

## Impact of Servant Leadership on Employee Work Engagement: Mediating Role of Psychological Climate

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This study examined the influence of servant leadership (SL) on the faculty's work engagement. It also examined psychological climate (PC) as mediating variable in this relationship. Moreover, this study has considered social exchange theory (SET) as a base theory to explain the relationship between SL, PC, and work engagement. A quantitative research design was applied and data was collected using questionnaires from faculty members of Pakistani universities. A total of 276 datasets were analyzed through Structural Equation Modeling using SPSS version 27.0 and Smart-PLS 3. The findings of this study provide evidence that SL is the key leadership style for Pakistani universities. In addition, the PC significantly mediates the relationship between SL and faculty members' work engagement. In conclusion, the current study has extended the SET by incorporating PC as a mediator between the relationship of SL and the work engagement of faculty members in Pakistani universities. The findings are useful to the universities of Pakistan to consider the SL practices that are important in shaping the powerful motivational process of PC to enhance the level of work engagement among faculty members .

**Keywords:** Servant Leadership, Psychological Climate, Work Engagement, Social Exchange Theory, Education Sector.

A common definition of work engagement is being proactive in a task or purpose in the human-oriented and positive organizational behavior area that contributes to the improvement of workplace performance, focusing on that goal (Soares & Mosquera, 2019). Employee work engagement is an important topic and burning issue across the globe (Tsaur *et al.*, 2019). A recent report on global workplace engagement stated that eighty-five percent of employees worldwide are not engaged in their jobs (Memon *et al.*, 2020; Gallup, 2018), resulting in significant productivity costs (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2019).

According to a survey, work engagement amongst employees working in different sectors of Pakistan has declined over time but its more in the education sector of Pakistan, and this has led to low productivity and growth (Sheikh *et al.*, 2019). During the last decade, certain issues like corruption, mismanagement, and low budget badly influence the education sector and resulting in poor educational outcomes. Work engagement among faculty members of Pakistani universities has become one of the primary concerns for policymakers and academicians

(Sheikh *et al.*, 2019). Thus, the current study aims to investigate the critical issues of work engagement amongst faculty members specifically relating to PC and leadership style.

Leadership styles that positively influence their followers in higher educational settings and their probable effects on employees' attitudes and behaviors are key interests of researchers nowadays. Practitioners and academicians have emphasized the probable role of leadership styles that assist universities in achieving their objectives and encouraging work-related goals amongst faculty members (Jones & Harvey, 2017). Additionally, it is essential for making an improved comprehension of leadership behaviors (Inman, 2011), and to apply the most practiced leadership style in the universities to improve employee and organizational outcomes (Esen *et al.*, 2020).

The literature revealed that various studies have been conducted in higher education settings to improve employee and organizational outcomes, such as faculty members' satisfaction with their job (Smerek & Peterson, 2007) staff commitment (Nazir & Islam, 2017), staff spirit (Rosser, 2004), faculty members turnover (Johnsrud *et al.*, 2000), and work engagement (Okun & Arun, 2020). Although studies on employee engagement, leadership styles, and their consequences have been conducted (Cole *et al.*, 2012; Richter, 2018), leadership and faculty members' engagement are still under-researched and are relatively new topics to the education sector (Wilkins *et al.*, 2017; Zacher & Johnson, 2015).

Existing literature revealed that SL is most compatible with the values of the education sector as compared to other leadership styles (Wheeler, 2012). A recent systematic review on SL has identified potential research gaps in the existing literature. Thus, according to Eva *et al.* (2019), only five research studies were reported from Pakistan about SL style and more research is encouraged in the future. In addition, past research studies have identified mediating mechanisms between SL and work engagement. In past studies, mediators that were examined in the relationship between SL and work engagement are group trust climate, job resources, need satisfaction, psychological empowerment, and, organizational identification (Coetzer *et al.*, 2017; de Sousa & van Dierendonck 2014; van Dierendonck *et al.*, 2014; Ling *et al.*, 2017). However, more studies are needed to identify the mediating mechanism between the relationship between SL and work engagement (Aboramadan *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, the present study has identified PC as a mediating mechanism between SL and work engagement. According to Aboramadan *et al.* (2020), future studies may consider PC as a mediating mechanism between SL and the work engagement relationship.

This inclusion of PC as a linking mechanism between SL and work engagement will extend previous research, which has mainly focused on person-job fit, intrinsic motivation and psychological ownership, group trust climate, leader-member exchange, need satisfaction, psychological empowerment, organizational identification, psychological capital, job resources, job crafting, job satisfaction, and public service motivation (de Sousa & van Dierendonck 2014; Kaur, 2018; Coetzer *et al.*, 2017; Aboramadan *et al.*, 2020; Ling *et al.*, 2017; van Dierendonck *et al.*, 2014; Yang *et al.*, 2017; Bao *et al.*, 2018). PC is defined as a determination by the person of how much their work environment contributes to their sense of well-being (Carless, 2004). Different research studies have also considered PC as an important underlying mechanism at work that explains a wide range of attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (e.g. Ozyilmaz & Cicek, 2015; Saengon *et al.*, 2020; Savas & Toprak, 2014).

In conclusion, this study is trying to fill several research gaps. Firstly, it will look at leadership styles from the perspective of SL in the education sector of Pakistan as existing

literature revealed that studies conducted on SL in Pakistan are scarce (Eva *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, more research is required in this area. Secondly, the present study proposes that SL may affect positively on work engagement of faculty members in the universities of Pakistan, as there is a dearth of study on work engagement and related factors in educational institutions (Wilkins *et al.*, 2018). Thirdly, the present study has introduced a mediating mechanism in the form of PC between SL and work engagement to investigate the direct and indirect relationships between SL and work engagement among faculty members of Pakistani universities (Aboramadan *et al.*, 2020).

### **Hypotheses Development**

#### **Servant Leadership (SL) and Work Engagement**

Work Engagement has received tremendous consideration in the last two decades (Aboramadan *et al.*, 2020; Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). According to Schaufeli *et al.* (2006), work engagement can be broken down into three categories: enthusiasm, commitment, and absorption. Work engagement refers to employees' perceptions of their jobs as encouraging and stimulating activities to which they dedicate their time, hard work, and energy that is vigor. The dedication dimension is defined as, these employees regard their job as a valuable endeavor, and the last dimension absorption is defined as when employees regard their job as demanding and exciting (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006).

SL, on the other hand, is a significant approach (Greenleaf, 1970, 2002; Monfardini, 2009) a lifelong drive, and an administrative tool through which leaders' expression is extracted about their will to serve (Aboramadan *et al.*, 2020b). SL elucidates variance in consequent variables more as compared to the authentic, transformational, and ethical leadership styles (Banks *et al.*, 2018). SL is distinct as its focus is on aspirational and motivational characteristics that can find followers' requirements for psychological support as well as their belongings to help lessen their workplace challenges (Eva *et al.*, 2019). In universities, the engagement of faculty members is critical because the low engagement level of faculty members may result in several problems, that may include teaching quality and research.

Past literature, for example, Ling *et al.* (2017), De Clercq *et al.* (2014), Kaur (2018), Carter and Baghurst (2014), Coetzer *et al.* (2017), Aseanty *et al.* (2022), Zeeshan *et al.* (2021) has shown that SL is positively associated with work engagement. SL fuels the vigor amongst their subordinates (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) since SL identified the distinctive skills and expertise of their followers (Van Dierendonck, 2011). As a consequence, followers will experience positive feelings at work (Page & Wong, 2000) and this is the result of the extraordinary caring attitude of their servant leader. Through the effective use of communication, a positive work environment, and equipment with direction, servant leaders also assist followers in becoming more energized to reach their full work capacity (Van Dierendonck, 2011). SL is likely to have a beneficial effect on a wide range of personal, group, and organizational level outcomes (Yoshida *et al.*, 2014).

According to the SET, employers, as well as employees, would relish quality and trusting relationships till both parties adhere to the reciprocal arrangement (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Employees would behave or respond positively as a result of the employer's favourable arrangements (Saks, 2006). Employees will feel obligated and repay the company by showing high levels of work engagement when servant leaders establish a favourable work environment for them (Saks, 2006).

Hence, based on the SET (Blau, 1964) and existing literature, it is assumed that servant leaders' actions may be positively recognized by their faculty members (followers), and that faculty members (followers) will respond by enhancing their engagement in the workplace. As a result, it is assumed that:

H1. *SL is positively and significantly related to the work engagement of faculty members in the universities of Pakistan.*

### **Psychological climate (PC) as a mediator between servant leadership (SL) and work engagement**

Existing literature has shown that leadership is an important antecedent of PC (e.g., Schneider *et al.*, 2005; Van Dierendonck, 2011; Ozyilmaz & Cicek, 2015; Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008). The current study also claims that SL is a significant and positive driver of PC as it forms reciprocal arrangements through SL practices that increase the interest of the faculty members (followers) (Blau, 1964). Past studies have shown associations between the SL and PC. For instance, Ozyilmaz & Cicek (2015) surveyed employees of for-profit organizations and found a strong positive association between SL and PC. Similarly, past studies have also shown a strong link between PC and work engagement. For example, Lee (2015) examined the relationship between the PC and work engagement and found that SL is an important determinant of work engagement. Similarly, Kataria *et al.* (2013) investigated the influence of PC on the work engagement of employees in an IT organization in India and found that PC is a strong driver of work engagement. This study asserts that the PC has a beneficial effect on work engagement. Therefore, PC turns into the mechanism for achieving employee work engagement. Therefore, this study proposes that the PC acts as a mediating mechanism between SL the work engagement. Accordingly, an employee engagement level is determined by the employee's PC with their social setting, which is shaped by the SL serving behaviours. Moreover, previous research supports that PC positively affects work engagement (e.g., Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2008; Hakanen *et al.*, 2006; Lee, 2015; Saks, 2006).

PC refers to the emotional and observable elements of a worker's interactions with supervisors and colleagues. SL plays a dynamic role in establishing these climate perceptions of an employee. As per SET, "managerial practices that advance the collective interest of subordinates create joint obligations" (Blau, 1964: 207). Lewin *et al.* (1939) support this viewpoint by suggesting that employee work engagement is the outcome of diverse climates formed by various leadership styles.

This study supports the idea that workplace climate creates a social environment that affects employees' views in terms of their level of engagement at work. The PC that an individual experience from their social settings influences their work engagement (Lee, 2015), and PC about the employee needs provide servant leaders the possibility to deliver service by supporting their juniors in the shape of practical advice on a particular job or emotional support to employees who require personal healings (Liden *et al.*, 2014). Followers (employees) show serving behaviours as a consequence when they receive the advantages of their servant leader that assist them to become smarter, freer, healthier, and self-determined (Van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2004). It is believed that for subordinates if the experience of serving others is more psychologically fulfilling, and more employee benefits are received from the actions of a servant leader, the more the level of engagement of employees at their workplace. PC has also been proposed as a mediator in various relationships in recent empirical studies (e.g. Lee, 2015; Ozyilmaz & Cicek, 2015; Saengon *et al.*, 2020; Savas & Toprak, 2014). In line with the past research studies, we propose that SL shapes individual PC in a way that promotes positive

follower attitudes (i.e. work engagement), as implied by the social exchange theory reciprocity norm. As a result, we propose the hypothesis below:

H2: *PC mediates the relationship between SL and work engagement of faculty members in the universities of Pakistan.*

**Research Model**

This study suggests a framework for assessing the link between SL behaviours and faculty members' work engagement. Furthermore, the research suggests that PC acts as an important mediator between SL and work engagement relationship.

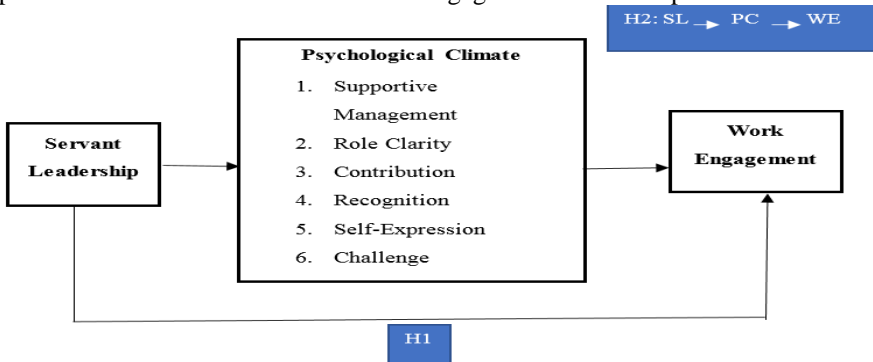


Figure 2.1.: Research Model

**Method**

The data was collected through a self-administered questionnaire from Pakistani universities using a quantitative research design. Referring to the Pakistan “HEC Universities Statistics, 2018” as the population of the current study, the data was gathered from faculty members at Pakistan's top ten universities. The response rate was 85 percent, thus being suitable for further analysis (Bell *et al.*, 2018). Data was analysed through Smart-PLS 3.

**Measures**

In the present study, all variables were evaluated using five-point Likert scales, ranging from 1-5. 1 represents strongly disagree whereas 5 represents strongly agree. For *SL*, a 7-item scale developed by Liden *et al.* (2015) was used. For *PC*, a 20-item scale that was developed by Brown & Leigh (1996) was used. For *Work Engagement*, a 9-item scale developed by Schaufeli *et al.* (2006) was used.

**Results**

**Measurement Model**

For the assessment of the measurement model, the acceptable value for factor loadings is equal to or greater than 0.60, and those values that lie below 0.60 were removed (Gefen & Straub, 2005). In this study, all factor loadings were found to be greater than 0.60 except for one item (SM2), which is 0.582. This item, however, was not removed because leaving it out has no discernible impact on the measurement model. This technique has been used in other studies that retained the factor loading values which are less than 0.6 but are above 0.50 (For. e.g. Lee, 2015). In the measurement model, the threshold for composite reliability is 0.70 (Ringle *et al.*,

2020), and the cut-off value for convergent validity (i.e. average variance extracted) is 0.50 (Ringle *et al.*, 2020). This study construct holds the threshold of composite reliability and convergent validity (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Factor loadings, alpha coefficient reliability, composite reliability, and average variance extracted*

	<b>Λ</b>	<b>Alpha</b>	<b>CR</b>	<b>AVE</b>
<b>Servant Leadership</b>		0.944	0.954	0.747
SL1	0.881			
SL2	0.878			
SL3	0.885			
SL4	0.840			
SL5	0.864			
SL6	0.831			
SL7	0.871			
<b>Supportive Management</b>		0.737	0.816	0.534
SM1	0.625			
SM2	0.582			
SM3	0.796			
SM4	0.878			
<b>Role Clarity</b>		0.823	0.895	0.741
RC1	0.741			
RC2	0.921			
RC3	0.908			
<b>Contribution</b>		0.872	0.913	0.724
C1	0.849			
C2	0.897			
C3	0.886			
C4	0.766			
<b>Recognition</b>		0.890	0.932	0.820
R1	0.910			
R2	0.873			
R3	0.933			
<b>Self-Expression</b>		0.896	0.928	0.763
SE1	0.908			
SE2	0.907			
SE3	0.785			
SE4	0.888			
<b>Challenge</b>		0.755	0.889	0.800
Ch1	0.925			
Ch2	0.863			
<b>Work Engagement</b>		0.946	0.955	0.701
WE1	0.857			
WE2	0.844			
WE3	0.869			
WE4	0.857			
WE5	0.836			
WE6	0.786			
WE7	0.844			
WE8	0.888			
WE9	0.747			

The Heterotrait Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) technique is utilised to determine the discriminant validity (DV) of the constructs. The more conservative threshold for HTMT values is 0.85 or suggestively lower than 0.9, to support measures' DV (Hair *et al.*, 2018). In this study, all HTMT is less than 0.90, therefore, DV is achieved (Table 2).

**Table 2**  
*Discriminant Validity using HTMT*

	C	Ch	R	RC	SE	SL	SM	WE
C								
Ch	0.572							
R	0.736	0.820						
RC	0.851	0.692	0.804					
SE	0.643	0.845	0.890	0.699				
SL	0.850	0.638	0.787	0.836	0.623			
SM	0.443	0.506	0.659	0.737	0.618	0.552		
WE	0.895	0.635	0.753	0.752	0.588	0.836	0.406	

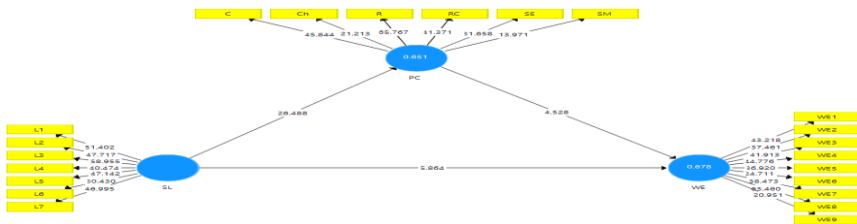
**Structural model**

The structural model explains the relationships that are established amongst the constructs of the proposed study. H1 assesses whether SL is positively and significantly linked to work engagement. The results exhibited that SL is positively and significantly linked to work engagement ( $\beta=0.486$ ,  $t=5.864$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). The results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
*Structural Model Direct Effect*

Hypothesis	Relationship	Coefficient				Sig	Remark
		( $\beta$ )	t	p			
H1	SL -> WE	0.486	5.864	0.000	***	Accepted	

Note: \*\*\* $p<0.01$ , \*\*  $p<0.05$



**Figure 4.1: Structural Model**

**Mediation analysis**

H2 assesses PC as mediating variable in the relationship between SL and work engagement. This study shows that by adding the mediator in the proposed model of SL and work engagement, the direct relationship was significant ( $\beta=0.486$ ,  $t=5.864$ ,  $P=0.000$ ) (table 3) and the indirect relationship was also significant ( $\beta=0.306$ ,  $t=4.740$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) (table 4.4). Hence, the results show partial mediation as the direct and indirect effects both show significant results. Therefore, H2 is supported as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4.***Structural Model Indirect Effect*

Hypothesis	Relationship	Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	t	p	Sig	Remark
H2	SL->PC->WE	0.306	4.740	0.000	***	Accepted

Note: \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ 

### Discussion

This study has investigated the direct link between SL and the faculty's work engagement. The study also investigated this relationship indirectly through the mediating mechanism of the faculty's PC. These relationships were studied in the universities of Pakistan as existing literature revealed that due to the lack of motivation of faculty members in Pakistani Universities, low productivity and growth have resulted in universities of Pakistan (Sheikh *et al.*, 2019). Data was collected from faculty members to analyse the impact of their leader's behaviour on work-related attitudes. The results obtained through empirical analysis have shown that the findings of the study were aligned with the hypothesized relationships.

#### Direct Effect

The data analysis of this study has shown a positive and significant relationship between SL and faculty's work engagement ( $\beta=0.486$ ,  $t=5.864$ ,  $P=0.000$ ). The findings indicate that SL creates an environment for employees to work with more dedication and motivation. This result is consistent with the previous literature that showed a positive link between leaders' behaviour and faculty's work engagement. According to Singh *et al.* (2020), SL has a positive significant impact on employee work engagement of hotel employees. According to Kaur (2018), when employees feel the positive attitude and behaviour of servant leaders, they are deeply encouraged towards exercising high levels of engagement and satisfaction in work. Thus, enriching the caring attitude amongst employees and improving the organizational environment by improving their satisfaction at the workplace differentiate servant leaders from other leadership styles. The findings of this study are supported by past literature.

Past Literature has also revealed that the effectiveness of the SL is related to the non-profitability structure of the organisation, as when a for-profit organisation is facing financial problems and needs to reduce spending to remain profitable, it is incredibly hard for a servant leader to maintain the competing interests of owners and employees (Schneider & George, 2011). By considering serving others first as an important element of SL (Greenleaf, 1977), the research study, Ozyilmaz and Cicek (2015) articulated that, SL is endorsed in a for-profit organisation by a servant leader demonstrating managerial skills and consistency in resolving various problems faced by the employees on daily basis, by meeting followers' workplace requirements and such that followers show job commitment in the organization, and by fostering an environment/climate where followers value teamwork and coordination when carrying out their duties. Recently, studies conducted on the employees working in the private sector universities in Western Jakarta and the banking sector of Pakistan, have found a positive impact of SL on employee work engagement (Aseanty *et al.*, 2022; Zeeshan *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, the effectiveness of SL in relation to employee attitudes and behaviours is applicable to all organizations irrespective of their organizational structure (for-profit or non-profit).



### **Mediating Effect**

In addition, it was also found that the PC of employees at the workplace acts as a mediator between SL and faculty's work engagement ( $\beta=0.306$ ,  $t=4.740$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). These results showed that SL in Pakistani universities indirectly influence the faculty's work engagement by affecting their PC. The results of this investigation are consistent with earlier research that has found that PC plays a significant mediating role. (e.g. Lee, 2015; Saengon *et al.*, 2020; Savas & Toprak, 2014; Ozyilmaz & Cicek, 2015). SL practices shape the PC of faculty members to enhance the level of work engagement among faculty members. Thus, PC is formed because of the perceived social settings, and due to the social environment provided, a social influence grows, and as a result work engagement is reflected in the employees' behaviour. According to the social exchange theory, employers and employees would relish a trusting relationships till both parties adhere to exchange rules (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The positive arrangements by the employer (servant leader) would result in positive behaviour or responses displayed by the employees (Saks, 2006). Servant leaders create a positive environment (psychological climate) for the employees to work in, and in return, employees will feel obliged and will repay the organization through high levels of work engagement (Saks, 2006). This study's findings are consistent with earlier studies. Based on the findings, it can be implied that to improve work engagement amongst faculty members, universities must consider the dynamic between servant leaders and the PC of their followers, which is formed by the serving behaviors of their leaders.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study suggested several practical implications that can be made to the education sector as well as other service sectors which are suffering low levels of work engagement amongst their employees. First and foremost, this study has revealed the presence and function of SL in Pakistan's educational system, which has resulted in several positive outcomes. In practice, normally supervisors/managers evaluate the performance and work behaviours of their subordinates and not vice-versa. Therefore, to improve the working climate of the organization and to achieve organizational goals, universities can take anonymous feedback from the employees regarding their supervisors' behaviour, which may help identify servant leaders, so that significant improvements can be made to improve the organizational work environment (psychological climate) that may result in employee's work engagement. Hence through proper SL practices and the PC of the employees, a high level of work engagement can be achieved in the field of education as well as in other service industries.

In view of the information vacuum in the prior literature addressing the relationship between SL and work engagement, this study is one the empirical evidence of the occurrence of SL in the Pakistani educational sector and identified it as a crucial antecedent of faculty members' engagement. This study augments previous research by linking SL, PC, and work engagement, and it strengthens the literature supporting SL influences organizational performance. This study has tested an integrated model that connects SL and work engagement via mediating role of PC. By utilizing social exchange theory, this work has added to the corpus of knowledge already available. Blau (1964) shows that SL can significantly improve the PC which is important in increasing the likelihood of a work engagement. Thus, a positive PC environment that is formed by leadership practices helps explain the link between SL and work engagement.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

There are some limitations of the study which can be considered in future research studies. Firstly, it was cross-sectional, thus, future researchers can conduct a longitudinal study

to examine the influence of SL on their faculty members' engagement, so that relationship between the constructs of the study can be better understood. Secondly, this study was conducted on Pakistani university faculty members; while the findings may be different from the perspective of college faculty or faculty of other countries. Future research can be conducted on cross-country and cross-sector for more generalizability.

Thirdly, this research has considered both private and public sector universities, but the comparison between private sector universities and public sector universities was ignored. Future researchers can undertake a comparative study between public and private sector universities, to identify where SL and work engagement are more dominant. Furthermore, future researchers can consider equal participation of private and public sector universities which could not be made probable in this study due to time restrictions and resource constraints.

Lastly, the present research has taken into consideration only a few constructs that are influenced by SL. Future researchers may consider other constructs for example values play an important role in assisting a leader's behaviour (Arun & Gedik, 2020). Every organization's leaders need to be aware of the values that are upheld by their workforce. A leader needs to behave in such a way that is appropriate for the roles that their subordinates expect of them. Therefore, thorough research is needed to examine how perceived values may support leader conduct by examining employees' day-to-day actions. In order to be effective leaders, they must learn to act appropriately for the roles that their subordinates expect of them.

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