
In Service for Sharing: Leadership and Leader - Follower Relationship Factors as Influencers of Tacit Knowledge Sharing in the IT Industry

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Tacit knowledge is an organizational resource that is difficult to cultivate. It requires that responsible agents in the organization take an active role in encouraging trust and the development of relationships where individuals feel that their voice will be heard and that there will be a benefit from them passing knowledge onto someone else. In knowledge work tacit knowledge is especially important.

This research found that servant leadership is an important factor in influencing tacit knowledge sharing, however leader-member exchange is a factor that will strongly support the sharing of tacit knowledge.

If there is a dearth in servant leadership, then leader-member exchange quality is able to act as an influencer of tacit knowledge sharing. This indicates the conclusion that while servant leadership has its virtues, it is possible that other leadership constructs will be useful in encouraging tacit knowledge sharing.

Keywords: *Servant Leadership, Leader-Member Exchange, Tacit Knowledge Sharing, Trust, Information Technology*

Introduction

Access to tacit knowledge held by workers will give management a strong advantage in the emerging knowledge economy when managers are able to encourage workers to share tacit knowledge with them. Knowledge is important because it has been tied to decision making and being able to make evidence-based decisions is imperative for management to be successful [1]. The importance of knowledge to organizations is further emphasized by Grant [2] indicating that there is a general perception among scholars that knowledge is believed to be importance for organizations. While there is no argument about the importance of knowledge to organizations, the sharing of this knowledge is still a challenge. Hinds & Pfeffer [3] point out that knowledge sharing is a challenging task in organizations. This research seeks to address this challenge. To answer this problem, we propose that leadership behaviors can encourage the sharing of tacit knowledge. Different leadership styles and behaviors have been identified in literature [4], [5], [6], [7]. The impact of different leadership styles on employees' behavior is still a research progress, however a multitude of studies have indicated the influence that leadership has on many organizational outcomes [8], [9]. While there is a paucity that exists in the understanding of the relationship between leadership and tacit knowledge sharing, the ability of leadership to answer a number of different organizational problems indicates the potential of leadership to answer the problem of tacit knowledge sharing.

Cote and Gilbert [10] indicate that servant leadership is an effective behavior when coaching workers and encouraging trust among workers. Levin and Cross [11] indicate that trust mediates tacit knowledge sharing. Holste and Fields [12] back up these findings, exposing significance between trust and tacit knowledge sharing among workers in a professional setting. Robert Greenleaf first proposed the concept of servant leadership in 1970. Since then, many studies have identified different characteristics of a servant leader [13], [14], [15], [16]. Servant leaders can be defined as a leader who empower his or her employees and put their needs before his or her own [17]. Just like any other type of leadership servant leadership impact and influence others in organization. Servant leadership behavior can inspire followers to pass it on [18]. DeHaven [19], in his dissertation, studied the

relationship between knowledge management and how it is influenced by servant leadership behavior. One of his findings is: “Certified knowledge managers in this study used the servant leadership style as a reflection of their values to share knowledge, build relationships and develop others” (p 119).

Theoretical Framework

Prior research has indicated that trust can mediate the relationship between interpersonal influence and tacit knowledge sharing [20]. As leadership can be considered to be an interpersonal experience where one attempts to influence another, findings by Lin indicate that there may be reason to believe that trust will mediate the relationship between leadership and tacit knowledge sharing. Russell [21] indicates that servant leadership will influence feelings of trust. Concerning specific leadership propositions, Greenleaf [22] proposes that servant leadership influences leaders and followers to trust one another and to have shared values, hinting that trust will also develop the quality of the relationship between the leader and the follower. Nohria and Ghoshal [23] suggest that when workers adopt shared values that they will build trust. Further, reciprocity which has been found to be significantly related to leader-member exchange [24]. These findings all suggest that the influence that leadership has on tacit knowledge sharing may involve a number of other interpersonal characteristics. This study will examine a model which sought to better understand how the relationship between leadership and other interpersonal characteristics relates to tacit knowledge sharing (Figure 1). Prior literature suggests a number of questions for research to address:

- 1. Do significant relationships exist between factors in the constructed model (Figure 1)?*
- 2. Can multifactor relationships be found between factors linked in the constructed model (Figure 1)?*
- 3. Does mediation exist between factors linked in the constructed model (Figure 1)?*
- 4. Does a model with good fit arise from the proposed model (Figure 1)?*

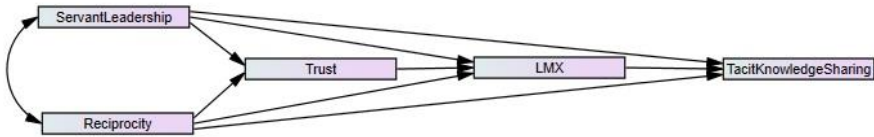


Figure 1: Theoretical Model of Study

This study is designed to focus on the tacit knowledge sharing of workers by leadership through leader behaviors, the behaviors of workers and leaders in their professional relationship and how interpersonal factors impact the outcome of tacit knowledge sharing.

Methods

Sample

A cross-sectional survey approach was taken to this study and responses in this study were collected using convenience random sampling among workers in the information technology industry in the mid-western region of the U.S. The survey used a five-point, five anchor Lickert scale which required respondents to respond according to their agreement with each item on the survey (1 – Strongly Disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 – Agree; 5 – Strongly Agree). 20 items on the survey related to the variables in this study and 6 related to the demographic profile of respondents to the survey. The exception to the use of the Lickert scale was the collection of demographic data, where age, gender, household income and education were collected to develop a profile of the people who were responding and questions about the region where the respondent lived and the industry they worked in to ensure that they fit the profile of what the survey required. Age as responded to by number of years living, not range, gender was responded to according to gender binary and household income and education were responded to according to range.

Data Collection

The data was collected through the use of an electronic survey that was placed on the web from 14 December, 2013 to 1 January, 2014. This survey

collected 105 responses. Of the 105 responses collected two were discarded as they supplied the same response for every item. All other surveys were completed, giving this study a final response rate of 98.1%. The survey was made available to individuals associated with a non-profit group of information technology professional and academics with a population concentrated in the mid-western U.S (Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri, Iowa, Minnesota, Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota). Understanding the influence of the vertical-dyad exchange between leaders and followers on the relationship between the practice of servant leadership behaviors and knowledge sharing in this industry and region can help management understand the most effective behaviors to perform if they wish to encourage a free flow of information to them.

Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

Analysis of the profile of survey respondents shows that there is an equal amount of women that were surveyed as there was a man. There seemed to be a slight skew towards older respondents, with 60.2% of respondents being 45 and older. There seemed to be a bell curve around income, with most workers having an annual income between \$50,000-99,999. The education level of 89.3% of respondents to the survey reported at least some college education, with 49.5% having at least an associate degree and 21.3% having a graduate degree (Table 1). Demographic data served as controls in this study.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

Profile Characteristic		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	51	49.5
	Female	52	50.5
Age	18-29	20	19.4
	30-44	21	20.4
	45-60	36	35
	60+	26	25.2
Income	\$0-24,999	14	13.6
	\$25,000-49,999	15	14.6
	\$50,000-99,999	39	37.9
	\$100,000-149,000	12	11.6
	\$150,000+	23	22.3
Education	Less Than High School Degree	1	1

	High School Degree	10	9.7
	Some College	41	39.8
	Associate or Bachelor Degree	29	28.2
	Graduate Degree	22	21.3
Region of U.S.	Midwest	103	100
Industry	Information Technology	103	100

Measures

Servant leadership

Two items were chosen from each characteristic to measure each characteristic of servant leadership according to which items appears to be most effective in representing the characteristics observed in this study. The definitions of characteristics proposed by Barbuto and Wheeler [16] were the basis for determining conformity of items to measuring for characteristics. As a whole the scale for servant leadership was found to be reliable with an α of .91 (Table 2).

Leader-Member Exchange

To measure Leader-member exchange, this study used an existing scale developed by Graen & Uhl-Bien [25]. The scale contains seven items, hence the name of the scale LMX-7. This study used all of the seven items to collect data on LMX. The LMX is the result of a longitudinal study, 20 years, by Dansereau, Graen and Haga [26]. Leader-member exchange focuses on the relationship between leader and his or her employees. A leader can establish a leadership or supervision relationships with member in his or her unit [26]. LMX can be defined as a relationship between subordinates and their leaders, this relation can be categorized by the material resources, information, mental and physical effort, and / or emotional support exchange between the two parties [27]. The items measuring leader-member exchange were found to be reliable with a Cronbach's α score of .93 (Table 2). This is better than the .8 - .9 found in studies cited by Graen and Uhl-Bien [25].

Reciprocity

This study adopted the POPRS scale developed by Wintre, Yaffe and Crowley [28]. Four items were used to measure reciprocity. Reciprocity can be defined as responding to an action with a similar one whether it is positive or hostile action regardless of future expectations [29]. In his experimental study, Regan [30] found out that recipient of a favor feels obligated to return the favor regardless if he or she is attracted to the person who initiated the favor. There is some disagreement on the on the explanation of favor-compliance relation but not on the fact that it increases compliance [31]. The α of reciprocity was found to be .82 (Table 2).

Trust

To measure trust, in this study we used three items. This study utilizes the Organizational Trust Inventory as a way to measure trust between a worker and the manager [32]. Trust in this context focused on the ability of the worker to believe what the manager said or that their actions were in their best interest. The scale used to measure this was found to have a reliability of .89 (Table 2).

Knowledge sharing

To measure Knowledge sharing this study adopted Tacit Knowledge Sharing Scale developed by Lu, Leung & Koch [20]. Tacit knowledge sharing is defined in this study as the efforts of a worker to share tacit knowledge with their supervisor on the job. 3 items were chosen from this scale. Measurement for reliability of the scale found that the scale was reliable at .89 (Table 2).

Analysis

Responses were loaded into SPSS for data analysis and the data was further analyzed through the use of SPSS AMOS. Data was first analyzed to determine means and standard deviations as well as correlations. There were significant relationships at $p < .001$ found between all the variables measured for in this this study. Theory and the findings from the analysis of

correlations drove the design of a model. The model was designed in SPSS AMOS and tested to determine model fit. Relationships in the model were then tested using bootstrapping to determine direct and indirect effects.

Results

Descriptive Analysis

The mean scores observed in this research indicate that: the philosophy that leader-member exchange quality can describe whether an individual is in the in-group or the out-group of a leader had been proposed by (.). Based on this proposition, the sample was split into two different sections, with the median leader-member exchange score (24) being the basis of the split, with responses below the median being labeled as “low LMX scores” (n=52) and the median and above being labeled “high LMX scores” (n=51). The data was tested to determine the results of two-way interaction. Figure 2 indicates that there is a dramatic increase in tacit knowledge sharing when there is a high leader-member exchange relationship over a low leader-member exchange relationship when there is a low level of servant leadership present. It seems that leader-member exchange is an effective way to enforce the sharing of tacit knowledge overall, however if there is a low level of leader-member exchange, a high level of servant leadership can support the relationship.

Two-way Interaction of Leader-Member Exchange and Servant Leadership with Tacit Knowledge Sharing

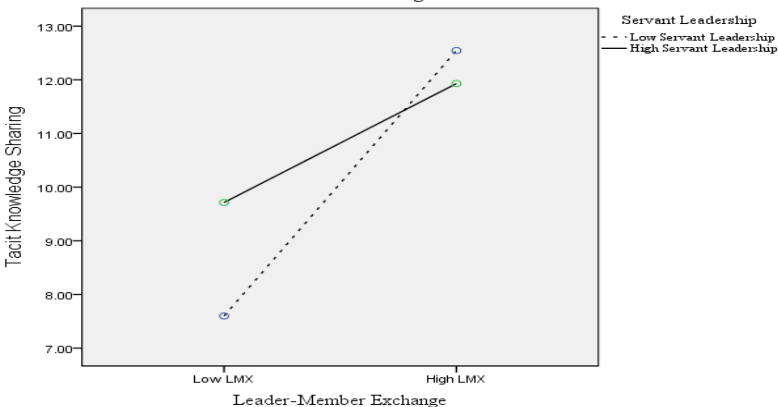


Figure 2: Two way Interaction Plot of Leader-member Exchange and Servant Leadership with Tacit Knowledge Sharing

Figures 3 and 4 are the results of a three-way interaction between leader-member exchanges, trust and servant leadership with tacit knowledge sharing. The importance of trust to the development of tacit knowledge sharing becomes clear in these graphs. A high level of servant leadership will help overcome a low level of leader-member exchange when there is a low level of trust, however when there is a high level of trust, tacit knowledge sharing will be quite low if there is a low level of leader-member exchange, even if servant leadership is high. When there is a high level of trust however, there will be a high level of tacit knowledge sharing only if there is a high level of leader-member exchange. Servant leadership does not seem to have a significant influence when it is moderated by leader-member exchange. Work in press by Whisnant and Khasawneh (2014) express the moderation of the relationship between servant leadership and tacit knowledge sharing as being one where the individual dimensions of servant leadership are most effectively influenced by moderation; however different dimensions of servant leadership are moderated at different levels of leader-member exchange. Their findings suggest that servant leadership is relevant to people in different ways according to the development of the leader-member exchange relationship in the scope of influencing them to share tacit knowledge.

Three-way Interaction of Leader-Member Exchange and Servant Leadership with Tacit Knowledge Sharing at a Low Level of Trust

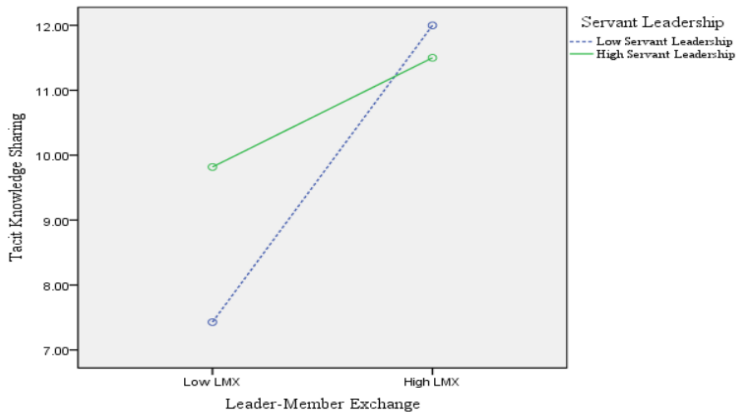


Figure 3: A figure of the Three-way Interaction of Leader-Member Exchange and Servant Leadership with Tacit Knowledge Sharing at a Low Level of Trust.



Figure 4: A figure of the Three-way Interaction of Leader-Member Exchange and Servant Leadership with Tacit Knowledge Sharing at a High Level of Trust.

Figure 5 in this study expresses that there is generally a greater level of both servant leadership and tacit knowledge sharing when there is a higher level of leader-member exchange. Additionally, there is a drop off in the amount of subjects expressing higher levels of servant leadership when the leader-member exchange is low, whereas when it is high, it reaches higher boundaries. These findings suggest that levels of servant leadership and leader-member exchange will go hand-in-hand. Statistical analysis is reported later in this chapter that discusses this. There is also a greater degree of tacit knowledge sharing when there is a high level of leader-member exchange and when there is a higher level of servant leadership.

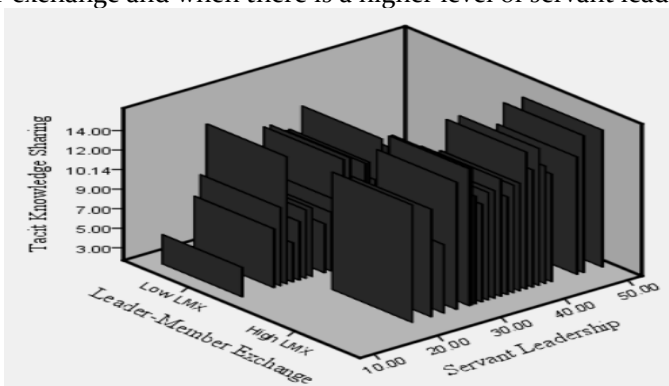


Figure 5: A Bar Graph of Tacit Knowledge Sharing at Different Scores of Servant Leadership, Moderated by High and Low Levels of Leader-Member Exchange.

Regression Analysis

Servant leadership was found to explain 46.9% of variance in tacit knowledge sharing in organizations; however reciprocity was found to explain 57.4% of variance. When both factors were run together against tacit knowledge sharing in a stepwise regression model the variance of tacit knowledge sharing explained increased to 63.2% with both factors being significant at $p < .001$ in the model ($\beta = .80$). This suggests that when servant leadership is covered with the worker having a feeling of reciprocity with the leader, the worker will feel compelled to share with them the tacit knowledge associated with work processes on the job. The personal traits of the leader working in service for the follower and their maintenance of a relationship with the follower is therefore an important component in the encouragement of the sharing of tacit knowledge.

The ability of servant leadership to explain variance in LMX was quite strong, explaining 67.9%, while reciprocity was able to explain 62.6%. Stepwise regression of the relationship of servant leadership and reciprocity on LMX was found to explain 79.2% of variance with significance at $p < .001$ for both factors ($\beta = .90$). This suggests that while reciprocity and servant leadership will encourage a great deal of tacit knowledge sharing, it will also have a highly influential effect on leader-member exchange. This finding suggests that there should be further investigation of the relationship between leadership and the relationship that the leader has with their follower as an influencer of tacit knowledge sharing. Stepwise regression on the influence of servant leadership, reciprocity and leader-member exchange as influencers of tacit knowledge sharing indicates 66.5% of variance can be explained through the predicting factors.

Relatively speaking, the ability of servant leadership and reciprocity to explain trust in a manager is strong, as servant leadership only explained 58.9% of variance and reciprocity explained 40.7%. Together in a stepwise multiple regression with trust as the outcome, they explain 61.6% of variance ($\beta = .79$, $p < .001$). This finding suggests that trust is something that can be influenced by the relationship a worker has with their leader and the behavior of the leader. Acting as a servant to the follower will encourage them to have a greater deal of trust, however when there is a feeling that if the worker does something good for the leader that the leader will do something back trust will but even higher.

In the relationship between trust and LMX, trust was able to explain 52.6% of variance in LMX. Stepwise multiple regression of the relationship between servant leadership and trust with LMX showed that 69.6% of variance could be explained ($\beta = .84, p < .001$) whereas when trust and reciprocity predict LMX, 70.2% of variance is explained ($\beta = .84, p < .001$). LMX was found to explain 62.5% of tacit knowledge sharing, however when stepwise multiple regression is run on the relationship between servant leadership and LMX with tacit knowledge sharing, servant leadership remains excluded from the model. When run as reciprocity and LMX against tacit knowledge sharing, the factors predict 66.5% of variance ($\beta = .82, p < .001$). NOTE: N = 103. The α coefficients of reliabilities are displayed in parenthesis.

Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations and Correlation matrix

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. <i>Servant Leadership</i>	29.39	8.17	(.91)				
2. <i>Reciprocity</i>	12.68	3.83	.65***	(.82)			
3. <i>Trust</i>	10.59	3.14	.77***	.64***	(.89)		
4. <i>LMX</i>	22.86	6.93	.83***	.79***	.73***	(.93)	
5. <i>Tacit Knowledge Sharing</i>	10.14	2.98	.69***	.76***	.63***	.79***	(.89)

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. two-tailed.

The theoretical model used in this study was found to have good fit by all measures of goodness of fit (Table 3). This suggests that the design of this study was one where the observed relationships could be taken into composite and explain the variance that exists in tacit knowledge sharing through leadership and inter personal relationship factors (Figure 6). This finding suggests that leaders should exude the behaviors of the servant leader; however they need to also go the extra mile and nurture and cultivate the relationship that they share with their followers.

Table 3: Model Fit

X^2	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	X^2/df	CFI	GFI	AGFI	PCLOS	RMSEA	SRMR	AIC
22.09	17	.18	1.30	.99	.96	.89	.42	.05	.09	78.09

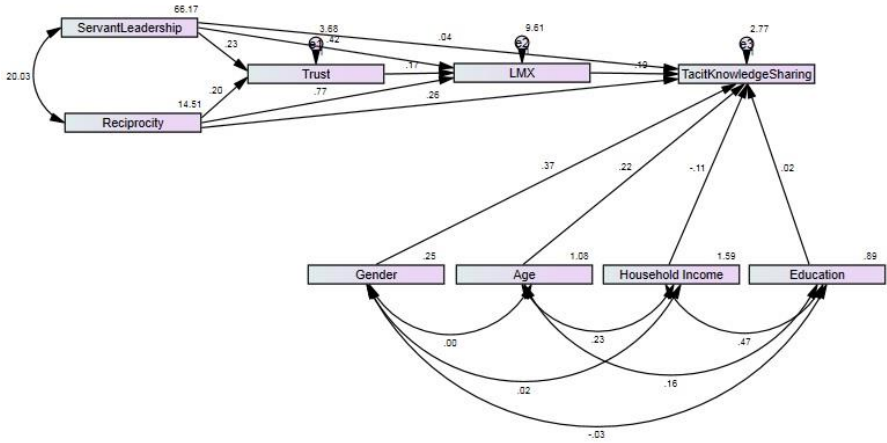


Figure 6: The Theoretical Model Tested in this Study.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that tacit knowledge sharing is greatly influenced by servant leadership and reciprocity with over 60% of variance explained by these factors. This finding suggests that management should embrace servant leadership behaviors and to initiate reciprocal relationships with workers if they wish to improve tacit knowledge sharing. As we continue to move into the information age, the knowledge economy will grow. To be competitive, management must understand how to encourage workers to share tacit knowledge. Managers who focus on industrial age command and control relationships where the focus is on a transactional piece-rate relationship with workers will be at a stark disadvantage.

Leader-member exchange was found to be a significant consequence of servant leadership and reciprocity and a significant antecedent to tacit knowledge sharing. Leader-member exchange was also found to have an indirect effect on the relationship between the both of causal variables of servant leadership and reciprocity and the outcome of tacit knowledge sharing. These findings suggest leader-member exchange is an integral component of the process of influencing workers to share tacit knowledge. Management should integrate servant leadership into their development of leader-member exchange and use reciprocity to encourage a higher quality leader-member relationship.

Limitations and Future Research

There are a number of limitations to this study that span from the method of sampling to the choice of scales for measurement. This study is limited in the ability to generalize findings as this study focused on collecting data in the Midwestern US and in the IT industry. While these findings may indicate things that may be true in other industries and regions, there are a multitude of differences that should be accounted for before findings such as these can be generalized. Second, the sample size can be considered to be somewhat small. This could potentially influence the results of the study especially when looking at the results of moderation. Prior work by Barbuto and Wheeler [16] that developed the scale for servant leadership that was used in this study found convergence between the different elements previously espoused as being the elements that make up servant leadership [13]. Barbuto and Wheeler's factor analysis combined some elements into different characteristics. This study measures for those characteristics, not for the original elements.

Future research may wish to focus on the influence that the individual factors of servant leadership have in the designed model. Further, future research may wish to understand the influence that tacit knowledge sharing may have as a causal variable of other factors such as performance and organizational efficiency and effectiveness. The use of other leadership models may be useful when attempting to understand the impact of leadership in this model. Transformational leadership could be a part of competing models, as could things such as authentic leadership. A more robust model utilizing other interpersonal factors such as worker's psychological contract, trust with the organization or organizational climate or culture may be useful factors to measure in this model. The impact of technology could be a useful factor to use to moderate the constructed model or any future robust models. In organizations where workers participate in virtual work versus those where workers have a high degree of co-location can be useful.

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