

When Serving Others Goes Bad

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This paper explores the impact that working within a servant leadership environment potentially has on individuals who perceive themselves employable, specifically examining its impact on emotional exhaustion and unethical behavior. Based on the social exchange theory (SET), we hypothesize that an individual low in employability will be more likely to experience emotional exhaustion and display unethical behavior. Using a sample of business professionals, we found support that social exchange theory is activated under conditions of servant leadership whereas the subordinates' behavior is interdependent, resulting in a reduction in emotional exhaustion. Further, emotional exhaustion was related to unethical behavior. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

When faced with times of economic uncertainty, employees may feel less secure about their employability as the ability to find a comparable job may be seen as difficult. Employability refers to an individual's ability to obtain and maintain a job, based on their skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that are valued by employers (Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004). Therefore, employees who feel uncertainty may partake in behaviors in which they normally would not engage in, such as unethical behavior. Unethical behavior can be defined as an illegal or commonly unacceptable act (Umphress, Bingham, & Mitchell, 2010; Lee, Schwarz, Newman, & Lee-good, 2019) and is becoming very common and widespread in the modern workplace (Welsh, Ordonez, Snyder, & Christian, 2015).

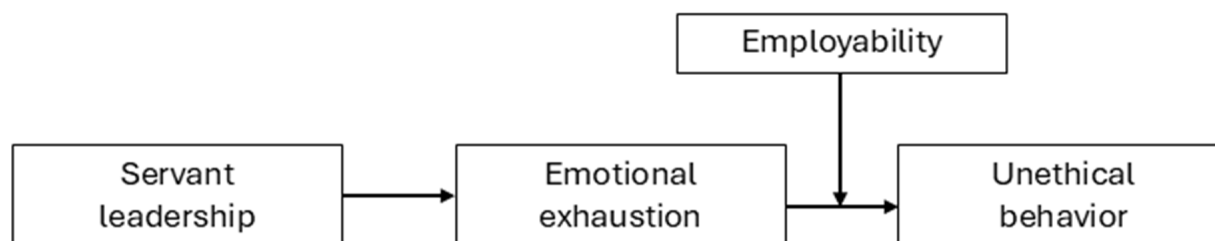
Unethical behavior in the workplace is not uncommon. In fact, the occurrence of unethical behavior happens across various industries. There are instances of high-profile unethical conduct being reported (Lee et al., 2019) such as Nestle's irresponsible marketing, Wal-Mart in Mexico CEO's bribing of Mexican governmental officials, and Hewlett Packard's spying scandal. However, there are times when unethical behavior occurs and goes

undetected for a period of time before it is uncovered. For example, the Enron scandal went on for years before the company filed bankruptcy due to its billion-dollar debt (Rockness & Rockness, 2005). In addition, Wells Fargo repeatedly made the news for their mischievous behavior within the organization (Witman, 2018). More recently, Amazon was recognized for their mistreatment of employees (Landi, 2020) and their misuse of the Ring doorbell camera (Rolino & Valente, 2023). Given this inclination of employees to engage in unethical behavior, researchers have called for scholars to explore antecedents of unethical behavior (Lee et al., 2019).

The purpose of this research is to explore an employee's decision to engage in unethical behavior and how that decision has implications on that individual's emotional exhaustion. Specifically, this study examines whether servant leaders, who consistently put others first and foster a norm of reciprocity, can reduce emotional exhaustion among their subordinates, which subsequently decreases unethical behavior within the organization (see Figure 1). Additionally, the study also examines how perceived employability influences this relationship. When subordinates feel pressure about their ability to find new

Figure 1

Conceptual Model for Subordinates



employment if they lose their current job, their ability to self-regulate and resist engaging unethical behavior may be diminished and potentially result in them engaging in unethical behaviors to maintain their current positions. Thus, employability is proposed to moderate the relationship between perceived servant leadership, emotional exhaustion, and unethical behavior such that when employability is low, the protective effect of servant leadership on unethical behavior will be weakened.

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) provides an explanation for an employee's decision-making process. Specifically, social exchange theory proposes that supervisor-subordinate relationships are established through the norm of reciprocity (Blau, 1964). The utilization of social exchange theory results in servant leaders influencing the exchange of actions and behaviors of subordinates by limiting engagement in unethical behavior. However, the influence of the servant leader may not be sufficient to counteract the stress the subordinate feels to remain employed. When subordinates perceive their chances of finding another job to be low, they may engage in unethical behaviors to maintain their current position, even if their supervisor has demonstrated strong servant leadership qualities.

The current paper aims to contribute to the literature in multiple ways. First, while the literature on servant leadership is growing, the major focus highlights benefits to the organization and subordinates (Hsieh & Want, 2019; Parris & Peachey, 2013). However, as there continues to be increased incidents of unethical behavior within organizations, it's important to further examine the contexts in which they occur. To fill the gap in the literature, this study explores servant leadership in an organizational setting. In addition, other scholars have explored the relationship between emotional exhaustion and unethical organizational behavior; however, the effects of employability as a moderator for emotional exhaustion and unethical behavior seems to be absent. The literature has not explored this style of leadership as an antecedent of emotional exhaustion and unethical behavior, in part because this leadership style is characterized by prioritizing the needs of others before assuming a leadership role (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). We propose that servant leadership does not directly discourage unethical behavior; in fact, this style of leadership may encourage self-sacrificial behavior (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). This encouragement of serving behavior puts more pressure on subordinates to perform unethical acts they perceive are for the benefits of others. This study develops a theoretical model regarding employability's moderating effect on emotional exhaustion and unethical behavior (see figure 1) in pursuit to provide an understanding of individual's reciprocated unethical behavior.

Theoretical Framework

Social exchange theory's (SET; Blau, 1964) tenets garners the basis of understanding relationships in the workplace. The social exchange process begins when one member of the organization treats another member in a

positive or negative manner (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Once the process is initiated, the targeted member will react to the treatment in either a positive or negative manner depending on how the targeted member perceives the treatment (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Social exchange is an ongoing process with an open-ended relationship (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Social exchange theory is a framework that aids in the understanding of the leadership style and subordinates' behavior in various ways. Servant leaders initiate serving behaviors that subordinates deem necessary to reciprocate in the workplace. Social exchange theory suggests that desired behavior is signaled by the exchange of treatment amongst individuals (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Due to servant leader's innate tendency to provide support and prioritize employees' needs, subordinates will see the servant leaders "move" as an indication that the behavior should be reciprocated. This initiation of reciprocal exchange will require a new round of exchange behavior (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Subordinates will feel supported by their supervisor and not need to waste resources reacting in a negative manner so emotional exhaustion is lower. Given this positive outcome, subordinates will reciprocate by not engaging in unethical behaviors to keep the positive interdependent transactions occurring (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Hsieh & Want, 2019). Thus, we build the theoretical framework for this study around the premise of this idea and examine how servant leaders' behavior leads to subordinates' avoidance of unethical behavior.

Hypotheses

Servant Leadership and Emotional Exhaustion

At its core, servant leadership occurs when the subordinates' needs, aspirations, and interests are put in the forefront of the leaders' desires (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002) by putting aside the self-interest of the leader (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008). Rooted in Greenleaf's (1970) philosophy, servant leadership represents a selfless approach where the desire to serve precedes the desire to lead (Parris & Peachey, 2013). History has given us examples of servant leaders, i.e., Mother Teresa, Harriet Tubman, and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Servant leadership is believed to aide in improving followers' well-being as the servant leader's ability to prioritize the needs of their employees, create a supportive and nurturing work environment that results in feelings of overall well-being (Eva et al, 2019; Parris & Peachey, 2013; Zhang & Xie, 2020). Within such environments, subordinates should experience reduced emotional exhaustion, as the servant leader's continuous support and genuine concern function as protective factors against depletion and stress. Therefore, we propose:

H1: There is a negative relationship between servant leadership and subordinate emotional exhaustion.

Mediating Effects of Emotional Exhaustion

Unethical behavior can be defined as an illegal or commonly unacceptable acts (Umphress et al., 2010; Lee et

al., 2019). Examples of unethical behaviors in the workplace include doing personal business on company time, concealing known errors from others, passing blame for poor workmanship to others, and taking credit for positive work performed by colleagues (Akaah, 1992). From the perspective of social exchange theory, subordinates working with servant leaders are less likely to experience emotional exhaustion because their leaders prioritize their needs and well-being. Servant leaders create an environment in which subordinates feel valued and supported, thereby diminishing emotional exhaustion and the temptation to engage in unethical behaviors to cope with stress. Therefore, we propose:

H2: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between servant leadership and subordinate unethical behavior.

Moderating Effects of Employability on the Emotional Exhaustion – Unethical Behavior Relationship

As discussed above, subordinates who have high levels of emotional exhaustion have depleted resources which limit their ability to self-regulate behaviors (Cheng & Chan, 2008; Lawrence & Kacmar, 2017; Sverke & Hellgren, 2002). Under such conditions, individuals are more likely to make impulsive or shortsighted decisions, such as engaging in unethical behavior (Lawrence & Kacmar, 2017; Trevino et al., 1998). We believe that this positive relationship will be even stronger when employees view themselves as lacking employment options.

Employability is an individual measure of an individual's competencies in the job market (Paunescu, Acatrinei, Argatu, McGuire, & Zhang, 2024). When employees perceive themselves as having low employability, their commitment to the organization tends to increase, as they strive to maintain a relationship with their employer (Paunescu et al., 2024). The dependence subordinates have on their employer has been shown to have a positive relationship on workplace deviance. In other words, subordinates who feel they have limited alternative employment options will be more inclined to engage in behaviors 0 including unethical actions – that they believe will assist them in retaining their employment.

Thus, we theorize that emotionally exhausted subordinates who deem themselves low on employability will be more inclined to engage in the unethical behavior. Therefore, we propose:

H3: Employability moderates the positive relationship between emotional exhaustion and unethical behavior, such that this relationship will be stronger when employability is low as compared to when employability is high.

As discussed above, subordinates who work for a servant leader should not be emotionally exhausted as the leader supplies the employees with resources needed to successfully complete their jobs. When resources are plentiful, employees are better able to self-regulate their behavior and avoid engaging in unethical behavior. However, when we factor in perceptions of employability, we argue that the positive influence of the servant leader may not be strong enough to ward off unethical behavior in

subordinates. Specifically, we theorize that subordinates who work under a servant leader and lack confidence in their ability to secure alternative employment will be more likely to engage in unethical behavior in the workplace than subordinates who perceive themselves as being able to easily find comparable or better employment. Employees with low employability lack confidence in their ability to find an equivalent job. This lack of confidence can make them more susceptible to external pressures and risk taking as they prioritize short-term gains over long-term ethical choices, leading to unethical behaviors as a means of preserving their job.

H4: Employability moderates the indirect relationship between subordinate's perception of servant leadership and unethical behavior through emotional exhaustion such that this effect is stronger when employability is low.

Method

Sample and Procedure

The data were collected by surveying licensed architects, engineers, and accountants in the southern United States. This self-report method allowed for insight into how individual's think, feel, and/or behave. An active license email list was reviewed to send an invitation email to potential participants in all three professions (N=2000). The email contained information ensuring participants their confidentiality, informing them of their rights, explaining there were no right or wrong answers, and informing them of the two-week deadline. If respondents agreed to participate in the online survey, they indicated their agreeance by clicking on a link. If respondents chose not to participate, they were instructed to select the opt out button. A friendly reminder email was sent to potential participants if they had not completed the survey or opted out after the first week. Because of invalid email addresses and participants opting out, the sample size was reduced from 2000 to 1599. Two hundred forty-three (15% response rate) completed the survey.

Although 243 participants completed the survey, the sample produced 209 usable surveys after removing surveys with significantly missing data. Given the sample size of 209 usable surveys, the statistical tests employed in this study should have adequate power to detect medium to large effect sizes. Of the 209 respondents, the sample consisted of 76 (36%) males and 133 (63%) females. The average respondents were 37.22 years in age with an average of 8 years of work experience. In terms of race, most of the participants were Caucasian with 172 (82%). The other participants were Hispanic 15 (8%), African American 14 (7%), other 5 (2%), and Asian 3 (1%).

Measures

Servant leadership. Subordinate perception of servant leadership was measured using a fourteen-item scale from Liden et al., (2008). The items were measured on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Sample items from the scale were "My supervisor holds department employees to high ethical standards" and "My

supervisor makes others feel like I work with him/her, not for me." Cronbach's (1951) alpha for this scale was .93.

Emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion was measured with a five-item scale developed by Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, and Jackson (1996). The items were measured on a five-point scale (1 = never to 5 = always). Sample items from the scale were "I feel emotionally drained from my work" and "Working all day is really a strain for me." Cronbach's (1951) alpha for this scale was .93.

Employability. Employability was measured with a five-item measure developed by (DeVos & Soens, 2008). The items were measured on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Sample items from the scale were "I believe I could easily obtain another job that is in line with my level of education and experience" and "I could easily switch to another employer, if I wanted to." Cronbach's (1951) alpha for this scale was .89.

Unethical behavior. Unethical behavior (UB) was measured using a seventeen-item scale from Akaah (1992) that was adapted by Trevino et al. (1998). The items were measured on a five-point scale (1 = never to 5 = very often). Using the prompt "Please indicate the extent to which you have engaged in these behaviors in the past 6 months," respondents reacted to items such as "Given gifts/favors in order to receive preferential treatment" and "Passed blame for errors to an innocent coworker." Cronbach's (1951) alpha for this scale was .89.

Control variables. To be consistent with prior research on emotional exhaustion (Conway, Fu, Monks, Alfes & Bailey, 2016), the following variable was controlled in this study: gender (1 = male; 2 = female).

Analysis

We used hierarchical moderated regression analyses via IBM SPSS 27 and the PROCESS Macro (Model 7) written by Hayes (2013) to test our hypotheses. The PROCESS macro estimates the bootstrapped conditional indirect effect of an independent variable on a dependent variable through a mediating variable at varying levels of the moderating variable. Bootstrapping is a process that uses sampling with replacement from the original sample in an effort to replicate the population from which the sample was drawn. Results from the analyses conducted on the

bootstrap samples are used to create a 95% confidence interval which were used to determine whether the indirect effects were significant.

Results

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations for the variables of interest. As expected, servant leadership was negatively and significantly related to emotional exhaustion and unethical behavior. In addition, emotional exhaustion and unethical behavior were positively and significantly related. The recommendation of Fornell and Larcker (1981) was followed to explore the discriminant validity of our scales. We calculated the square root of the average variance explained for each of the variables in our study. Shown on the diagonal in Table 1, these values represent the variance accounted for by the items in the scale. The values must exceed the corresponding latent variable correlations in the same row and column to demonstrate discriminant validity. For example, the diagonal value for Servant Leadership (0.71) is higher than its correlations with Emotional Exhaustion (-0.50), Unethical Behavior (-0.14), and Employability (0.03). This pattern holds for all variables, indicating that each construct shares more variance with its own measures than with any other construct, thus supporting discriminant validity.

Prior to testing our hypotheses, we conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses to ensure the items in our scales worked as expected. The first model was a four-factor measurement model with each of our scales (servant leadership, emotional exhaustion, unethical behavior, and employability) serving as a factor. This model demonstrated good fit indices (CFI = 0.91, NNFI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.07), indicating that the data fit well with the hypothesized four-factor structure. This suggests that the items in each scale cluster together as expected and measure separate latent constructs. Our second model combined servant leadership and emotional exhaustion into one factor as these two variables produced the largest correlation in Table 1. Finally, we estimated a one-factor model. These results, shown in Table 2, demonstrate that only the four-factor measurement model fit the data. This three-factor model showed significantly worse fit (CFI = 0.86, NNFI = 0.85, RMSEA = 0.09, SRMR = 0.10) and a significant chi-square difference

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Servant leadership	3.54	0.76	0.71			
2. Emotional exhaustion	2.77	0.95	-0.50***	0.86		
3. Unethical behavior	1.39	0.31	-0.14*	0.20**	0.64	
4. Employability	3.74	0.75	0.03	-0.12	-0.10	0.79
5. Gender	1.64	0.48	0.01	0.10	-0.08	-0.08

Note. N=209. Gender coded 1 = male 2 = female; *p < 0.05. **p < 0.01. ***p < 0.001.

Table 2*Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results*

Model	X ²	df	X ² _{diff}	CFI	NNFI	RMSEA	SRMR
4-factor measurement model	1900.91	773		0.91	.090	0.06	0.07
3-factor model (SL/EMEX)	2515.86	776	614.95***	0.86	0.85	0.09	0.10
1-factor model	4347.68	779	2446.77***	0.70	0.69	0.12	0.20

Note. SL = servant leadership; EMEX = emotional exhaustion; *** $p < 0.001$.

($\Delta\chi^2 = 614.95$, $p < .001$) compared to the four-factor model. Finally, we added an uncorrelated method factor to the four-factor measurement model to examine the degree of common method variance inherent in our data (Williams et al., 1989). Results showed that only 5% of the variance can be attributed to an uncorrelated method factor suggesting that common method variance is not driving our results.

We ran model 7 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) to test our hypotheses. These results can be found in Table 3. Hypothesis 1, which predicted that servant leadership would be negatively related to emotional exhaustion, was supported ($\beta = -.63$, $p < .001$). As predicted, these results suggest that as an individuals' perception that they are working for a leader who utilizes servant leadership as a style of leadership decreases the amount of emotional exhaustion experienced. Hypothesis 2, which predicted that emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between servant leadership and unethical behavior was supported. As shown in Table 2, a Sobel test revealed that the indirect effect ($-.038$, $p < .05$) was significant.

Hypothesis 3 predicted a moderating effect of employability on the relationship between emotional exhaustion and unethical behavior suggesting that when employabil-

ity is low, the positive relationship is stronger. As can be seen in Table 3, the moderating effect was significant. The graph of the interaction, shown in Figure 2, supports our prediction as do the results of the simple slope test (low employability .12, $p < .001$, [.05, .18] versus high employability $-.01$, $p = .84$, $[-.07, .06]$). Finally, we tested our moderated mediation hypothesis. Results, shown in Table 3, indicate that the indirect effect when employability is low was significant ($-.07$, $[-.12, -.02]$) but insignificant when employability was high ($.00$, $[-.03, .06]$). More importantly, the index of moderated mediation suggests that the difference between these two values was significant ($.05$, $[-.01, .10]$). Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

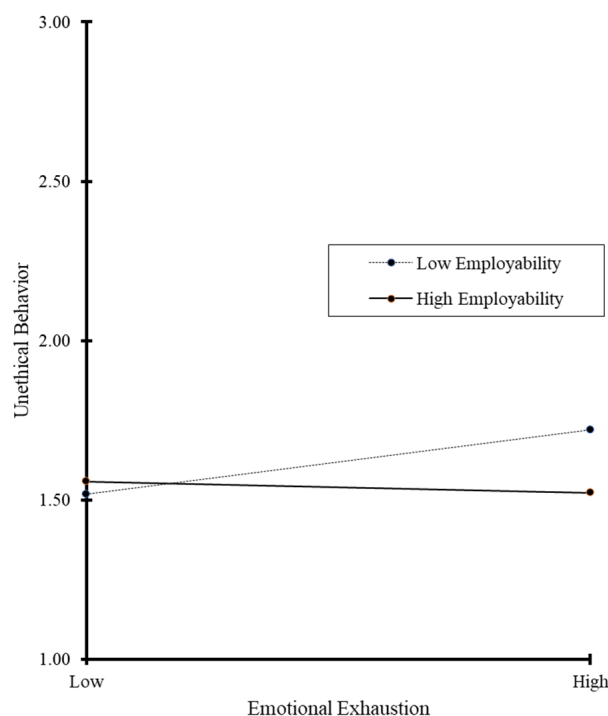
Discussion

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the literature on servant leadership by helping organizations understand how employees who do not experience emotional exhaustion forego the opportunity of engaging in unethical behavior. We utilized social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) to explain and predict how individuals who utilize servant leadership as a style of leadership are less likely to supervise subordinates who will experience emotional exhaustion and who will succumb to engaging in unethical behavior. Emotional exhaustion was examined as a

Table 3*Regression Results*

	β	SE	p	LLCI	ULCI
Dependent variable = emotional exhaustion					
Constant	1.90	0.34	0.00	1.226	2.573
Servant leadership	-0.63	0.08	0.00	-0.779	-0.476
Dependent variable = unethical behavior					
Constant	1.58	0.13	0.00	1.327	1.845
Servant leadership	-0.03	0.03	0.38	-0.091	0.035
Emotional exhaustion (A)	0.06	0.03	0.03	0.005	0.106
Employability (B)	-0.04	0.03	0.14	-0.097	0.014
AXB	-0.08	0.03	0.00	-0.139	-0.027
	Effect	t	p		
Indirect effect	-0.038	-2.10	0.04		
Bootstrapped conditional indirect effect	Effect	SE		LLCI	ULCI
Employability -1SD	-0.07	0.03		-0.117	-0.019
Employability mean	-0.03	0.02		-0.066	0.016
Employability +1SD	0.00	0.03		-0.034	0.068
Index of moderated mediation	0.05	0.02	0.008	0.098	

Note. N = 209. LLCI = lower level 95% confidence interval. ULCI = upper level 95% confidence interval.

Figure 2*Interaction Between Emotional Exhaustion and Employability on Unethical Behavior*

Note. Low employability .12, $p < 0.001^{***}$, [.05, .18]; High employability -.01, $p = .84$, [-.07, .06]

mediating variable to explain the process through which a subordinate's perception of their servant leader influences the likelihood that they will refrain from engaging in unethical behavior. Employability was explored as a moderator in this study due to its ability to greatly impact an individual's ethical behavior due to their livelihood being threatened.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This article contributes theoretically to the ethics field by informing scholars about the implications social exchange can have on subordinates who experience emotional exhaustion. This is imperative in extending the current research on understanding the reciprocity relationship between leaders and their subordinates and how these norms may be deviated from during times of intense pressure. For instance, previous research suggests that employees who face job insecurity engage in unethical behaviors as they become overwhelmed and are unable to regulate their decision making (Lawrence & Kacmar, 2017). This study extends that behavior to highlight the fact that the extreme pressure of the potential loss of income can negate the positive influence of servant leaders.

This study also offers practical implications. A practical implication of this study is that subordinates who perceive their leaders as high in servant leadership are significantly

less likely to engage in unethical behavior compared to those who perceive their leaders as low in servant leadership. Another practical implication is that practitioners can better understand if and how leadership styles, servant leadership specifically, can affect the emotional state of employees. Additionally, organizations should consider implementing programs that monitor employee stress levels, provide mental health resources, and ensure that employees feel supported. By proactively reducing emotional exhaustion, employees are better able to self-regulate and are less likely to engage in behaviors that compromise organizational ethics.

Limitations and Future Research

This article contributes to the ethics literature in several ways; however, this article is not without its limitations. While this article aims to fill in the gaps in the literature, there is still much to learn about emotional exhaustion effects on the subordinate's unethical behavior.

This paper is limited in that it does not address all the industries when discussing unethical behavior as the study's sample was collected from accountants, engineers, and architects. Unethical behavior can exist inside or outside of the organization and in a variety of industries. This study explored the hypothesized relationships with a sample consisting of architects, engineers, and accountants,

which could restrict the external validity of our results. To enhance the generalizability of our findings, future research should replicate the study with a broader sample of varying professions.

Moreover, the data for this study was collected from the same source at the same time. However, we followed the advice of Podsakoff et al. (2003) to address the potential of common method variance in this study. The results of our analysis suggest CMV is not causing our results.

Additionally, future research should examine other leadership styles on the relationship of the other variables in the theoretical model. Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) occurs when other individuals learn the appropriate behavior to mimic by watching others in the organization. Therefore, the results of the study could differ in various leadership settings from a social exchange aspect.

Conclusion

This article extends previous research on servant leadership and how to circumvent unethical behavior within organizations. Consistent with prior research, the results of the study show that individuals who work under a servant leader experience less emotional exhaustion and less likely to engage in unethical behaviors. Finally, the study contributes to the field of employment by informing scholars individuals who experience perceived lack of employment will engage in unethical behavior.

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