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Servant Leadership and Employee Engagement: A Qualitative Study

Alice Canavesi[1] · **Eliana Minelli[1,2]**

Abstract

Servant Leadership is a holistic approach whereby leaders act with morality, showing great concern for the company's stakeholders and engaging followers in multiple dimensions, such as emotional, relational and ethical, to bring out their full potential and empower them to grow into what they are capable of becoming. Servant leadership has been linked through various mediators to positive individual and collective outcomes, including behavioral, attitudinal, and performance. Among follower attitudinal outcomes, the present study aims at deepening the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement in a large Italian consulting firm; first, by assessing the implementation of a servant leadership approach through a survey based on SL-7; second, by qualitatively investigating the servant leadership experiences lived by junior employees and their influence on individual engagement though a semi-structured questionnaire. The findings of the study suggest that employee engagement is positively influenced by servant leadership through various mediators, either leader-centered, such as empowerment, team-centered, such as team cohesion, organization-centered, such as positive organizational climate, job-centered, such as challenging tasks, and employee-centered, such as proactive personality. Some factors also emerged to hinder the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement, particularly those related to the working environment: namely, high pressure, poor work-life balance and remote-working. The article also provides theoretical and practical implications and identifies potential areas for future research on servant leadership.

Keywords Servant leadership · Employee engagement · SL-7 · Qualitative study

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Introduction

Servant Leadership

In response to negative outcomes emerging from leadership styles associated with the promotion of the leader's self-interest, moral-based leaderships have recently emerged with the aim of promoting integrity and prioritizing the support and development of followers (Liden et al., 2015). Servant Leadership is a holistic approach whereby leaders act with morality, showing great concern for the company's stakeholders (Shirin, 2015) and engaging followers in multiple dimensions, such as emotional, relational and ethical, to bring out their full potential and empower them to grow into what they are capable of becoming (Eva et al, 2019). In other words, leaders, instead of pursuing their self-interest, focus on investing in personal relationships with employees and other company stakeholders to increase trust, loyalty and commitment. Key qualities of servant leaders are humility, ensuring followers' development, listening, sharing in decision-making, behaving ethically and promoting a sense of community (Jit et al., 2016). The idea is that when followers' needs and well-being are prioritized, they are able to achieve their goals, and this flows upward so that the leader's and the organizational goals are met in turn (Kohntopp & McCann, 2018). Servant leadership has been linked through various mediators to positive individual and collective outcomes, including behavioural, such as organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB) and proactive behaviour (Bande et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2014; Hu & Liden, 2011; Liden et al., 2015; Walumbwa et al., 2010; Zhao et al., 2016) attitudinal, such as engagement and job satisfaction (Amah, 2018; Chan & Mak, 2014; Coetzer et al., 2017; Mayer et al., 2008; Schneider & George, 2011; Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2014; van Dierendonck et al., 2013), and performance, such as team performance and innovative behaviour (Hu & Liden, 2011; Krog & Govender, 2015; Panaccio et al., 2015; Rasheed et al., 2016; Schaubroeck et al., 2011; Song et al., 2015). For these reasons, several companies, including some of those ranked by Forbes Magazine among the "best 100 to work for", such as Marriott, Starbucks, SAS and Zappos.com (Eva et al., 2019), foster an organizational climate based on service, ethics and healthy work relationships that significantly contribute to organizational success.

The concept of servant leadership is not new among both academics and practitioners, as it was introduced by Greenleaf in his essay "the servant as leader" (1970, 1977), where he argued that true leadership is synonymous with service, and servant leaders' highest priority is to serve others, namely employees, customers and the community. However, it has recently received growing consideration by scholars especially in the late 2010s. The literature on servant leadership can be divided into three main streams of research: a first stream focusing on its conceptual development, a second stream investigating its measures and its most relevant outcomes, and a most recent stream deepening these relationships to identify antecedents, mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions (Allen et al., 2016; Eva et al., 2019).

SL-7

In the second stream of research, different measures of servant leadership have been developed with the aim of testing its degree of implementation in a given organizational context. Eva et al (2019) identified 16 measures in extant literature and examined each of them

according to their relative theoretical and methodological rigour in construction and validation phases. They ended up recommending 3 out of 16 scales of servant leadership under study, including Liden et al.'s (2015) 7 item composite measure (SL-7). SL-7 consists in a shortened version of the global servant leadership measure of 28 items developed by Liden et al. (2008). As a multidimensional construct, it covers 7 different dimensions identified in servant leadership: 1) emotional healing, which addresses the leader's involvement in the follower's well-being and personal problems; 2) creating value for the community, which assesses the leader's concern towards the community surrounding the organization; 3) conceptual skills, which captures the leader's ability to deal with work problems and understand organizational goals, 4) empowering, which reflects the extent to which the leader delegates to followers entrusting them with autonomy and responsibility; 5) helping subordinates grow and succeed, which is related to the development of followers' full potential by the leader to help them grow into what they are capable of becoming; 6) putting subordinates first, which involves the leader's motivation to serve followers and prioritize their needs and well-being; 7) behaving ethically, which includes behaving with integrity, honesty and trustworthiness (Liden et al., 2015). The limited number of items (i.e. seven) makes this scale concise, while still valid and reliable, and does not introduce fatigue or boredom among respondents with a negative impact on quality. Even though SL-7 has already been validated and tested by scholars across various organizations (Karatepe et al., 2018; Lapointe & Vandenberghe, 2015; Tang et al., 2016), to the authors' knowledge, it has not yet been applied to the Italian cultural, economic and political context.

Employee Engagement

Servant leadership has been linked to several individual and collective outcomes including follower centred, leader centred, team centred and climate and organization centred. With regards to followers, three types of outcomes seem to be influenced by servant leaders: behavioural outcomes, attitudinal outcomes and performance outcomes (Eva et al., 2019). Among follower attitudinal outcomes, some scholars assessed a positive relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement (Coetzer et al., 2017; Ling et al., 2017; Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2014; van Dierendonck et al., 2013).

The term engagement was first mentioned by Kahn in 1990 in his article "Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work" (1990), where he stated that "in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances". Since his conceptualization, several authors have defined and measured the construct differently, to the point that nowadays there is little consistency around the term (Borah & Barua, 2018). Overall, employee engagement refers to a series of positive attitudes displayed by employees, such as passion for their work and organization, commitment and contribution to organizational success. Since the human capital represents one of the most important assets in an organization, leaders are challenged to identify those drivers that can either increase or decrease engagement. When employees are engaged, they become in fact more emotionally involved, loyal and productive, thus providing better customer service experiences, particularly in services-oriented firms (Carter & Baghurst, 2013; Keith, 2008). Disengaged employees, on the other hand, can negatively affect organizational performance through absenteeism, non-participation, poor customer service and an adverse approach towards colleagues (Carter & Baghurst, 2013). It is therefore essential for leaders to create a unique organizational culture based on ethics where they lead through service, meaning that

they collaborate with followers for the achievement of established organizational goals without imposing authoritative power.

When analysing the concept of employee engagement, an overlap of attributes emerges with respect to servant leadership, such as the fact that both constructs imply the emotional attachment of employees to their organization. This further suggests that servant leadership may have a positive influence on employee engagement.

Purpose of the Study

Although the concept of servant leadership is not recent, significant empirical research started after the seminal work by Ehrhart (2004) and mainly consisted in quantitative research conducted in the United States and China (Eva et al., 2019). Most studies have focused on quantitative analyses of the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement (e.g. Coetzer et al., 2017; Ling et al., 2017; Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2014; van Dierendonck et al., 2013). According to two recent literature reviews on the topic, very limited qualitative research is available on the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement (Eva et al., 2019). Thus, the present study aims at providing a complementary qualitative contribution in the Italian context, where the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement has been very little investigated. In particular, it addresses an organization where the servant leadership approach is likely to be adopted: a large and long-term oriented services firm (i.e. consulting), having several female leaders. Servant leadership has indeed been predominantly observed in organizations having some degree of permanence, with a long-term orientation (Kohntopp & McCann, 2018). Moreover, servant leadership, as a leadership style focused on serving others, is closely related to employees' service behaviours (Su et al., 2020). By providing guidance to their subordinates and inspiring them with vision, servant leaders can pass on to them their motivation to serve and help them grow into service-oriented employees (Greenleaf, 1970; Lemoine et al., 2018). Last but not least, the organization under study has been chosen as it has several female leaders compared to other consulting firms. Females differ from males in their moral reasoning modes, as they are more communal and affiliative (Eagly, 1987) and generally display higher relationship and caring characteristics (Butz & Lewis, 1996; Fridell et al., 2009). Overall, women are reported to show behaviours of altruistic calling, emotional healing, and organizational stewardship, which have been identified as central in servant leadership (Beck, 2014; de Rubio & Kiser, 2015; Politis & Politis, 2012). The fact of having several female leaders in the organization further increases the likelihood of producing a higher level of service to followers and creating a culture of help, humility and vision.

The purpose of the paper is therefore that of qualitatively investigating the servant leadership experiences lived through by employees and their influence on individual engagement in a typical large Italian consulting firm, by identifying the leader-centred, employee-centred, team-centred, job-centred and organization-centred drivers at the basis of the relationship between the two constructs. This will contribute to the body of knowledge on servant leadership and partly also to that on employee engagement.

Methods

To gain an initial understanding of the company and explore the existence of a servant leadership approach, a first preliminary qualitative analysis of the firm's secondary data and internal documentation was carried out, as well as three interviews to senior managers were conducted. With regards to secondary data, the firm's website as well as the intranet of the company, including a video of the Chief Executive Officer talking about the leadership fundamentals, were evaluated in the analysis. With regards to the interviews, three senior managers volunteered to take part in this preliminary analysis by responding to semi-structured questions aimed at investigating:

– whether the organizational structure was top-down or bottom-up and which degree of autonomy and responsibility was given to subordinates;
– what the main characteristics and values were that a leader should possess within the organizational context under study;
– what the role of the leader was with respect to the organizational objectives as well as to people needs (subordinates, final clients and other company's stakeholders);
– how employees were valued from both a personal and professional standpoint;
– what the risk appetite and the approach to innovation was.

Once the bases of a servant leadership approach were identified, the first part of the research was launched with two main objectives. First, it aimed at collecting the demographic variables of the participants (gender, role and length of service) as well as of their direct supervisor (gender and role) with multiple choice questions. Second, it aimed at assessing the degree of implementation of servant leadership (high, moderate, low, extremely low) in the selected consulting firm through the SL-7, a survey based on the servant leadership scale developed by Liden et al. (2015) and consisting of seven questions with a 7-point Likert scale.

The second part of the study was conducted on the basis of a qualitative and phenomenological design, with the aim of investigating the drivers through which servant leadership may influence employees' engagement. In particular, a semi-structured questionnaire consisting of three open-ended questions was distributed to determine the mediating mechanisms that can foster or hinder the relationship between the two constructs, as reported in Table 2.

According to the literature, mediating mechanisms fostering the positive relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement can be of four types: leader-centred, follower-centred, team-centred and finally climate and organization-centred (Eva et al., 2019).

The first question was developed on the basis of the extant literature (Carter & Baghurst, 2013) to investigate the leader-centred mechanisms that mediate the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement. The second question addressed the other three types of mechanisms mentioned above which could possibly foster employee engagement. The third question was developed to explore the existence of mediating mechanisms of the four different types that hinder the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement, which, to the authors' knowledge, has not been addressed in the literature so far.

Overall, the phenomenological design based on these three questions sought to identify the engagement level of the participants and how this was influenced by servant leadership.

Participants

The investigated firm is among the largest companies in the world, with more than 500,000 people employed in 80 different countries, and has ranked among the top ten management consulting firms by revenues in 2019 (CNN Money, 2011). When undertaking the study, according to the purpose of the research, only the Italian division headquartered in Milan was targeted. In Italy, the firm employs 17,000 people divided into three different practices: Technology Consulting, Business Process Operations and Strategy and Management Consulting. The last practice was addressed for the objective of the study, as it bases its core business on consulting services, whereas the other two practices are characterized by a working methodology and approach to clients which are not fully representative of consulting firms. In particular, within the Financial Services industry, the segment providing consulting services to banking groups, numbering 350 employees (250 junior resources and 100 senior resources), was selected for the analysis, due to the fact that it represents the key revenue contributor of the business. The main reason is that it is the most representative and heterogeneous segment in terms of gender and different seniority levels. In particular, junior resources (i.e. analysts, with a working experience between 0 and 3 years, and consultants, with a working experience between 3 and 6 years) were involved in the study. Thus, the present study used individuals as the unit of analysis.

Out of the 250 employees invited to participate, 159 completed both the survey and the questionnaire, with a response rate of about 64%. Eight surveys and the related questionnaires were discarded due to the fact that the answers to the semi-structured questions lacked content validity and were not connected to the purpose of the research. The final sample consisted of 151 junior employees, including 73 females (48%) and 78 males (52%). The majority of them (62%) were in the role of analysts, the entry level job, while the others were consultants. With regards to the length of service, 17% had been working in the company for less than a year, 60% for a period between 1 and 3 years and 23% for more than 3 years. With regards to their direct supervisor, 59% said they report to a man and 41% to a female, while the seniority of leaders was distributed as follows: 59% managers, 37% senior managers, 2% managing directors and 2% principal directors.

Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to the distribution of both surveys and questionnaires, confidentiality was ensured to all participants and the researcher asked for honest responses. Two URLs containing a web-based survey and a web-based questionnaire were provided to the participants via email. This method allowed for an electronic collection of data, which ensured the effectiveness of data entry and integration while reducing the time. Surveys and questionnaires were completed during a seven-week period.

An approach of theoretical coding was employed on survey data and questionnaire information to analyse the servant leadership practices shown by leaders and their influence on subordinates. The process of thematic analysis enabled to systematically analyse qualitative information by attributing explicit "codes" which captured the essence of observations, thus enhancing the clarity of results (Boyatzis, 1998). The manual coding procedure, compared to the use of automated or computerized software, allows for deeper insights into the meaning of words and themes identified (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009) and it is particularly precise for the detection of subtle themes. For this reason, it was preferred and

adopted together with the previous literature (Eva et al., 2019) for the generation of themes and subthemes. As a first step, data were transferred and listed in a proper worksheet (i.e. Excel), to have a clear display of the experiences of each participant in relation to their personal characteristics and those of their leaders. In the second step, the responses of participants were reviewed in order to eliminate unclear words or comments. From the third step on, the coding procedure started to be applied by taking notes on invariant constructs to identify recurring themes. In the fourth step, the meanings of themes were analysed individually and then compared together to detect subthemes. The following step consisted in gathering the demographic information of the sample as well as counting the occurrences of themes and subthemes in order to understand their relevance with respect to the object of the study. As a last step, some analyses were made through tables of statistics (i.e. pivot tables), with the aim of gaining an overview of participants' responses.

Data Validity, Reliability and Triangulation

The validity of data refers to how accurately data are measured, while reliability indicates the consistency of the research approach across different researchers and projects (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Gibbs et al., 2007). Even though confidentiality was assured at the beginning of the study, some factors could have influenced the findings.

Above all, participants could have felt pressured to participate in the survey and the questionnaire as they have been solicited by a company manager, who represented the company's entry point for the author. However, there was no direct interaction between the researcher and the respondents, thus reducing the possibility of bias; in fact, researchers who have little familiarity with a phenomenon tend to direct their attention to the manifest level (Boyatzis, 1998). Moreover, the survey and the open-ended questions employed for the purpose of the study may have been limited in investigating the mechanisms at the basis of the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement, compared to face-to-face interaction. Personal interviews and focus groups could have helped gain better insights on the topic. However, using a semi-structured questionnaire made it possible to reduce the risk of introducing the researchers' personal bias or prior knowledge in the data collected.

Data triangulation consists in "the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data or methods of data collection in descriptions and themes in qualitative research" (Creswell, 2005). Secondary data and internal documentation (i.e. intranet, internal annual surveys) on the leadership style implemented by the firm and on employee engagement helped triangulate the research findings, which were also confirmed by the preliminary interviews with senior managers. Additional objectivity was obtained by including a second researcher in the analysis, external to the company, who reviewed the transcripts of the questionnaires and the coding process.

Results

The analysis of secondary data, such as the company's website and intranet, allowed to identify some of the underpinnings of servant leadership. Personalizing in a truly human way, collaborating across the ecosystem and innovating for results were clearly mentioned as part of the firm's leadership DNA. Moreover, integrity (i.e. behaving ethically, inspiring trust and taking responsibility for actions), respect for the individual (i.e. valuing diversity

and fostering an open and inclusive environment), and stewardship (i.e. developing people, meeting the commitment to stakeholders and improving communities and the global environment) were clearly mentioned as the core values shaping the organizational culture. A statement from the CEO was the following: "Our people around the world share something: we care about what we do and the positive impact we generate on our clients and in the communities we live and work in. It's a personal matter for us."

The three interviews to senior managers revealed that the organizational context under study was bottom-up and based on the idea that all employees must be given the right amount of autonomy and responsibility to express their full potential and become what they are capable of becoming. The most important values for a leader included showing empathy, caring about people, empowering subordinates, leading by example and delegating. People were valued individually for what they truly were and their professional needs tended to be accommodated to increase their engagement level and their contribution to the achievement of organizational goals. The company embraced innovation based on individuals' diversity, proactiveness and cooperation. All these premises emerged in the preliminary analysis provide breeding ground for the implementation of a servant leadership approach, which was therefore tested in the following study.

The first part of the study intended to assess the degree to which leaders exhibited behaviours that are characteristic of servant leadership according to the employees' perspective. The survey based on the short scale of SL-7 developed by Liden et al. (2015) was used to measure each of the seven areas corresponding to a different servant leadership behaviour (i.e. emotional healing, creating value for the community, conceptual skills, empowering, helping subordinates grow and succeed, putting subordinates first, behaving ethically) through a 7-point Likert scale question. Once the responses of 151 employees were collected, the mean of every single dimension of the servant leadership scale adopted in the study was calculated. The scoring interpretation was the following: high range (with a mean between 5,75 and 7), moderate range (with a mean between 3,5 and 5,5), low range (with a mean between 2 and 3,25) and extremely low range (with a mean between 0 and 1,75). Surprisingly, all seven items scored high, having a mean between 5,75 and 7, as reported in Table 1. These results confirmed the insights gained through the preliminary analysis on the firm's secondary data and internal documentation, together with the interviews to senior managers, during which servant leadership traits and setting had already been observed.

Once a servant leadership practice was identified within the organizational context, the second part of the study was conducted. Servant leadership effects had already been linked

Table 1 SL-7 survey scoring

Likert scale / Dimension	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Mean
Conceptual skills	0	0	0	0	14	87	50	6,238
Helping subordinates grow and succeed	0	0	0	7	15	85	44	6,099
Emotional healing	0	2	2	2	16	82	47	6,086
Creating value for the community	0	0	1	6	12	85	47	6,132
Putting subordinates first	0	2	2	10	10	81	46	6,013
Empowering	0	1	0	4	15	69	62	6,232
Behaving ethically	0	0	0	5	10	76	60	6,265

Table 2 Research questions

RQ1	How does your leader motivate you at work and inspire you to do and accomplish more in your role?
RQ2	Which are other factors—related to your personality, your team and the organizational context—increasing your engagement?
RQ3	What about your leader and your working environment does not motivate you?

to employee engagement by previous literature (Bao et al., 2018; Carter & Baghurst, 2013; De Clercq et al., 2014). This was the starting point of the semi-structured questionnaire, with the final aim of deepening knowledge of the servant leadership experiences shared by employees and investigating the mechanisms that can foster or prevent their engagement (Table 2).

RQ1 (*How does your leader motivate you at work and inspire you to do and accomplish more in your role?*) sought to identify the factors through which leaders motivate employees to do and accomplish more in their role. According to Eva et al. (2019), some leader-centred mediators were identified and reported in Table 3, with their relative number of occurrences in employees' responses: empowerment, leader prototypicality, LMX, trust, communication arrangements and identification with the leader.

Empowerment is here conceived as a set of managerial practices aiming at increasing employees' autonomy, proactivity and responsibilities. Not surprisingly, it came out as the most significant theme affecting the level of employee engagement, with several subthemes emerging from responses.

Above all, junior resources claimed to be motivated by their leaders' encouragement to do their best on a daily basis, leveraging on their strengths and improving their weaknesses, with the aim of achieving better results. Below are some representative comments from employees:

- "My leader always pushes me to perform at my best";
- "She is really helping me accomplish more";
- "My leader is inspirational (…) encouraging the entire team to perform well".

Support from the leader to the individual and the team as a whole also emerged as a crucial empowerment factor increasing employee engagement. In particular, subordinates appreciated the fact that their leaders stood on the front line to provide them assistance when needed and helped them achieve their personal and professional goals. This aspect was emphasized in different ways:

Table 3 Theme occurrences in responses to RQ1

RQ1 mediating factors	Number of occurrences
Empowerment	113
Leader prototypically	86
LMX	71
Trust	63
Communication arrangements	38
Identification with the leader	32

- "He is always available to support when I ask for help and he gives me amazing advice in terms of daily routine management";
- "My leader is a focal point for the team since he is part of our daily work, supporting and taking key decisions together";
- "He is always ready to drive the group and to literally take care of you if needed. I think that these aspects match with the servant leadership definition".

Other important factors fuelling engagement were autonomy and responsibility. Employees valued the fact of feeling reliable and self-sufficient in managing their everyday activities, tasks and even the relationship with the client. Very often, these two mechanisms were interrelated and also emerged in combination with trust. This has been widely analysed in literature as a frequent moderator in the leader–follower relation (Eva et al., 2019), due to its fundamental role in fostering engagement. Here are some of the most significant statements:

- "I appreciate the way she gives me the freedom to manage my work as well as the relationship with the Client";
- "I feel confident and I perform better thanks to the independence I have when doing my job";
- "He is giving me trust and a lot of responsibility that makes me accomplish more and increases my overall motivation".

Finally, among the most relevant factors of empowerment, employees stressed the importance of undertaking new challenges on a daily basis, such as following new projects, carrying on different activities and serving more than one client. After all, providing a range of different tasks and creating variation are known to be excellent motivators for employees (Sabir, 2017).

Comments from participants reflected their willingness to get involved in various activities:

- "My leader motivates me by pushing me out of my comfort zone";
- "The challenges she gives me are increasing day-by-day";
- "He inspires me by involving me in interesting tasks".

Other behaviours shown by leaders in inspiring employees were, to a lesser extent, personal appreciation and recognition, the support of their ideas as well as a greater and more direct exposure with clients.

Leader prototypically is defined as the extent to which a leader's characteristics are representative of the characteristics of his/her group (Pierro et al., 2007). The higher the affinity, the more likely it is that individuals will have positive perceptions of the leader, thus increasing their willingness to change accordingly. Among the most recurring aspects cited by subordinates was the leader's personal commitment, namely the fact that the leader is very assiduous and shows a great dedication to work. This was confirmed as follows:

- "My leader is the first one in the office and the last one leaving the office";
- "My leader is a hard-worker and motivates me by keeping concentration and effort high in all daily tasks";
- "My senior manager (that I can consider my current leader) is what you call a go-to-guy: (…) he is incredible, and I can't still figure out where he gets all the energy he passes down to us";

- "My leader is inspirational in terms of commitment and team-work management. I feel I am more than achieving my professional goal thanks to this".

Another characteristic of the leader appreciated by employees was availability, which is fundamental, because when people feel that they can have personal access to their leaders, they are in turn more engaged (Catteeuw et al., 2007). Availability often came out in combination with the subthemes of personal and team support analysed before, as reported in the following statements:

- "My leader is a senior manager and he's really busy; regardless of his agenda, he is always available to help me going through my work";
- "He is available every time we need support or advice";
- "My leader is (…) always available for a hint/ quick help and ready to listen to each one of us";

The leadership and management style of supervisors also has a critical role with regards to employee engagement (Othman et al., 2017; Popli & Rizvi, 2016). The ability of a leader to guide a team and to effectively manage daily tasks and routines creates a positive climate that fosters employees' productive behaviour and sense of belonging to the organization (Liden et al, 2008). This is true especially when the adopted approach is supportive, inclusive and ethical. On the other hand, the lack of a clear leadership approach or a wrong management style can de-motivate employees, kill productivity, and lead to disengagement and turnover (Catteeuw et al., 2007; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). This aspect came up several times in employees' responses:

- "Working for the team is key when you are a leader and my manager puts this pillar into his managerial style and approach. This is inspirational because it makes all of us feel part of something important";
- "I like the way my leader applies his leadership style: first of all, he is always standing by our side until we have all completed our work; second, he is always ready to intervene in case we are following the wrong approach; finally, he supports us in case we have trouble with the client";
- "She is inspirational, as she can always manage tough situations";
- "I feel I am more than achieving my professional goal thanks to this kind of leadership that is devoted to supporting the team".

Additionally, some employees mentioned the importance of an approach oriented to action and the client, but also soft skills and enthusiasm shown by the leader.

Leader-Member exchange (LMX) focuses on the relationship developed between a leader and their subordinates, from both a conceptual and emotional standpoint. Its quality is predictive of outcomes at the individual, group and organizational level (Gerstner & Day, 1997), including employee engagement. The most recurring subthemes emerging from the questionnaire with regards to this point were guidance and leading by example. These behaviours make a leader an inspirational example for subordinates to follow, setting the standards for the right attitude at work and leading the team to the achievement of organizational goals. The most representative statements were:

- "He is always guiding the team without prevailing";

- "My senior manager represents a key focal point as well as an inspirational model when guiding the team";
- "She is a perfect example of how all junior resources should behave, work and perform";
- "He provides us with examples and guidance according to the job we have to perform".

A central aspect of servant leadership is stewardship, which was also found by the present study in the investigated organizational context, according to several respondents. Stewardship refers first and foremost to a commitment to serving the needs of others. The servant leader is distinguished from other leaders primarily by the motivation to serve his / her followers (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002), which relies on a feeling for people and a moral calling to help (Keith, 2008). By making the conscious choice of valuing others and behaving altruistically (Laub, 1999; Winston, 2004), servant leaders generate a shared vision of help and caring while providing employees with the freedom and resources to become servants themselves with respect to clients and the community. The implementation of servant leadership indeed creates the basis for an organizational culture where employees are committed to deliver a memorable customer experience (Carter & Baghurst, 2013). Some of the respondents reported:

- "My leader feels like the one that wants to serve, and this approach guides the team to feel really committed, hence perform highly and achieve professional goals";
- "I feel like we are all really focused in reaching (…) our professional goals, and to do so we are supported and guided by our managers who are there to serve us when we need";
- "She puts us above everything and this is great. We feel committed and part of something really important";
- "My leader makes sure that our highest needs are met".

The importance of having a positive interpersonal relationship with the leader was emphasized by more than one employee. This dimension involves the degree to which the leader is emotionally attached to his / her followers and cares about their personal problems and well-being. Thus, it requires some of the characteristics identified as critical to the development of servant leaders: listening, which also encompasses hearing one's own inner voice, showing empathy, to accept and recognize people for what they truly are, and healing, to help make whole those with whom they come in contact (Spears, 2010). Examples of employees' responses include:

- "I feel I can always rely on her, also after working hours";
- "He is always ready to literally take care of you if needed";
- "The positive relationship we developed motivates me and inspires me in my role".

Trust is a multidimensional construct representative of the level of confidence that one individual has in another's competence and his or her willingness to act in a fair, ethical and predictable manner (Cufaude, 1999; Maren et al., 1999; Nyhan & Marlowe, 1997). Servant-led organizations have been found to exhibit higher levels of both leader and organizational trust, which act as mediating mechanisms for several follower behavioural and attitudinal outcomes, such as engagement. Comments that can be considered representative are:

- "My leader (…) has high working standards and she never leaves anything behind. At the beginning this behaviour was complex for me to manage, but now I feel that her trust is helping me overcome the initial concern I had and perform even better";
- "I feel trusted and this gives me great stimuli to achieve my professional goals";
- "She puts a lot of trust in our work and this is inspiring for me".

With regards to communication arrangements, continuous feedback and tailor-made advice provided by the leader proved to be the most important factors triggering employee engagement. A one-to-one interaction aimed at learning more about each other and gaining insights on how to move the relationship forward, from both a personal and a professional standpoint, came out as a real stimulus for subordinates, as reported below:

- "I feel inspired by the fact that her feedback towards junior resources is continuous and important";
- "She tells me how to improve on my weaknesses and reinforce my strengths";
- "He is always available to support when I ask for help and he gives me amazing advice in terms of daily routine management, cutting-down of complex tasks and issues simplification".

Some respondents also mentioned straight forward communication as the basis for a relationship generating engagement.

The last theme emerging from RQ1 was identification with the leader, which is related to the sharing of objectives, attitudes and values to create an organizational culture where both leaders and followers unite to reach higher organizational goals. In particular, goal congruence, was the most recurring subtheme, with such statements as:

- "There is a strong goal congruence between what we have to deliver and how my manger wants us to act in order to achieve the project objectives";
- "We both have the same mid-term professional goals".

Moreover, according to subordinates, leaders have to act in a manner that is both inspirational and an example for their followers, thus becoming key-role models to aspire to, as shown in the following comments:

- "My senior manager represents a key focal point for the team as well as an inspirational model when delivering and guiding the team";
- "I feel like my work is always at a higher level when helped and supported by my senior manager. This makes me think he is really making the difference".

RQ2 (*Which are other factors—related to your personality, your team and the organizational context—increasing your engagement?*) explored those factors of servant leadership, other than leader-centred, that may influence employees' engagement. On the basis of the previous literature (Eva et al., 2019), the mediating mechanisms were divided into: team-centred, organization-centred, job-centred and employee-centred. In Table 4, they are listed on the basis of their impact on engagement, with the number of occurrences in employees' responses.

Factors related to the team clearly emerged as the most significant in influencing the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement. In particular, the most commonly recurring topic was team cohesion, which refers to a dynamic process where

Table 4 Theme occurrences in responses to RQ2

RQ2 mediating factors	Number of occurrences
Team-centred	116
Organization-centred	61
Job-centred	34
Employee-centred	31

forces bind members to each other so that the team sticks together and remains united in the pursuit of common objectives (Carron et al., 1989; Guzzo & Shea, 1992). According to the similarity–attraction perspective, the perception of similarities in personality, attitudes and values increases the level of attraction among team members (O'Reilly, 1989; O'Reilly et al., 1991). This factor was stressed by several employees:

- "Spending time with the team outside work and sharing personal issues with them is motivating";
- "The team is really united and we all feel like one. We are part of something that moves and grows together";
- "Team cohesion is something impressive and is fostered by my leader".

Other factors reported by respondents, to a lesser extent, were team support, team efficacy and group identification.

At the organizational level, a positive organizational climate and inclusive organizational practices are very likely to influence the effectiveness of servant leadership on employee engagement. Organizational climate is a multi-dimensional concept that refers to those aspects of the environment that are consciously perceived by organizational members (Armstrong, 2003). Many participants reported that the fact of perceiving a positive organizational climate increased their commitment to work. Inclusive organizational practices empower employees, promote equitable and more humane workplaces, and are more responsive with regards to various societal expectations (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016), thus reflecting the servant leadership philosophy. Below are some of the most significant statements supporting this sub-theme:

- "I like the overall organizational climate that is inclusive and positive";
- "Enthusiasm and positive working environment motivate me";
- "The internal supportive environment and the inclusive organizational practices are inspiring".

Other emerging subthemes were a climate based on trust and a culture focused on valuing people.

In relation to the characteristics of the job itself, its content, in terms of tasks and activities, a relevant aspect proved to be fuelling employee engagement. In particular, many respondents claimed they felt really engaged by the work topics, which were described as dynamic, diversified and challenging:

- "My current project assignment is of great interest to me";
- "Challenging tasks and goals are what I look for";

- "We deal with different opportunities and challenges everyday".

Finally, when dealing with possible employee-centred mediators, the proactive personality and motivational orientation of the follower may play a major role. Proactive personality is the personality of those who tend to take control of the environment, by seeking out opportunities, showing initiative and persevering to bring about meaningful change (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Parker & Collins, 2010). Previous literature has already demonstrated that proactive personality influences how followers respond to servant leaders (Newman et al., 2017) and is in turn influenced by servant leadership itself (Panaccio et al., 2015; Song & Lee, 2020), leading to a series of positive individual outcomes, such as the willingness to master tasks and goals. All these factors contribute significantly to increasing employee engagement, as reported by junior resources:

- "I try to create my own motivation, ambition and vision in everyday work";
- "Personal motivation is very high and I am enthusiastic about my work";
- "The fact that the more effort I put in, the better the result I obtain, is inspirational to me".

In contrast to RQ1 and RQ2, RQ3 (*What about your leader and your working environment does not motivate you?*) investigated the factors that can hinder the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement. The mediating mechanisms identified were divided into organization-centred and leader-centred, as reported in Table 5. Some participants reported that there is nothing about their leader or their working environment that does not motivate them.

Nearly all participants stated that the main factors lowering their engagement were linked to the organization and specifically to the intense working environment. High-pressure and a poor work-life balance are not the ideal conditions for employees to thrive in; indeed a lot of resources are required and these are not possessed by everyone, often leading to poor psychological and emotional outcomes. Rushing, long working hours and stressful deadlines during peak periods were reported as the main reasons at the heart of the problem. It must be underlined that these aspects are typical of the consulting industry, regardless of the degree of servant leadership implemented by the single firm. Below are some representative statements reported by employees:

- "There is a lot of pressure and this increases the level of stress that sometimes might turn into team-conflicts, which are unusual and do not last longer than a day";
- "Working hours are sometimes really tough and pressure is always very high";
- "Sometimes the client needs are put ahead of the work-life balance principle";
- "Work-life balance is critical during peak periods and pressure is generally very high".

Table 5 Theme occurrences in responses to RQ3

RQ3 mediating factors	Number of occurrences
Organization-centred	124
Leader-centred	18
Nothing	16

Another critical aspect that seriously affected employee engagement during 2020 is related to the lockdown and restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic. Because of the health crisis, several companies, including the one under study, forced their employees (especially those with junior positions) to work remotely. According to some researchers, the intense use of agile working will lead to an increase in productivity and other positive financial outcomes (Hickman, 2019). On the other hand, it can generate stress, weaken ties among employees and obviously reduce the managers' span of control, as claimed by some subordinates of the company under study. In fact, the theme of agile working often arose in combination with two other leader-centred mediators: the unclear definition of tasks and the low supervision exercised by leaders.

- "I like working in a team, sitting near my teammates; hence I feel demotivated by remote-working";
- "Remote-working has changed the approach to work, creating a gap between us and reducing supervision";
- "Agile-working has negatively changed the way we work: tasks now are unclear and I miss my team and the working environment as a whole".

Missed promotion was another aspect considered quite relevant by employees in fuelling disengagement.

In accordance with the previous literature, all the mechanisms that emerged in this study influencing the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement in a typical consulting firm located in Italy are summarized in Table 6 and 7.

The drivers identified have been divided into leader-centred (Table 6), job-centred, employee-centred, team-centred and organization-centred (Table 7). In each category, they have been listed according to their relevance in terms of occurrence in employees' responses (from the most relevant to the least relevant) and are distinguished between positive mediators (+) and negative mediators (-).

In particular, among the themes listed as top, empowerment by the leader (73%) and team cohesion (52%) seem to be at the baseline of an effective servant-led environment fuelling employee engagement. This means that a leadership approach based on giving increasing autonomy and responsibility to subordinates, encouraging them to take on new challenges and improve their work on a daily basis as well as supporting and appreciating

Table 6 Leader-centred mediators

Leader-centred
• Empowerment (encouragement to do one's best, trust, autonomy, responsibility, personal & team support, personal appreciation & recognition, support of ideas, new challenges, exposure with clients) (+)
• Identification with the leader (goal-congruence, key-role model) (+)
• Leader prototypically (personal commitment, availability, soft skills, enthusiasm, action-oriented approach, client-oriented approach, supportive, inclusive and ethical leadership and management style) (+)
• LMX (guidance, leading by example, stewardship, positive interpersonal relationship) (+)
• Leader–follower trust (+)
• Communication arrangements (continuous feedback, tailor-made advices, straight-forward communication) (+)
• Low supervision (-)
• Unclear definition of tasks (-)

Table 7 Job-centred, employee-centred, team-centred and organization-centred mediators

Job-centred	Employee-centred	Team-centred	Organization-centred
• Job content (diversification of tasks, challenging goals) (+)	• Employee personal resources (proactive personality) (+) • Motivational orientation (+)	• Team cohesion (+) • Team support (+) • Team efficacy (+) • Group identification (+)	• Positive organizational climate (+) • Inclusive organizational practices (+) • Trust climate (+) • Culture of valuing people (+) • High pressure (-) • Poor work-life balance (-) • Agile working (-) • Missed promotions (-)

them as persons seems to be fundamental for Italian firms operating in the consulting industry. Also, a strong peer-to-peer relationship and a climate of inclusion, trust and support within the team can further contribute to the achievement of organizational goals without the leader's imposition of authoritative power.

When considering the gender of leaders who emerged as truly servant according to the employees' perspective (i.e. rated the maximum score of 7 in at least four out of the seven dimensions investigated in the servant leadership questionnaire), women prevailed. In fact, out of 62 respondents referring to a female leader, 24 (representing 39%), rated their leader's behaviour as truly servant in four or more dimensions of the SL-7 survey; while out of 89 respondents referring to a male leader, 16 (representing 18%) rated their leader's behaviour as truly servant in four or more dimensions of the SL-7 survey. This may be explained by the fact that women are reported to show behaviours of altruistic calling, emotional healing and organizational stewardship, which have been identified as central in servant leadership (Beck, 2014; de Rubio & Kiser, 2015; Politis & Politis, 2012). Hence, gender may have a role in determining the likelihood of producing a higher level of service to followers and creating a culture of help, humility and vision.

With regards to the seniority level of the leaders identified as truly servant, 27 out of 89 subordinates reporting to a young manager (representing 30%) rated their leader's behaviour as truly servant in four or more dimensions of the SL-7 survey; while 13 out of 56 subordinates reporting to a senior manager (representing 23%) rated their leader's behaviour as truly servant in four or more dimensions of the SL-7 survey. In the company under study, young managers have an average of 7/10 years of experience in consulting, while senior managers usually have more than 10 years of experience. This may suggest that, with the renewal of the leadership DNA and the code of business ethics emphasized by the firm through different channels (e.g. company intranet, website, social media, etc.), new managers and young generations are moving towards the core values of "integrity", "respect for the individual", "stewardship", and "client value creation", which again are essential in servant leadership. Thus, also the level of seniority may influence the likelihood of displaying servant leadership behaviours within a typical Italian consulting company, with a stronger inclination shown by the middle management.

Discussion

The study examined the leader experiences individually lived through by junior employees in an Italian consulting company. First of all, the responses of participants confirmed that servant leadership was practised by managers and experienced by employees, and the organization overall emerged to be significantly "servant".

Additionally, several themes were identified revealing that employee engagement is positively influenced by servant leadership through various drivers, as supported by other studies (Bao et al., 2018; Carter & Baghurst, 2013; De Clercq et al., 2014; McNeff & Irving, 2017). Employees felt more engaged when leaders valued their opinions, giving them autonomy and responsibility, acknowledged their behaviours, through appreciation and recognition for work contributions, and encouraged them to do their best daily and to take on new challenges. Trust, feedback on a continuous basis and ad-hoc recommendations came out as factors that helped them improve confidence in their work and willingness to perform better. Moreover, leaders were expected by employees to share professional goals and values, to lead by example and act as role models towards the clients and

the community. The sense of caring from managers and their motivation to prioritize fol-lowers' needs and well-being strongly contributed to having more devoted and committed employees. The characteristics of leaders most appreciated by employees came out as their personal commitment and dedication to work, their availability and support towards the team and their management approach, especially when dealing with complex situations. All these factors contribute to the success of the organization, by creating employees who are committed and want to become servant leaders themselves to deliver an outstanding client experience. When considering drivers increasing engagement and not related to the leader, the employee proactive personality, the strong peer-to-peer relationship, the organi-zational climate of trust and inclusion as well as the variety and stimulating content of the job emerged as the most valuable.

However, the findings from this study also revealed that there are factors hindering the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement, which, to the authors' knowledge, have been little investigated so far. In a servant-led organization where leaders do not impose authoritative or positional power, welcoming and valuing the opinions of all subordinates and encouraging them to take initiatives and make decisions, low supervision and unclear definition of tasks may sometimes occur. These aspects, observed in the organ-ization under study, were also amplified by agile-working brought on by the restrictions of the covid-19 pandemic. Some of the observed dynamics negatively affecting motivation are typical of consulting companies, such as a poor work-life balance, due to long working hours, and intense pressure, due to a fast-paced and turbulent working environment. Last but not least, it is not surprising that employees expect to have a fast career growth in a consulting firm, compared to other companies; missing the opportunity to be promoted has therefore a harmful effect on their engagement.

From a practical standpoint, the findings of the study have some implications. In similar organizational contexts (i.e. Italian consultancy which desires a long-term growth profile), leaders should try to foster a climate of inclusion, trust, open communication, flexibility and peer relationships to have more loyal and devoted employees, contributing more to the organizational success. Displaying empowering, supporting and people-centric behaviours could foster the growth and development of followers, facilitate their task accomplishment and lead them to become servants of the organization. Since servant leadership is a combi-nation of a learned behaviour and an innate trait, dedicated workshops, seminars and train-ing could benefit managers and senior managers in empowering and developing followers, as well as emerging professionals in building their relationship with clients. Additionally, managers should try to reduce criticalities like those that emerged in the company under study. In order to avoid low supervision and confusion, they should diversify individual tasks while distinguishing roles, provide guidance and set clear directions, develop com-munication strategies to overcome difficulties derived from agile-working and establish a well-defined career path and the relative steps to be achieved. They should also try to reduce pressure and enhance a better work-life balance by granting employees the neces-sary support, by setting clear and realistic goals, by encouraging mindfulness within the team and with the leader and by offering a flexible working environment.

The findings of this paper should be considered in the light of its limitations. First of all, since the respondents of the survey and the questionnaire were junior resources who were asked to take part in the research by a company manager, they may have felt somehow pressured to do so. However, there was no direct interaction between the researcher and the respondents, with no possibility for the former to guide responses. Research bias was reduced by providing the confidentiality statement and by asking semi-structured open-ended questions. Moreover, data were collected and analysed by

the first researcher and then revised by a second researcher to achieve greater objectivity. In future research, face-to-face interaction (i.e. individual interviews or focus groups) could provide better insights and more meaningful data specifically with regards to servant leadership, even though the possibility of influencing participants with comments by the researcher would be higher. The results of the study cannot be generalized to the consulting industry, as the sample consisted in a limited number of respondents and was taken from a single organization. However, the purpose of the present paper was not that of obtaining generalizable results through a quantitative analysis, but rather that of gaining qualitative in-depth insights on the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement in a typical large Italian consulting firm. Future studies could assess whether this servant leadership approach is implemented by different consulting firms and the effect on the engagement of employees. Moreover, the relationship between the two constructs under study may not necessarily be the same with outside consulting. Quantitative correlational studies could additionally expand the scope of the research by assessing the main differences and commonalities across various industries. Last but not least, the results could be somehow culturally driven, as the leadership style is influenced not only by organizational culture but also by national culture (Janicijevic & Marinkovic, 2015). It would therefore be interesting to assess whether the findings of the present study could be obtained in branches of the same consulting firm located in different countries.

Conclusion

This paper analysed the servant leader experiences of 151 subordinates of a large and long-term oriented Italian consulting firm and provided additional support to those studies showing that servant leadership is connected to employee engagement. In particular, through a qualitative analysis, the research made it possible to identify those mechanisms that positively influence the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement and those that have a negative impact on it.

All in all, it can be inferred that organizational leaders have a fundamental role in establishing a culture based on ethics and trust, where subordinates are engaged to be autonomous, productive and committed to the clients, to serve them with the best possible approach. Moreover, a strong tie both between a leader and his or her peers and among peers themselves can be acknowledged as the baseline for the creation of a servant-led environment, where several other factors highlighted in this study can further contribute to the achievement of organizational success.

Declarations

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