Gap

Although servant leadership has been extensively studied, existing research is predominantly concentrated in large organizations and relies heavily on quantitative designs that examine outcome relationships. There remains limited qualitative evidence on how servant leadership is interpreted and selectively implemented in local, non-corporate firms, particularly in emerging economies. Moreover, prior studies often treat servant leadership as a unified construct, overlooking the uneven enactment of its dimensions within specific organizational contexts.

Addressing these limitations, the present study adopts a qualitative, employee-centered approach to explore the implementation of servant leadership in a local automotive service company in Indonesia. By examining employees' lived experiences, this study seeks to illuminate the contextual dynamics, cultural influences, and organizational constraints that shape the practice of servant leadership in non-corporate business environments.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a phenomenological perspective to explore employees' lived experiences and interpretations of servant leadership practices within their organizational context. A phenomenological approach is appropriate because it enables an in-depth understanding of how individuals perceive, experience, and assign meaning to leadership behaviors in everyday work settings (Creswell, 2021).

The study is further framed as a single case study focusing on a local automotive service company in Bandar Lampung, Indonesia. A case study approach allows for an intensive and contextualized examination of servant leadership as it is enacted in a specific organizational environment, particularly within a non-corporate, family-oriented firm (Yin, 2020).

3.2. Research Context and Participants

The research was conducted in a medium-sized local automotive service company operating in Bandar Lampung, Indonesia. The organization represents a non-corporate business characterized by a relatively flat organizational structure and frequent direct interactions between leaders and employees. Such organizational features provide a suitable context for observing and interpreting servant leadership practices from the employee perspective.

Participants consisted of employees and managerial staff who were directly involved in daily operational activities and leadership interactions. Informants were selected purposively based on their roles, tenure, and direct experience with organizational leadership practices. This sampling strategy ensured that participants were able to provide rich and relevant insights into the implementation of servant leadership within the organization.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected using multiple qualitative techniques to enhance depth and credibility through methodological triangulation. The primary data collection methods included in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis.

3.3.1. In-Depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture participants' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of servant leadership practices. This interview format allowed the researcher to explore predefined themes while maintaining flexibility to follow emergent issues raised by participants (Creswell, 2020). Interview questions focused on leadership behaviors, communication patterns, decision-making processes, and employee experiences related to empowerment, empathy, and organizational support.

3.3.2. Non-Participant Observation

Non-participant observation was employed to obtain firsthand insights into leadership practices and workplace interactions without the researcher's direct involvement in organizational activities. Observations focused on leader-employee interactions, communication styles, decision-making processes, and behavioral indicators associated with servant leadership, such as listening, empathy, empowerment, and support for employee development. Field notes were recorded systematically to capture contextual details and interaction dynamics.

3.3.3. Document Analysis

Document analysis was used to complement interview and observational data. Relevant organizational documents, including company profiles, organizational structures, internal procedures, and activity records, were examined to provide contextual background and support data triangulation.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles et al. (2020), which involves an iterative process of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection to allow emerging insights to inform subsequent data gathering.

Data reduction involved selecting, simplifying, and organizing raw data obtained from interviews, observations, and documents. Relevant codes and categories were developed to capture recurring themes related to servant leadership practices. Data display was achieved through narrative descriptions, thematic matrices, and illustrative quotations, facilitating pattern recognition and interpretive analysis. Finally, conclusions were drawn by identifying consistent themes and relationships across data sources, with continuous verification against empirical evidence.

3.5. Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, several strategies were employed. Credibility was enhanced through data triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents, as well as member checking, whereby preliminary interpretations were shared with selected participants for validation. Dependability was supported by maintaining a clear audit trail documenting research procedures and analytical decisions. Confirmability was addressed by grounding interpretations in empirical data and minimizing researcher bias through reflective field notes. These strategies collectively strengthen the reliability and validity of the study's findings.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study based on employees' lived experiences of servant leadership practices within the organization. Guided by the servant leadership framework proposed by Spears (2020), the analysis reveals that servant leadership is implemented selectively rather than holistically. Four dimensions conceptualization, foresight, healing, and community building emerge as consistently enacted, while the remaining dimensions are either weakly implemented or structurally constrained.

4.1. Selective Implementation of Servant Leadership Practices

4.1.1. Indirect Listening and Limited Two-Way Communication

Listening is widely recognized as a foundational element of servant leadership. The findings indicate that employee voices are acknowledged; however, listening practices are predominantly mediated through intermediaries, such as human resource personnel or managers. Direct communication between employees and the organizational leader occurs infrequently, largely due to the leader's limited physical presence in the workplace.

This pattern suggests that indirect listening is shaped by both structural and cultural factors. Structurally, the leader's limited availability necessitates delegation of communication through managerial intermediaries. Culturally, this practice is reinforced by the Indonesian organizational context, where hierarchical norms and the tendency to avoid direct confrontation with authority figures may discourage employees from engaging in open, direct dialogue with top leadership. As a result, listening is enacted procedurally rather than relationally, fulfilling informational functions while limiting the reciprocal interaction emphasized in servant leadership theory.

4.1.2. Empathy and Emotional Healing as Situational Practices

Empathy and emotional healing are perceived positively by employees, particularly in situations involving health concerns or workplace conflicts. Leadership responses in these situations indicate a capacity for emotional sensitivity and professional conflict resolution. However, the healing dimension is enacted primarily in a reactive manner, emerging only after problems or tensions become visible.

From a servant leadership perspective, such reactive healing fulfills short-term emotional stabilization but falls short of fostering sustained psychological well-being. To shift healing toward a more proactive orientation, the organization could institutionalize regular well-being check-ins, provide basic training for managers in emotional support and conflict prevention, and create informal spaces for employees to voice concerns before they escalate into conflicts. Proactive healing practices would allow servant leadership to function not only as a crisis response mechanism but also as a preventive and developmental leadership approach.

4.1.3. Awareness through Delegated Monitoring

The awareness dimension is reflected through delegated monitoring mechanisms rather than continuous direct engagement. Employees noted that leaders remain informed about workplace conditions through managerial reports and digital communication platforms when not physically present.

While this approach allows leaders to maintain situational awareness, it also highlights a reliance on hierarchical intermediaries. From a servant leadership standpoint, awareness achieved through delegation maintains operational oversight but limits opportunities for leaders to engage empathetically with employees' lived experiences. This finding supports prior research emphasizing that awareness in servant leadership is most effective when accompanied by relational presence and direct interaction.

4.2. Strong Future Orientation: Conceptualization and Foresight

Among all servant leadership dimensions, conceptualization and foresight are the most consistently implemented. Employees demonstrated a clear understanding of organizational vision, long-term objectives, and strategic direction. Regular briefings and team discussions serve as mechanisms through which leadership communicates future-oriented goals and prepares employees for organizational challenges.

These findings suggest that the leader adopts a strategic leadership orientation aligned with the conceptual and anticipatory dimensions of servant leadership. By articulating long-term goals and encouraging collective preparedness, leadership fosters shared purpose and organizational coherence. This result is consistent with previous studies indicating that visionary clarity is often more feasible to implement than relational or developmental dimensions in SMEs.

4.3. Weak Stewardship and Limited Commitment to Employee Development

In contrast, stewardship and commitment to employee growth emerge as notably weak dimensions. Employees reported limited awareness of leadership accountability mechanisms and expressed uncertainty regarding leaders' responsibility for long-term employee welfare. Most notably, there is an absence of structured training, mentoring, or career development programs.

This lack of investment in human capital development reflects a leadership orientation that prioritizes short-term operational targets over employee growth. Such findings resonate with studies in local and family-oriented firms, where resource constraints and performance pressures often limit the institutionalization of servant leadership practices. The absence of systematic development initiatives represents a critical divergence from servant leadership principles, which emphasize long-term investment in people as a core leadership responsibility.

4.4. Building Community through Social Cohesion Activities

Building community is another dimension that is consistently enacted. Employees described regular social and cultural activities, including annual celebrations and communal gatherings, that foster interpersonal bonds and collective identity. Leadership participation in these events reinforces a sense of inclusivity and shared belonging.

These findings suggest that community-building practices are culturally congruent within the Indonesian organizational context, where collectivism and social harmony are highly valued. Unlike empowerment or participatory decision-making, community-oriented activities are more readily accepted and easier to implement without disrupting existing hierarchical norms.

4.5. Contextual Interpretation and Theoretical Implications

Overall, the findings demonstrate that servant leadership in this organization is not adopted as a comprehensive leadership philosophy but rather as a selective set of practices shaped by organizational structure, leadership availability, and cultural expectations. Strategic and relationally "safe" dimensions such as vision articulation and community building are more readily implemented, while empowerment-oriented and developmental dimensions face structural and cultural constraints.

These results contribute to servant leadership literature by highlighting the contextual nature of leadership implementation in non-corporate SMEs. In emerging economy contexts, servant leadership appears to require adaptive translation rather than direct transplantation from Western conceptual models. The partial enactment observed in this study underscores the importance of aligning servant leadership principles with organizational realities, resource availability, and cultural norms.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the implementation of servant leadership from the employee perspective within a local, non-corporate automotive company in Indonesia. The findings demonstrate that servant leadership is not adopted as a comprehensive leadership philosophy but rather implemented selectively and contextually. Of the ten servant leadership characteristics proposed by Spears (2020), only four conceptualization, foresight, healing, and community building are consistently enacted, while the remaining dimensions are weakly implemented or largely absent.

The partial implementation of servant leadership is shaped by several organizational and contextual factors. Indirect communication structures limit reciprocal leader-employee dialogue, reducing opportunities for active listening and empowerment. Moreover, a strong emphasis on short-term business targets constrains leadership commitment to employee development, resulting in minimal investment in structured training, mentoring, and career progression. Although social activities contribute to a sense of community, these initiatives remain largely symbolic and have yet to cultivate a strong sense of psychological ownership or sustained employee engagement.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study reinforces the argument that servant leadership is inherently context dependent. While prior literature highlights the positive outcomes of servant leadership for employee satisfaction, commitment, and performance, the present findings indicate that such benefits are unlikely to materialize when servant leadership practices are fragmented and inconsistently applied. This study thus extends servant leadership theory by illustrating how organizational structure, cultural norms, and resource priorities shape the selective enactment of servant leadership dimensions in small and medium-sized enterprises within emerging economies.

Practically, the findings suggest that local firms seeking to adopt servant leadership must move beyond symbolic practices and align leadership behaviors with systematic human resource development. Establishing direct and structured communication channels, introducing basic leadership and skills training programs, and clarifying employee development pathways may enhance the effectiveness of servant leadership practices without undermining existing organizational hierarchies. Importantly, servant leadership in family-oriented businesses may benefit from gradual and adaptive implementation rather than wholesale adoption of Western leadership models.

This study is not without limitations. As a single qualitative case study, the findings are context-specific and do not aim for statistical generalization. Future research may employ mixed-method or comparative designs across multiple local firms to strengthen generalizability while preserving contextual depth. Further studies could also explore intergenerational leadership dynamics and culturally grounded leadership models that complement servant leadership in non-corporate organizational settings.

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