

Culture & Servant Leadership: The Impact of Situational Strength

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The concept of servant leadership has gathered significant attention from leadership scholars. However, since it is a non-conventional form of leadership, some researchers have expressed the concern that followers in some cultures might perceive such leaders to be ineffective. This paper explores the perceived effectiveness of a servant leader in different cultures. Cultural factors like power distance and uncertainty avoidance act as cues that determine the situational strength in various social situations like leader-follower interaction. Drawing from the situational strength theory, mechanisms are proposed to explain the perceived effectiveness of a servant leader in cultures with high and low power distances and strong and weak uncertainty avoidance. Managerial implications have been discussed.

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Introduction

The topic of leadership has been at the center of scholarly attention for a long time (Alvesson, 2019; Newman et al., 2018). The study of leadership is of utmost importance because of the crucial position of the leaders in organizations as well as societies. Researchers have proposed several typologies of leadership, out of which transformational and transactional leadership have attracted significant scholarly attention. However, over the past few decades, other conceptualizations of leadership, such as ethical leadership, servant leadership and spiritual leadership have also been studied by researchers (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). They differ from the traditional forms of leadership in the force that drives the leader to lead (Patterson et al., 2004). While in servant leadership, a major motive of the leader is to satisfy the psychological needs of the followers, in the case of transformational leadership, it is to attain higher leader effectiveness (van Dierendonck et al., 2014).

Owing to the emphasis on followers, servant leaders are known to be humble, ethical and have been found to sacrifice their self-interest for the sake of development of the followers (Banks et al., 2018; Liu, 2019; Pekerti & Sendjaya, 2010; van Dierendonck et al., 2014). Such a selfless form of leadership has overall been empirically found to have a positive association with performance (Chiniara & Bentein, 2018, 2016). However, some researchers have expressed concern regarding the impact of culture on the appropriateness of servant leadership (Eva, 2018). This concern, in general, stems from the fact that the style of a servant leader might not be in congruence with some cultures. For instance, in a highly individualistic culture, a servant leader might be perceived to be lacking competency. Most South Asian countries have a high-power distance, which essentially means that subordinates are likely to rate a coercive leader positively. This stems from deeply engrained beliefs about the relationship between a leader and a follower. In high power distance societies, the chain of command is very strict, and leaders expect obedience from followers. Subordinates also believe that it is polite and courteous to obey leaders and follow their commands. Therefore, an effective leader in such cultures is one who wears the badge of command and instructs followers to work in a certain way.

There exist mixed findings in the literature regarding the effectiveness of servant leadership (Liu, 2017; Pekerti & Sendjaya, 2010). A plausible explanation for such differences may be cultural fac-

tors. Further, a systematic literature review on servant leadership has expressed the need to explore whether cultural factors like uncertainty avoidance and power distance have a role to play in the perceived effectiveness of a servant leader (Eva, 2018).

The impact of cultural factors on the perceived effectiveness of servant leadership may be explained with the help of several theoretical frameworks, like the situational strength theory. The situational strength theory posits that the characteristics of a situation have the potential to moderate human behavior and response towards it (Rauthmann et al., 2018). Situational strength has been defined as “implicit or explicit cues provided by external entities regarding the desirability of potential behaviors” (Meyer et al., 2010). Cultural factors have been proposed to act as cues that influence the situational strength in a variety of social situations (Cooper & Withey, 2009; Meyer et al., 2010; Rauthmann et al., 2018), including leadership (Eva, 2018). The influence of situational strength on leadership effectiveness and organizational culture has been studied earlier (Masood et al., 2006).

National cultural factors have been found to influence how individuals in a society behave at large (Swoboda & Batton, 2019). It has been studied in literature as a factor that has the potential to influence all facets of life. Impacts of national culture have been studied in contexts like family structure, display of emotions, sense of privacy, tendency to multi-task and a lot more. Thus, there is

ample reason to believe that national culture would impact the perceived effectiveness of a leader. This is because individuals gauge the appropriateness of any social behavior based on their underlying assumptions and beliefs about the same.

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Since leadership is a social phenomenon wherein the perceived effectiveness of the leader by the followers is of utmost importance, it is important to explore the factors that lead to perceptions of leader effectiveness among the followers and which factors lead to perceived lack of effectiveness. National cultural factors are likely to influence situational strength and in turn, the perceptions towards the leadership style of the leader. Therefore, this paper explored the possible role of national cultural factors in the effectiveness of servant leadership concerning the situational strength.

Literature Review

In order to explore the impact of culture on servant leadership, we have drawn from Hofstede's dimensions of national culture. The two dimensions whose impacts have been considered in this paper are power distance and uncertainty avoidance. (Hofstede, 1984).

Power Distance: This dimension focuses on the distribution of power in

society. On one end of the continuum, the general norm is to consult the subordinates while making an important business decision; while on the other end, obedience and respect are expected from the subordinates. The former scenario is more likely in cultures with low power distance while the latter is more likely in cultures with high power distance. Power distance also has implications for social values like respect for the elderly and the meaning of the status difference. Leadership styles might also differ based on power distance of the country.

Uncertainty Avoidance: This refers to the extent to which the members of a society feel comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity in their lives. A culture with strong uncertainty avoidance has an emotional need for formal rules and regulations. Any deviance from the given rules would result in a lot of anxiety and stress for the members. A country with weak uncertainty avoidance would view uncertainty as a part of their day-to-day life or perhaps even as a challenge. Uncertainty avoidance together with power distance may be an important determinant of organizational structure. For instance, if the country has a high power distance and also strong uncertainty avoidance, organizations would be highly centralized and structured. In countries that have low power distance and weak uncertainty avoidance, decentralized and informal structures are more likely. Other implications of uncertainty avoidance may be found in the type of planning used, the meaning and importance of time and appeal for precision. Uncertainty avoidance also affects the emotional expressions of

individuals. In countries with weak uncertainty avoidance, direct emotional expressions and communication are likely to be appreciated. Further, countries with strong uncertainty avoidance have lesser tolerance for deviant behavior.

Servant Leadership

The concept of a servant leader was proposed for the first time in 1977 by Greenleaf (Liu, 2017; Spears, 1996). A servant leader is one who is humble and spiritual (van Dierendonck et al., 2014). Such leaders push their followers towards realizing their full potential (Eva, 2018). Organizational goals are pursued by fostering the development of the employees in this kind of leadership (Chiniara & Bentein, 2018). They have been found to consider themselves one among the followers (Newman et al., 2018). Further, servant leadership has been conceptualized to be associated with a number of positive characteristics like emotional healing (Jit et al., 2017), empowering (Tripathi et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2019), helping subordinates grow and succeed (Wang et al., 2019), putting subordinates first, creating value for the community (Luu, 2019), boosting creativity (Williams et al., 2017), and behaving ethically (Lemoine et al., 2019; Liden et al., 2008). According to some reviews and meta-analyses, servant leadership has been contrasted against traditional leadership styles and has been classified as a non-conventional and value-based leadership style (Banks et al., 2018; Leroy et al., 2018; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002).

Various empirical studies have found a positive association between servant leadership and work-related outcomes like performance and organizational citizenship behavior (Banks et al., 2018); innovative behavior (Newman et al., 2018; Yoshida et al., 2014); work engagement and leader effectiveness (Carter & Baghurst, 2014; van Dierendonck et al., 2014); team cohesion and team performance (Chiniara & Bentein, 2018); organizational learning (Choudhary et al., 2013). Empirical studies have also concluded that servant leadership is likely to be more effective when the environment is static as opposed to dynamic (Smith et al., 2004).

However, there exists contradictory evidence regarding the effectiveness of adopting a servant leadership style. In a case-based study of Australian firms, subordinates did not rate their leader as a servant leader despite their leader having all the characteristics of a servant leader (Liu, 2017). Liu (2017) explained these findings by claiming that subordinates' perception of leadership style is somewhat moderated by the race of the leader. He also proposed that cultural factors might moderate the effectiveness of servant leadership. Several other studies have also studied the impact of culture on servant leadership (Hale & Fields, 2007). In another cross-cultural study of servant leadership, no empirical evidence was found to support the hypothesis that the effectiveness of servant leadership would vary across cultures (Pekerti & Sendjaya, 2010). Thus, there exists a dilemma in the role of cultural factors in explaining the effectiveness of servant leadership.

Situational Strength Theory

As per the situational strength theory, the reaction of individuals towards a situation is governed, to some extent, by the implicit and explicit cues in the environment (Meyer et al., 2010). Several researchers have directed their attention towards understanding the impacts of situational strength on human behavior (like stopping at traffic lights; working hard for deadlines; acting in ways that are inconsistent with traits and a lot more) (Rauthmann et al., 2018).

The situational strength may be strong or weak. A strong situational strength is one in which the majority of individuals are likely to interpret it similarly. In other words, there is less heterogeneity in the manner in which individuals construe the situation. Thereby, individuals in such situations are more likely to respond to the stimulus or situation in the same way (Mullins & Cummings, 1999). Scholars have majorly agreed to the fact that the prevalence of rigid rules in society leads to an increase in the situation strength, which in turn leads to greater compliance with the same (Cooper & Withey, 2009; Rauthmann et al., 2018). The impact of situational strength on human behavior has been studied by various scholars in a variety of work-related contexts as well, like organizational change (Mullins & Cummings, 1999); transformational leadership (Masood et al., 2006); voluntary work behavior (Meyer et al., 2014) and an array of others.

Several researchers have agreed that cultural factors guide situation strength (Masood et al., 2006; Meyer et al., 2010). This is because cultural factors are deep-rooted assumptions and beliefs that guide the actions of individuals who endorse to that culture. In other words, culture acts as implicit cues that demand a particular form of behavior. Compliance to cultural norms is almost compulsory for the inhabitants of the cultural ecosystem. Depending upon their assumptions, a cultural dimension might strengthen or weaken the situational strength. In general, a cultural dimension that makes the situational strength strong is more likely to demand a homogenous pattern of behavior (Mullins & Cummings, 1999). On the other hand, a cultural dimension that weakens the situational strength is likely to consider heterogeneous behavioral patterns as 'normal'.

Depending upon their assumptions, a cultural dimension might strengthen or weaken the situational strength.

Considering the above discussion, situational strength may be considered to be a moderator in the relationship between a particular behavioral pattern and the perceptions of that behavioral pattern in society. In this paper, we have explored the moderating role of situational strength in the relationship between a style of leadership (servant leadership) and the perception of the leader among the followers.

Conceptual Framework

If the organization belongs to a nation with high power distance, the leader-follower relationship is likely to be guided by very rigid rules. Due to the existence of such rigid rules, followers are expected to display a homogenous set of behavior towards the leader. The follower might be expected to display obedience and respect for the leader. Further, he is also expected to follow what the leader says. In other words, the leader is likely to exercise high levels of power and authority. Thus, strict hierarchy is likely to exist in such organizations and is also likely to be considered appropriate and natural by the organizational members. The employees are more likely to follow the rules and regulations with respect to hierarchy and power in the organization. They are likely to follow their leader rather than acting in different ways. The individual difference with respect to obedience to the leader is likely to be low.

Owing to the presence of strict rules and regulations with respect to leader-follower relationship, the situational strength in such an organization is likely to be strong. Thereby, if the leader follows an unconventional and non-traditional style of leadership, it might be considered inappropriate. The appropriate set of leader behaviors in high power distance cultures include exercise of authority, expectation of obedience, directing the followers regarding what should be done and even overt display of signs of power (like being addressed as Sir or Madam, sub-

ordinates standing up when they pass by) and also focusing more on self-development as compared to development of the followers. These leader behaviors are contrary to what is conceptually expected out of a servant leader. A servant leader is expected to be follower-centric, even at the cost of forsaking his or her own self-development and self-interest. Such a leader leads by serving the followers and not be considering himself as superior to them. To elaborate further, a servant leader is not likely to believe in organizational hierarchy and is not likely to consider his followers to be subordinate to him or her. Thus, the chances of acceptance of a servant leader by a high power distance culture may be low. Being humble and aiming to foster the growth of followers at the cost of their own growth might be seen as inappropriate leader behavior in such cultures.

Therefore, it might be proposed that due to the strong situational strength of high power distance cultures, greater exercise of power and authority is expected from the leaders. As a result, followers of such cultures might not perceive a servant leader to be effective.

Proposition 1a: Perceived effectiveness of a servant leader may be expected to be low in cultures with high power distance.

On the contrary, if the power distance of the nation to which the organization belongs is low, the leader-follower relationship is less governed by mechanisms of power and position. The lead-

ers of such organizations are less likely to consider his/her followers to be inferior to them. Further, there are likely to be fewer rigid rules and regulations in the organizations that govern the pattern of interaction between the leader and the follower. The leader is neither expected to be authoritative nor is blind obedience expected out of the followers. In sum, a strict hierarchy may not be considered to be appropriate in such organizations. Owing to the absence of rules and regulations that govern the leader-subordinate relationship, it is more likely that different leader-subordinate pair would have different patterns of interaction. Therefore, heterogeneity in leadership style is not an unacceptable thing.

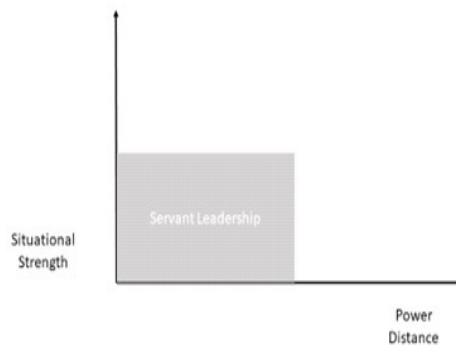
The leader is neither expected to be authoritative nor is blind obedience expected out of the followers.

In the absence of strict codes of conduct between the leader and the followers, the situational strength governing the relationship between the leader and the follower is weak. Thereby, the set of appropriate leader behaviors is not strictly laid down as a result of which, if the leader follows a non-conventional leadership style like servant leadership, it might not be considered inappropriate by the followers and other organizational members. Contrarily, a humble leader who displays greater concern for the development of followers in such cultures might be seen in a positive light by followers. Therefore,

it might be proposed that, due to weak situational strength in low power distance cultures, servant leadership might be seen in an extremely positive light and leaders who exhibit this form of leadership might be perceived to be highly effective.

Proposition 1b: Perceived effectiveness of a servant leader may be expected to be high in cultures with low power distance.

Fig. 1 Zone Where a Servant Leader Is Likely to Thrive



Graphically, the zone where a servant leader is likely to be perceived in the most positive light has been depicted in fig. 1.

The cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance too has been conceptualized as a broad generalization of situational strength (Meyer et al., 2010). If the organization belongs to a nation with strong uncertainty avoid-

ance, it is more likely for the leader and his or her followers to be intolerant and uncomfortable in ambiguous situations. Such cultures have been found to show a preference towards behaving in a predictable and conventional manner. In order to reduce the discomforts associated with uncertainty, they might often rely on social norms, rituals and bureaucratic practices. Reliance on such practices greatly homogenizes patterns of behavior both in organizations as well as in society at large. Thus, the situation strength in such cultures has been conceptualized to be strong (Meyer et al., 2010; Rauthmann et al., 2018). Deviance from these norms might not be perceived in a positive light in cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance. Thereby, individual differences in broad behavior patterns, including deviance from conventional norms of leadership may not be acceptable and perceived positively by followers. Rather, due to the divergence of leader behavior pattern in servant leadership from a conventional leader, a servant leader might not be perceived to be effective in such cultures where uncertainty avoidance is strong. Thereby, owing to the strong situational strength in cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance, it might be proposed, that the perceived effectiveness of a servant leader is low.

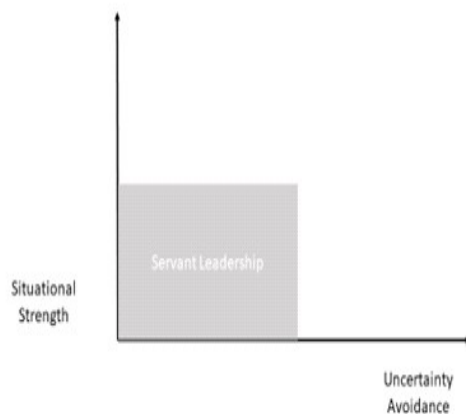
A servant leader might not be perceived to be effective in such cultures where uncertainty avoidance is strong.

Proposition 2a: Perceived effectiveness of a servant leader may be expected to be low in cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance.

Conversely, if the organization belongs to a nation with weak uncertainty avoidance, organizational members, including the leaders and the followers are likely to be somewhat tolerant towards uncertainty and ambiguity in the environment. Therefore, the general tendency of members of such a culture might be to show a preference for behaving in distinctive and unique ways. This implies that the reliance on societal norms and rituals is likely to be lower. Further, it also means that the tendency to prefer homogenized behavior patterns in the organization is likely to be low. Therefore, the situational strength is likely to be lower in such cultures. Deviance from the norm is likely to be considered normal and may even be perceived in a positive manner. Thus, individual differences in behavior patterns, including leadership style is likely to be appreciated. Therefore, deviance from conventional leadership styles may be perceived positively. Since a servant leader follows a style of leadership that is different from the traditional forms of leadership, it is more likely that a servant leader will be perceived to be an effective leader in a weak uncertainty avoidance situation. Thereby, it may be proposed that, owing to the weak situation strength in a culture with weak uncertainty avoidance, a servant leader is likely to be perceived as an effective leader.

Proposition 2b: Perceived effectiveness of a servant leader is likely to be higher in a culture with weak uncertainty avoidance. In sum, the zone where a servant leader is likely to be seen in the most positive light with respect to uncertainty avoidance has been depicted in fig. 2.

Fig. 2: Zone Where A Servant Leader Is Likely to Thrive



Discussion

This paper has explored the servant leadership as an unconventional or non-traditional form of leadership. This is in congruence with the conceptualizations of other authors (Banks et al., 2018; Leroy et al., 2018). Further, factors like situational strength have been considered to explain why cultures with high power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance might not perceive such a form of leadership to be highly effective. This has several practical implications. Nations which are

high on power distance like China and India (“Power Distance Index,” 2018) might be less tolerant of servant leadership as a form of organizational leadership as the situational strength is very strong in these nations and they might lack trust in a leader who is overly concerned about subordinates. It might be said that organizational members of such high power distance nations might expect leaders to be authoritative and instructing them regarding what they should do and what they should not. Such followers are also more likely to accept coercive behavior from their leaders.

On the other hand, a nation that scores low on power distance is likely to be more open to servant leadership. This is because the situational strength is likely to be low and therefore, leaders might have more independence to choose their style of leadership. Leaders and managers in low power distance nations like the USA and Australia (Smith, 2012) are more likely to be perceived as highly effective if they follow the servant leadership style.

Nations which have strong uncertainty avoidance are also likely to have strong situation strength which in turn is likely to reduce the perceived effectiveness of a servant leader. This too has managerial implications as leaders in cultures with high uncertainty avoidance might need to dictate clear instructions to their followers so that the level of ambiguity and uncertainty in the situation can be tolerable by the followers. Contrarily, nations with weak uncer-

tainty avoidance are likely to have weak situation strength and hence are likely to have a more positive outlook towards a servant leader. This has similar implications for managers and leaders of such nations.

It might be noted that some nations might be having a high power distance along with weak uncertainty avoidance. In such a case, the aggregate situational strength due to the various degrees of power distance and uncertainty avoidance might be taken into account. This is because situation strength does not depend on only one factor. Rather, a combination of factors determines the situation strength: clarity, consequence, consistency and contrasts (Rauthmann et al., 2018). Therefore, both scholars and managers need to keep in mind that situation strength is a function of a number of factors in the environment and not just power distance and uncertainty avoidance or not just culture. Culture is likely to be a subset of all the factors that influence situation strength.

This paper also contributes to the literature on situation strength theory by explaining the role of situation strength on the appropriateness of servant leadership style in a particular national culture. Earlier work on this topic focused only on organizational culture (Masood et al., 2006). This paper has extended the link between situation strength and culture by proposing the relationship between situation strength and national culture. This paper contributes to the field of international business in the sense that it suggests the compatibility of national

culture and servant leadership. Hence, firms which have subsidiaries, joint ventures or mergers and acquisitions overseas might consider the cultural appropriateness of a particular leadership style, specifically if it is a non-traditional one.

Some of the limitations of this paper include the fact that the dimensions of power distance and uncertainty avoidance have not been aggregated to form a single dimension so that better prediction could be made. Future researchers could focus on developing a model that can explain the interplay of power distance and uncertainty avoidance together. Secondly, there are several other dimensions of national culture like femininity versus masculinity and time-orientation. Further, there are dimensions of culture beyond what was proposed by Hofstede. Studies focusing on newer aspects of culture would also help understand the holistic picture. Thirdly, just like organizational culture has been found to have an impact on transformational leadership (Masood et al., 2006), it could also have a possible impact on servant leadership. Future studies might also focus on developing frameworks to understand the role of organizational culture and situation strength on servant leadership behavior. Fourthly, we have proposed a likely relationship between cultural factors and perceived effectiveness of servant leadership. However, for validation of these claims, empirical studies need to be conducted. Such studies need to focus on data from nations which vary considerably in their scores on the respective indices.

Implications for South Asian Countries

The cultural context of South Asia requires special attention in the field of leadership. For decades, findings obtained in Western studies have been generalized to South Asia despite its vivid cultural differences with countries of the West. For instance, most South Asian countries have high power distance. This dictates several organizational norms. Firstly, most traditional organizations have an apparently strict hierarchy and power distribution. Employees here are likely to know who is the boss. Usually, the leader has supreme decision-making authority and employees are expected to obey the rules and regulations. They are not supposed to address their leaders by first names, rather they are expected to pay respect and use “madam” or “sir”. This implies that there are strict rules that guide leader-follower exchange. In addition, high power distance implies that the leader has the natural right to coerce the follower. The leader is not expected to keep the interests of the followers in mind.

Conclusion

Thus, the mediating role of situational strength in the relationship between national culture and the perceived effectiveness of a servant leader by the followers has been explored with the help of the situational strength theory. Overall, it may be claimed that when the cultural factors lead to strong situational strength, the perceived ef-

fectiveness of a servant leader decreases. On the other hand, when the cultural factors weaken the situational strength, the perceived effectiveness of a servant leader is likely to increase. This paper only explored two dimensions of national culture: power distance and uncertainty avoidance. Future research attention needs to be directed towards understanding the impact of other cultural dimensions. In addition, a holistic understanding of all the dimensions of national as well organizational culture would provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

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