Exploring the Impact of Servant Leadership on Thriving at Work and Adaptive Performance

BY

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Abstract

Servant leadership has been found to be associated with a wide range of positive employee work outcomes; however, we have a limited understanding of whether and how it may contribute to employee thriving and adaptability in the workplace. Drawing on Spreitzer and Porath’s (2014) integrative model of human growth at work and relevant theories of self-esteem (e.g., sociometer theory), this research examined the influence of servant leadership on employee thriving and adaptive performance, and the potential mediating role of organization-based self esteem (OBSE) on these relationships. Using a three-wave design, survey data were collected from employees and their supervisors in a medium-sized private sector organization. Results revealed that servant leadership is positively associated with both employee thriving and adaptive performance partly via its effects on OBSE. Furthermore, results indicated that the relationship between servant leadership on OBSE was more pronounced when employees reported lower levels of power distance, signaling that employees lower on power distance may be more responsive to the more personalized approach displayed by servant leaders. Taken together, this research highlights the integral role that servant leadership may play in shaping OBSE, and in turn, fostering employee thriving and adaptability. Further research is needed examining how servant leadership influences well-being in the workplace, including the effects of servant leadership on the well-being and career success of the leaders themselves.
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1.1 Overview of the Proposed Research

A thriving workforce has become more and more essential for long-term organizational success in today’s fast-paced, competitive business environment (Heintzelman & Diener, 2019; Prem et al., 2017; Spreitzer et al., 2012; Walumbwa et al., 2018). The concept of thriving at work has been defined as experiencing both a sense of vitality and learning in the workplace (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Vitality reflects a positive feeling of aliveness and having energy, whereas learning reflects a feeling of acquiring or applying knowledge and skills (Spreitzer et al., 2005).

To sustain organizational success, companies need employees who are energized to work and willing to learn and develop (Prem et al., 2017). In this sense, thriving is crucial since it strengthens both employees' psychological and physiological health and their desire for personal improvement (Spreitzer et al., 2012). More specifically, thriving at work reduces absenteeism and healthcare costs due to stress or burnout in organizations (Walumbwa et al., 2018). It is also positively related to many work outcomes, including employee performance, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (Gerbasi et al., 2015; Spreitzer et al., 2012). In addition to these positive outcomes, Sonnentag and Fritz (2007) argue that thriving is especially crucial in today’s fast-paced organizations since employees must continuously learn to keep their knowledge up-to-date and to be flexible in their careers, which can further sustain their well-being and performance (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007).
Although the importance of thriving has been underlined by researchers (Fritz et al., 2011; Gerbasi et al., 2015; Porath et al., 2012; Spreitzer et al., 2005, 2012), there has been a paucity of research on thriving at work (Niessen et al., 2012; Walumbwa et al., 2018). In particular, studies assessing the role of leadership in enabling thriving in organizations have been overlooked (Paterson et al., 2014). Drawing on Spreitzer et al.’s integrative model of human growth at work (Spreitzer et al., 2005; Spreitzer & Porath, 2014), the current research proposes that servant leadership is a critical antecedent of thriving at work since servant leaders prioritize the development and well-being of their employees (Greenleaf, 1977).

In addition to thriving at work, another crucial concept linked to organizational success is adaptive performance. Adaptive performance is defined as “task-performance-directed behaviors individuals enact in response to or in anticipation of changes relevant to job-related tasks” (Jundt et al., 2015, pp. 54–55). Adaptive performance is a critical concept to understand given the levels of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity that exist in today’s work environment for many employees (Zeng et al., 2020). Thus, it is becoming more and more important for both individuals and organizations to adapt to change effectively to generate and sustain high levels of performance in today’s workplace.

Researchers acknowledge that traditional models of performance tend to be static and have underlined the importance of measuring adaptive performance, which recognizes that work demands are dynamic and evolving (Jundt et al., 2015). We have a limited understanding, however, of what factors contribute to employee adaptive performance. In particular, scholars have paid little attention to how leadership in organizations influences employee adaptability. In
this research, I examine the question of whether servant leadership has an impact on employees’ adaptive performance, and if so, how.

Van Dierendonck (2011) argues that “servant-leaders empower and develop people; they show humility, are authentic, accept people for who they are, provide direction, and are stewards who work for the good of the whole” (p. 1232). Servant leaders empower their followers and foster personal growth from ethical, relational, and emotional perspectives (Eva et al., 2019). Followers of servant leaders grow and are expected to become “healthier, wiser, free and more autonomous” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 7). Unlike other leadership styles that are more directly linked to achieving organizational objectives and contributing to the financial success of the organization, servant leadership focuses on serving others and achieving sustainable success in the long run without compromising employee well-being.

Rooted in principles of self-determination theory, the integrative model of human growth at work posits that thriving at work is boosted when leaders enable decision-making discretion, provide constant feedback, share information about the organization’s strategy, decrease incivility, and promote diversity (Spreitzer et al., 2012). In this respect, the key characteristics of servant leadership, such as listening, providing direction, developing others, being open and transparent, coaching, and interpersonal acceptance (Liden et al., 2013; van Dierendonck, 2011; van Dierendonck et al., 2004) may facilitate thriving at work. Moreover, since thriving employees adapt better to change (Porath et al., 2012), thriving may also enhance employee adaptive performance.
The primary objective of the current research is to examine whether servant leadership may foster employee thriving and adaptive performance and to explore potential mechanisms that may assist in explaining this relationship. There is some evidence to suggest that servant leadership may influence thriving in work teams (i.e., collective thriving; e.g., Walumbwa, Muchiri, Misati, Wu, & Meiliani, 2018); however, we have a limited understanding of whether and how servant leadership may influence individual thriving at work. In response to this need to further understand what enables thriving at work for individuals, the proposed research will contribute to the research literatures on both servant leadership and thriving at work.

This research will also advance our understanding of employee adaptive performance and the role of power distance in fostering employee adaptability. Research on servant leadership emphasizes the importance of prioritizing followers’ needs, building honest and trustworthy relationships, and providing direction, encouragement, and feedback to employees (Eva et al., 2019; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). In an uncertain world, employees need leaders who listen to their problems, coach them, and encourage them to overcome challenges and adversity. In this regard, qualities relating to servant leadership can enhance employees’ adaptive performance. Although a number of studies have examined the role of employee individual differences (e.g., personality traits, knowledge, cognitive ability) in adaptive performance, we have a limited understanding of how contextual factors, including how different leadership styles and behaviors, impact employee adaptability (Huang et al., 2014, 2018; Jundt et al., 2015). The current study will contribute to the literature by investigating the relationship between servant leadership and adaptive performance in the high-tech industry, where employees are often exposed to changes in work demands and a consequent need to adapt to these changes.
Guided by sociometer theory and relevant models of motivation (e.g., self-consistency theory), this research will also explore specific mediators and moderators of the proposed relations between servant leadership, thriving at work, and adaptive performance. For example, the current study proposes that organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) is a central mechanism that acts as a catalyst for thriving at work and adaptive performance. Organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) is a perception of an individual’s worthiness as a member of an organization (Pierce et al., 1989). According to sociometer theory, self-esteem controls the level of whether a person is being accepted or rejected by others. High self-esteem individuals are also more likely perceive their sense of social connection to others in a positive light and it may reduce negative feelings such as stress, depression, and anxiety. In contrast, low self-esteem may reduce perceptions of the quality of their social ties, which may lead to outcomes such as greater perceived stress and burnout. In other words, OBSE functions like a sociometer to show us whether an employee will likely face negative or positive feelings, which, in turn, play a central role in contributing to employee’s sense of vitality and learning in the workplace – key elements of employee thriving (Kim & Beehr, 2018). Accordingly, the current research posits that OBSE will act as a key mediator of the influence of servant leadership on thriving at work. Likewise, this study proposes a mediating effect of OBSE on the relationship between servant leadership and adaptive performance. In the integrative model of human growth at work, thriving is positioned as contributing to employee adaptability. Moreover, according to self-consistency theory, individuals tend to behave consistent with their self-image and avoid inconsistencies (Hahn & Mathews, 2018). In this regard, individuals with high self-esteem will tend to demonstrate more positive work-related behaviors and may be expected to adapt more effectively to changing work
demands. Thus, OBSE should play a key role in predicting employees’ adaptive performance and mediating the effects of servant leadership on employee adaptability.

I also propose, however, that the effects of servant leadership on thriving at work and adaptive performance will vary as a function of key demographic and relational attributes (e.g., employee organizational tenure, power distance) that may moderate the influence of servant leadership on employee OBSE. For instance, individuals who report higher levels of power distance may expect their leaders to be more directive and provide clear instructions on how to complete a task (Kirkman et al., 2009). Individuals higher in power distance also are more tolerant of inequality and are less likely to form close relationships with authority figures (e.g., leaders) in organizations (Farh et al., 2007). Because servant leaders tend to employ a more non-directive and consultative approach to leadership, the positive relationship between servant leadership and OBSE may be stronger when employees espouse lower power distance values.

Finally, consistent with sociometer theory, when individuals have higher organization tenure, they have a longer time to establish themselves in the organization and develop a sense of competence, which should strengthen their OBSE. They also will have a greater opportunity to observe and benefit from their supervisor’s servant leadership. In this respect, organization tenure may strengthen the positive link between servant leadership and employee OBSE. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model proposed in this research.
1.2 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis consists of seven chapters. The current chapter presents an overview of the proposed research, including the purpose of the study and primary research questions that will be addressed. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature on servant leadership and how servant leadership differs from other key leadership constructs. Next, Chapter 3 reviews the literature on thriving at work and adaptive performance. Chapter 4 then discusses the proposed research model (Figure 1) in more detail and the specific hypotheses tested in the proposed research. Finally, Chapter 5 provides an overview of the research methodology, the sample, and the measures employed in this research. Chapter 6 presents the results. Lastly, Chapter 7 outlines the primary research findings, summarizes contributions to theory and practical implications, and describes key limitations of the study and future research directions.
CHAPTER 2: SERVANT LEADERSHIP

In recent years, various forms of “positive leadership” have been introduced in the scholarly literature and have been found to predict work outcomes beyond traditional leadership models (Avolio et al., 2013; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Some of the primary positive leadership theories include: transformational leadership, authentic leadership, ethical leadership, and servant leadership (Eva et al., 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011). Several studies have shown that organizations with leaders who empower followers have more committed and satisfied employees, which has ignited interest in these positive leadership approaches (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). Servant leadership, in particular, adopts a person-centered approach that focuses on the growth and well-being of one’s followers (van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leaders empower followers and help them to achieve their full potential by nurturing their ethical, relational, spiritual, or emotional development (Eva et al., 2019). Servant leadership has been shown to be conceptually and empirically distinct from other leadership styles partly owing to its emphasis on prioritizing followers but also emphasizing moral (ethical) aspects of leadership (Hoch et al., 2018; Jaramillo et al., 2015). Furthermore, servant leadership has been shown to predict various work outcomes beyond the effects of other leadership styles (Hoch et al., 2018).

Given the focus of this study on servant leadership, it is instructive to examine how servant leadership emerged and how it differs from other positive forms of leadership. In the next section, a brief overview of the primary theories of positive leadership will be provided, followed by a more in-depth review of the servant leadership literature.
2.1 Recent Developments in Positive Leadership Theory

2.1.1 Transformational Leadership

One of the most influential models of leadership is transformational leadership, which Burns (1978) first introduced in the context of political leadership. According to Burns (1978), transformational leaders significantly enhance the motivation levels and morale of employees by altering their values, expectations, and aspirations and encouraging employees to achieve their full potential (Burns, 1978). In this regard, transformational leadership can be differentiated from transactional leadership, which reflects a more exchange-based, instrumental approach to leading others (Bass, 1985, 1998; Bono & Judge, 2004; Polleys, 2002). While transactional leaders enable employees to meet expectations by providing appropriate resources and contingent rewards, transformational leaders motivate employees to transcend performance expectations by providing a source of inspiration and purpose (van Dierendonck et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2011).

There are different definitions of transformational leadership; however, they share a common focus on motivating employees to achieve organizational goals. For example, Bass and Riggio (2006) define transformational leaders as “those who stimulate and inspire followers to both achieve extraordinary outcomes” (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 3). Researchers have argued that transformational leaders help employees to grow and meet organizational goals through the display of four key components of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass et al., 2003; Hoch et al., 2018). Idealized influence refers to whether a leader serves as a role model to their followers and earns followers’ respect, admiration, and trust. Inspirational motivation involves inspiring
followers by articulating a compelling vision, providing a sense of meaning, and conveying high standards and expectations of them. Intellectual stimulation relates to whether a leader encourages their followers to be creative and to think independently by asking critical questions, redefining issues, and challenging assumptions. Lastly, individualized consideration refers to whether a leader listens to the concerns of their followers, provides support, and acts as a coach and mentor to them (Bass et al., 2003; Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Transformational leadership has been studied extensively and is generally viewed as an effective form of leadership (Bono & Judge, 2004; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). For example, several studies have shown that transformational leadership is positively associated with various work outcomes, including employee satisfaction and motivation (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Podsakoff et al., 1990), organizational commitment, and work engagement (van Dierendonck et al., 2014), innovative behavior (Nederveen et al., 2009), task, creative, and contextual performance (Wang et al., 2011), and perceptions of work meaningfulness and psychological well-being (Arnold et al., 2007).

2.1.2 Authentic Leadership

As a result of corporate scandals witnessed at the beginning of the 21st century and a recognition that extant models of leadership (e.g., transformational leadership) do not adequately capture ethical components of leader behavior, Luthans and Avolio (2003) introduced the concept of authentic leadership. Authentic leadership consists of six primary dimensions, including self-awareness, relational transparency, positive moral perspective, authentic behavior, positive psychological capital, and balanced processing (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). The self-awareness dimension indicates that authentic leaders know their strengths, weaknesses,
values, skills, and motives (Avolio et al., 2004). The relational transparency dimension entails demonstrating open and transparent communication, including sharing knowledge, while the positive moral perspective involves having a strong internalized moral orientation (associated with ethical decision-making and behavior; Hoch et al., 2018). Authentic behavior relates to whether the leader takes actions based on his/her core values, opinions, and emotions; in other words, based on his/her true self (Gardner et al., 2005). Positive psychological capital reflects the extent to which authentic leaders are resilient, optimistic, confident, and hopeful (Luthans & Avolio, 2009). Finally, balanced processing refers to whether authentic leaders listen to different perspectives and endeavor to be objective in incorporating all relevant information during the decision-making process (Hoch et al., 2018). There has been some debate in the literature regarding whether authentic leadership is distinct from transformational leadership. Although the authentic leadership concept is an extension of the transformational leadership literature, it has a stronger emphasis on self-awareness, valuing the viewpoints of others, and a more distinctive moral component, which was the primary impetus behind its development (Avolio et al., 2013; Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

2.1.3 Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership is defined as a leadership style that shows “normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Brown et al., 2005, p. 120). Ethical leaders make fair and moral decisions that are trustworthy, fair and principled (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Several studies have shown that ethical leadership can predict key employee outcomes such as job satisfaction, affective commitment, job
performance, motivation (Ng & Feldman, 2015), task performance (Piccolo et al., 2010), and organizational citizenship behavior (Mayer et al., 2009). It also has been linked to reducing interpersonal conflict and unethical behavior among followers (Mayer et al., 2012). While this construct is particularly useful in predicting outcomes related to employee ethical behavior, such as counterproductive or delinquent work behaviors (Peng & Kim, 2020), its incremental validity in predicting other work outcomes beyond transformational leadership and servant leadership is limited (Hoch et al., 2018). Indeed, recent empirical evidence indicates that although positive forms of leadership are derived from similar origins and evolved to focus on moral aspects of leadership, servant leadership, in particular, appears to enhance prediction of work outcomes beyond these other leadership styles (Hoch et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020). I now elaborate on the nature of servant leadership.

2.1.3 Servant Leadership

In his book introducing the concept of servant leadership, Greenleaf argues that “the great leader is seen as servant first” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 19). Servant leaders view serving others as the primary function of leadership and are motivated by this need to serve rather than a need for power (Mohr, 2013; van Dierendonck, 2011). Thus, servant leaders aspire to serve all stakeholders, including employees, customers, and the community (Peterson et al., 2012).

Although Greenleaf published his seminal work on servant leadership decades ago, the bulk of empirical research on servant leadership did not begin to emerge until much later (Eva et al., 2019). One of the initial impediments to research on servant leadership was the lack of a clear definition/consensus on the nature of servant leadership and, related to this point, the lack of well-validated measures (Eva et al., 2019). As a result, this created different interpretations of
servant leadership (Mahembe & Engelbrecht, 2013). In his original work on servant leadership, Greenleaf (1977, p. 22) described servant leadership as follows:

“It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first... The best test, and difficult to administer is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or at least not further be harmed?”

This often quoted but very vague definition created a challenge for scholars when building a reliable measure for it. Indeed, early conceptualizations of servant leadership relied heavily on anecdotal evidence. For instance, Larry Spears has published conceptual work on servant leadership for several years, primarily drawing on his business experience. Spears worked as the president of Greenleaf Center for more than 15 years and then established the Larry C. Spears Center for Servant Leadership (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Based on Greenleaf’s original work, he identified ten characteristics of servant leadership, including “listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, philosophy, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community” (Spears, 2019); however, this conceptualization is based on theoretical arguments and observation, rather than direct empirical evidence.

Beginning in the early 2000s, researchers began developing more valid and robust conceptualizations and measures of servant leadership. For example, Liden et al. (2008) conducted a construct validation exercise and identified seven dimensions of servant leadership: conceptual skills (knowledgeable about the tasks and the organization), empowering
(encouraging others), helping subordinates grow and succeed (mentoring), putting subordinates first (satisfying subordinates’ work needs is the first concern), behaving ethically (communicating fairly and honestly), emotional healing (demonstrating sympathy to other’s concerns) and creating value for the community (willingness to support the community; Liden et al., 2008). Based on this conceptualization, Liden et al. (2008, 2015) developed a 28-item measure and a 7-item short version of servant leadership assessing each of these dimensions.

Subsequently, based on an expansive review of the servant leadership literature, Van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011) proposed that there are eight core components of servant leadership: empowering and developing people, accountability, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance (or forgiveness), humility, standing back, courage, and stewardship, and built a measure of servant leadership to assess each of these components (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). This measure, the Servant Leadership Survey (SLS), contains 30 items assessing these eight dimensions. Taken together, the inclusion of these dimensions highlights that servant leaders empower and foster growth in individuals; however, servant leaders also hold followers responsible for the results of their job, act with a modest attitude embodied in an openness to learning and a willingness to accept errors, and they are prepared to stand up for their beliefs, but also act in the interest of others (Eva et al., 2019). More recently, a shortened version of the SLS (i.e., the SLS-18) has been developed that has shown stronger cross-cultural equivalence than the original SLS (van Dierendonck et al., 2017). This shortened measure is composed of 18 items that assess the following five dimensions of servant leadership: empowerment, standing back, humility, authenticity, and stewardship.
In a recently published review of servant leadership literature review, Eva et al. (2019) recognize that both Liden et al. and Van Dierendonck et al.’s measures reflect valid operationalizations of servant leadership. In order to further clarify the nature of servant leadership, however, they also provide a more integrative definition. Specifically, they state:

“Servant leadership is a (1) other-oriented approach to leadership (2) manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, (3) and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community.” (Eva et al., 2019, p. 114).

Eva et al. (2019) submit that servant leadership differs from other leadership styles with respect to three key features: its motive, mode, and mindset. With respect to their motive, servant leaders possess a clear sense of identity, personality, and psychological maturity, which fuel their desire to become servant leaders (Eva et al., 2019). In terms of mode, the primary focus of servant leaders is on their followers and helping to fulfill the needs of their followers; the secondary focus is organizational goals (Eva et al., 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011). Lastly, servant leaders are different in their mindset than other leaders since they are stewards for their followers, stakeholders, and the community as a whole (Eva et al., 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011). It is important to point out that the concept of being a servant leader, and acting in a stewardship role does not mean that these leaders do not possess any power. Instead of using their power to influence others to get things done, these leaders are using their power to help support others’ growth and development, to help organizations to survive, or to contribute positively to improvements in society in general (van Dierendonck, 2011). In sum, they go above and beyond their own self-interest. Indeed, this is a key distinguishing feature of servant leadership in relation
to other leadership styles, such as transformational leadership (Lee et al., 2020; van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leadership also includes components not captured in transformational leadership, such as humility, authenticity, and interpersonal acceptance, and differs from authentic and ethical leadership by emphasizing a broader range of leader behaviors (Eva et al., 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011).

Due to servant leadership qualities such as listening, empowering, humility, interpersonal acceptance, extant research indicates that servant leadership relates to a wide range of critical outcomes for organizations. For example, studies have shown that servant leadership is positively related to various behavioral outcomes, including organizational citizenship behavior (Liden et al., 2008; Newman et al., 2017), collaboration, and social responsibility (Hunter et al., 2013; Neubert et al., 2016), and both in-role and innovative performance (Liden et al., 2013; Panaccio et al., 2015). Also, servant leadership is positively associated with a broad array of employee work attitudes and perceptions, including work engagement and meaning (Khan et al., 2015; van Dierendonck et al., 2014), job satisfaction (Hebert, 2003; Mayer et al., 2008), organizational commitment (Bobbio et al., 2012; Miao et al., 2014), organizational identification (Zhao et al., 2016), work-life balance (Tang et al., 2016), and perceived team effectiveness (Mahembe & Engelbrecht, 2013).

In addition to predicting various employee attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors, it is important to note that servant leadership has also been linked to various outcomes at the team and organization levels (e.g., Choudhary et al., 2013; Liden et al., 2008; Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2014; Walumbwa et al., 2018). For example, Peterson et al. (2012) reported that CEO servant leadership is positively associated with a firm’s overall performance. Furthermore, Walumbwa et
al. (2018) found that servant leadership is positively associated with thriving at the team-level (i.e., collective thriving). Building on this work, the proposed research will examine the influence of servant leadership on individual thriving at work and the mechanisms that may assist in explaining this relationship. Furthermore, given the growing importance of employee adaptability in organizations (Griffin et al., 2010), coupled with a paucity of research investigating the impact of leadership on employee adaptive behaviors, this study will explore whether and how servant leadership contributes to employee adaptive performance. Taken together, this research will enrich our understanding of how servant leadership shapes these work outcomes and offer potential guidance to organizations on how to better foster employee thriving and adaptability.
CHAPTER 3: THRIVING AT WORK AND ADAPTIVE PERFORMANCE

This research examines the influence of servant leadership on two primary outcomes: thriving at work and adaptive performance. In this chapter, I describe these constructs in more detail and recent research examining these variables.

3.1 Thriving at Work

At the end of the 20th century in the field of psychology a shift occurred away from an exclusive focus on pathology (e.g., healing mental illnesses) to also exploring the positive side of psychology (e.g., maintaining or increasing well-being, meaning, happiness, optimism, thriving; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Specifically, researchers suggested that to more fully understand psychological health, more attention needs to be directed toward the study of the presence of positive psychological states, not just the absence of negative ones (Wiese et al., 2018). Although many studies still tend to assess negative psychological states (Wiese et al., 2018), there has been an increasing emphasis on this positive approach (Brown et al., 2017). For example, emphasizing the value of adopting this positive approach and studying human thriving, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2014, p. 295) submit that: “a psychology of positive human functioning will arise that achieves a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving in individuals, families, and communities.”

In parallel with this trend in psychology, an area of research labeled “positive organizational behavior” has also emerged (Youssef & Luthans, 2007). Luthans (2002b) has argued that although a positive approach has been emphasized for many years among certain
organizational behavior (OB) scholars and best-selling management authors, the predominant focus among researchers and practitioners has been identifying weaknesses and fixing destructive behaviors of individuals in the workplace rather than leveraging and enhancing employees’ strengths (Luthans, 2002b). POB has been defined as “the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today’s workplace” (Luthans, 2002a, p. 59). Echoing principles of positive psychology, this discipline tends to focus on “positive” constructs, such as procedural justice, organizational citizenship behavior, commitment, job satisfaction, positive affectivity, and prosocial behaviors in the organization settings (Youssef & Luthans, 2007).

Research in this domain has also proposed that there are two primary components of well-being: hedonic and eudaimonic (Gardner et al., 2005; Huta & Ryan, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Sotgiu, 2016). The hedonic perspective focuses on happiness and considers experiencing pleasure (or avoiding displeasure) as the ultimate goal in one’s life. Many philosophers such as Aristippus, Hobbes, DeSade, as well as behavioral science scholars, such as Kahneman et al. (1999), consider subjective happiness as tantamount to well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The eudaimonic perspective, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of one’s sense of purpose, deep personal values, and self-actualization. The work of philosophers such as Aristotle, and scholars such as Waterman, Ryff, Singer, Keyes have reflected tenets of this approach. This approach maintains that well-being is derived from a more profound sense of self-realization and submits that pleasure and subjective happiness alone do not equate to well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001).
One construct that incorporates both hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives into the study of employee well-being is that of employee thriving at work.

3.1.1 What is Thriving at Work?

The concept of thriving began to attract attention in the research literature after Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi’s (2000) seminal article highlighting the role of positive psychology in building thriving individuals and communities (Brown et al., 2017; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, a lack of consensus and different definitions of the meaning of thriving may have led to some confusion surrounding the nature of this concept. For example, various domain-specific conceptualizations of thriving, such as those relating to developmental scope for youth/adult (i.e., school success, community engagement) or performance scope (i.e., business) created different definitions of thriving and consequent ambiguity regarding whether thriving embodies a process or a state, or both (Brown et al., 2017).

Recently, however, there have been more concerted efforts to define and operationalize thriving. Su et al. (2014) define thriving as “the state of positive functioning at its fullest range – mentally, psychically and socially” (Su et al., 2014, p. 256), and they have developed measures to assess general thriving in health settings as a broad concept. Grounded in this notion, several domain-specific conceptualizations of thriving have been advanced relating to specific populations, including, for instance, adolescents in school, women recovering from domestic abuse, etc. (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). Likewise, drawing on the premise that thriving in the context of one’s work is a distinct construct that warrants its own line of study (Porath et al., 2012), Spreitzer et al. (2005) have introduced the concept of employee thriving at work.
Thriving at work is the “psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of vitality and learning at work” (Spreitzer et al., 2005, p. 538). Thus, thriving contains two central components: a cognitive part (learning) and an affective part (vitality). The cognitive component -- learning -- represents one’s perceptions that they are gaining and applying new skills and knowledge that are enabling them to build their confidence and capability (Carver, 1998; Edmondson, 1999; Porath et al., 2012). The affective component -- vitality -- represents positive feelings reflecting high levels of energy, aliveness, and having a sense of zest at work (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Porath et al., 2012).

Both the vitality and learning dimensions of thriving are aligned with eudaimonic and hedonic perspectives of psychological growth and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The eudaimonic perspective is reflected in the learning dimension of thriving since this perspective focuses on self-actualization and underlines that people seek to achieve their full potential. The hedonic perspective is mirrored in the vitality dimension of thriving since this perspective underlines that people seek pleasurable affective states and wish to avoid pain (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Given that these components of thriving at work are associated with both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, thriving at work embodies a more complete measure of employee well-being than other measures that may not capture both elements (e.g., job satisfaction; Kleine et al., 2019; Prem et al., 2017; Spreitzer & Sutcliffe, 2007).

Several studies have investigated vitality and learning separately and have found that they are associated with measures of individual well-being and performance (e.g., Carmeli et al., 2009; Colquitt et al., 2000; Shirom et al., 2008). However, several scholars have also emphasized the importance of examining these dimensions together (instead of separately), particularly
when assessing thriving at work (Paterson et al., 2014). Because these two dimensions together encompass a key self-regulation mechanism that helps individuals to gauge their personal growth (Porath et al., 2012; Spreitzer et al., 2005), examining both dimensions is essential to more fully understand thriving at work and its influence on other work and well-being outcomes (Prem et al., 2017; Spreitzer et al., 2005).

In sum, in the current study, our focus will be on examining thriving in the work context, which has been defined as a joint feeling of vitality and learning (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). Because individuals spend much of their time at work, and one’s work-life impacts one’s personal lives (Schor, 1991), studying this concept in the work context is beneficial both for organizations and for individuals.

3.1.2 How is Thriving Different from Other Related Constructs?

Thriving at work has been conceptualized as a state that can change over time as opposed to a more static dispositional characteristic (Niessen et al., 2012). In this section, I outline how thriving at work can be distinguished from other states that have been studied in the positive psychology and POB literature, including resilience (Carver, 1998), psychological well-being (e.g., life/job satisfaction), flourishing, self-actualization, flow (Spreitzer et al., 2005), growth, prospering (Brown et al., 2017), work engagement (Niessen et al., 2012) and growth-need-strength (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014).

First, thriving is different from resilience and growth. It might be thought that these two constructs are closely related to thriving because all three of them reflect one’s capacity to adapt to a problematic situation (Brown et al., 2017). More specifically, in the case of an adverse event,
such as the loss of a job or a change in management at work, resilient people maintain functioning
by, for example, trying to find another job or getting used to the new management team
(Bonanno, 2004). In contrast, stress-related growth and thriving involve efforts to enhance one’s
functioning (Park et al., 1996), such as learning new skills to find a better job or working harder
to create a better impression on a new management team. Moreover, thriving is distinct from
resilience and growth since individuals can experience thriving with or without an adverse event
(Spreitzer et al., 2005); whereas, resilience and growth generally occur after encountering a
difficult situation (Brown et al., 2017).

Second, thriving is different from traditional measures of subjective well-being. Subjective
well-being has traditionally been viewed and measured in relation to how individuals assess their
lives in general or in certain domains (Diener et al., 1999). These measures often assess
individuals’ emotional reactions and their sense of overall satisfaction (e.g., life satisfaction, job
satisfaction, etc., Spreitzer et al., 2005). In this regard, measures of subjective well-being tend to
emphasize a hedonic perspective on well-being. However, as stated earlier, thriving incorporates
both eudaimonic and hedonic perspectives and captures components of both vitality and
learning (Spreitzer et al., 2005).

Third, thriving is distinct from flourishing (Brown et al., 2017; Prem et al., 2017). In simple
terms, flourishing refers to “positive mental health, or a state in which an individual functions
well psychologically and socially” (Spreitzer et al., 2005, p. 538). Therefore, flourishing captures
a broader perspective than thriving; however, it does not appear to emphasize learning as does
thriving, which suggests that an individual can flourish without a sense of learning (Spreitzer et
Furthermore, thriving has been empirically distinguished from flourishing by Porath et al. (2008).

Fourth, thriving can be distinguished from self-actualization. Self-actualization is defined as the realization of one’s potentialities and can occur when all core needs (namely physiological needs, safety needs, love & belongingness, self-esteem) are fulfilled (Maslow, 1998). Even though thriving also deals with developing individuals’ full potential, it does not require fulfilling all core needs first (Spreitzer et al., 2005). For example, individuals can thrive when they have a severe illness (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), which contradicts how self-actualization is conceptualized in Maslow’s hierarchical model.

Fifth, thriving embodies a different focus than flow. Flow is defined as “the holistic experience that people feel when they act with total involvement” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 36). However, similar to flourishing, flow can also occur without learning (Spreitzer et al., 2005).

Sixth, thriving is distinguishable from work engagement. Work engagement refers to a positive state characterized by absorption, dedication, and vigor (Bakker et al., 2008). In this respect, thriving and work engagement share a component of energy (i.e., vitality in thriving and vigor in work engagement). However, work engagement also contains dedication and absorption (Spreitzer et al., 2010) and is associated with a motivation to conquer tough situations at work (Niessen et al., 2012). On the other hand, thriving has a learning dimension and focuses on personal growth at work that is not reflected in work engagement. In other words, it is possible to be engaged and not thriving or vice versa. For example, a thriving person may be learning and growing at work but not feel engaged in their work activities. As a result, this person may be more
likely to consider changing their jobs than a person who is more engaged in their work (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014).

Lastly, thriving is a different concept than growth-need-strength, which is a personality trait focusing on individuals’ need for growth (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). As a personality trait, this concept is more stable over time and less subject to situational influences. Thriving, on the other hand, is a state that can fluctuate over time, even within the same day, and recognizes that one’s tendency to grow and develop can change over time (Niessen et al., 2012; Porath et al., 2012; Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). Now that I have distinguished thriving from other related constructs, I next discuss why employee thriving is important in organizations.

3.1.3 Why Does Thriving Matter?

Research has shown that employee thriving at work is associated with various work outcomes and indicators of well-being (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009; Prem et al., 2017). For example, employee thriving has been linked to better general health, including less burnout and lower levels of strain (Porath et al., 2012). Both vitality and learning contribute to these outcomes by creating a sense of personal growth that enhances one’s sense of well-being (Spreitzer & Porath, 2012). Thriving is also related to lower levels of depression (Keyes, 2002) and can enhance individual adaptability to change (Spreitzer et al., 2012).

Thriving has also been found to be associated with improved employee career development and performance (Prem et al., 2017). When individuals thrive, they are eager to seek more learning and growth opportunities, which can benefit their job performance (Porath et al., 2012). These benefits extend beyond simply completing the requirements of one’s job,
however. Spreitzer and Porath (2014) argued that when people thrive, they contribute beyond their formal roles and help others by, for example, sharing knowledge. Consistent with this premise, thriving is positively associated with organizational citizenship behavior (Raza et al., 2017). Furthermore, thriving can foster creativity and innovation (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009; Wallace et al., 2016). Because creativity and innovation occur when individuals keep their knowledge up-to-date and are energized by the challenges presented in their work tasks, thriving enhances one’s creative effort and performance.

For similar reasons, thriving has been linked to employee commitment and a sense of meaning in one’s work (Spreitzer & Sutcliffe, 2007), positive affect, and core self-evaluations (Porath et al., 2012). When individuals interpret that they are growing personally, they may feel emotionally attached to their organization and be more willing to exert extra effort (Walumbwa et al., 2018). Likewise, thriving may enhance employee health by mitigating perceptions of stress and creating a stronger sense of meaning at work (Walumbwa et al., 2018). Thus, in addition to enhancing employee commitment and performance (Paterson et al., 2014; Porath et al., 2012; Spreitzer & Porath, 2014), thriving enables individuals to be more resilient in the face of adverse conditions (Carver, 1998; Su et al., 2014). In particular, the affective element of thriving – vitality – may help individuals to cope with challenging situations (Porath et al., 2012).

In sum, although thriving at work is a relatively new concept in the management literature, it has been found to be associated with a number of employee work perceptions and behaviors. Given the potential benefits of employee thriving, this raises the question of what factors contribute to thriving at work and how it can be cultivated. In the next section, I discuss
Spreitzer et al.’s (2014) integrative model of human growth at work, which describes some of the primary workplace conditions and motivational factors that foster thriving at work.

3.1.4 Social Embeddedness of Self-Determination and Thriving at Work

In order to explain how thriving at work occurs and the factors that contribute to its development, Spreitzer et al. (2005) introduced the socially embedded model of thriving. In this model, Spreitzer et al. (2005) emphasize that thriving at work is socially embedded since it depends on various situational factors, and one’s sense of thriving can itself fluctuate over time. More recently, Spreitzer and Porath (2014) have extended and refined this model by more explicitly integrating principles of self-determination theory (SDT) and have labeled this model: “the integrative model of human growth at work.”

SDT is a general theory of motivation that has been applied in many domains, ranging from education, recreation, and healthcare, to examining motivational dynamics in the workplace (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to Ryan and Deci (2000, p. 68), “SDT is an approach to human motivation and personality that uses traditional empirical methods while employing an organismic metatheory that highlights the importance of humans' evolved inner resources for personality development and behavioral self-regulation.” In this respect, SDT focuses on the growth tendencies of individuals, their sources of motivation, and conditions that satisfy their intrinsic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Applied to the workplace context, SDT asserts that employees need to fulfill three basic psychological needs in the workplace (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) in order to feel a stronger sense of well-being and to perform to their capabilities (L. E. Deci et al., 2017). A central assumption of SDT is also that various
workplace factors, including managerial actions and support, can help to satisfy these needs (L. E. Deci et al., 2017; Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Drawing on SDT, Spreitzer and Porath (2014) propose in their integrative model that various contextual enablers, including decision-making discretion, broad information sharing, climate of trust/respect, performance feedback, and environment volatility, each contribute to the fulfillment of one’s psychological needs at work, which in turn, foster employee thriving. **Figure 2** provides an illustration of Spreitzer and Porath’s (2014) model. Below, I describe the main contextual enablers specified in this model.

*Figure 2. Spreitzer & Porath’s (2014) integrative model of human growth at work*

![Contextual Enablers Diagram](image)

Fig. 15.1. An integrative model of human growth at work.

The first contextual enabler is decision-making discretion. Decision-making discretion enables employees to feel more autonomous because it allows them to make their own decisions
instead of being controlled or directed by someone else. This can enhance one’s sense of autonomy, and in turn, their vitality (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Likewise, when employees are empowered to make their own decisions, they will feel competent and more connected to the organization (enhancing their sense of competence and relatedness), which will, in turn, enhance one’s willingness to experiment (take risks) and learn and develop while performing their jobs (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). Second, broad information sharing is another contextual enabler. When employees have access to more information about the organization/team, this greater knowledge will help them to be more autonomous and competent to do their jobs, which will boost their learning and vitality (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). Third, a climate of trust and respect can also enhance one’s thriving at work. In a work environment in which employees trust leaders and each other, they will feel safer and more competent in taking risks and exploring new opportunities. Also, when employees work in a respectful environment, they are more likely to feel valued by the organization, increasing their self-esteem (Lau et al., 2014) and sense of relatedness (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014) and fostering stronger perceptions of thriving. Fourth, feedback is another enabler of thriving at work as it can heighten one’s feelings of competence. Employees can learn from the insights and ideas that others provide, which can support their sense of learning and personal growth. Finally, the last contextual enabler in their model is environmental turbulence. Environmental volatility, such as uncertainty and change, can, in some cases, lower one’s thriving due to perceived threats to one’s autonomy and competence.

In the current research, I draw on the work of Spreitzer and colleagues (2004, 2014) in arguing that servant leadership will significantly enhance one’s thriving at work. As I further explain in Chapter 4, servant leaders prioritize the needs of their followers and will assist in
building a work environment characterized by some of the key contextual enablers outlined above. In the next section, I will discuss the concept of adaptive performance, which I also propose will be strengthened for employees working for a servant leader.

3.2 Adaptive Performance

Traditional conceptualizations of job performance have argued that the construct domain job performance can be divided into four primary components: task performance, contextual performance, counterproductive work behavior, and withdrawal behavior (Shoss et al., 2012). Task performance is traditionally the most commonly studied in the research literature on job performance and reflects one’s task proficiency or “day-to-day performance on specific job tasks” (Allworth & Hesketh, 1999, p. 98). Contextual performance, also referred to as OCB (organizational citizenship behaviors), refers to behaviors that go above and beyond the completion of job requirements and emphasize supporting or collaborating with others (Borman & Mowday, 1997). In contrast, counterproductive performance relates to negative behaviors that detract from effective job performance, including behaviors that either intentionally or unintentionally damage the organization (Spector et al., 2006). Finally, withdrawal behavior refers to behaviors that indicate low effort or engagement, including lateness/tardiness or absenteeism (Shoss et al., 2012).

More recently, however, there has been greater recognition that job performance is dynamic in nature, which is not reflected in traditional static models of performance. Moreover, traditional performance taxonomies do not adequately capture an employee’s ability to adapt to changes in their work demands or work environment (Huang et al., 2018; Jundt et al., 2015).
Accordingly, the concept of adaptive performance has been introduced (Pulakos et al., 2000). Adaptive performance has been defined as “task-performance-directed behaviors individual enact in response to or in anticipation of changes relevant to job-related tasks” (Jundt et al., 2015, pp. 54–55). Given that one’s job performance can be affected by various unpredictable changes in one’s work environment due to external factors such as reorganizations, globalization, mergers, and technology disruptions, employees must be able to adapt to and cope effectively with change (Huang et al., 2018; Jundt et al., 2015; Shoss et al., 2012). Organizations need more adaptive employees who keep learning, can manage stressful situations, and can overcome obstacles that may impede their performance in a potentially volatile and unpredictable environment. For instance, we have witnessed how the Covid-19 pandemic has transformed how we work. Many of us needed to adapt to new working conditions and demands, such as working from home (and working online), while also finding ways to balance our other responsibilities (e.g., childcare). Some of us adapted effectively to new circumstances and demands and maintained our work performance, while some of us did not.

In Huang et al.’s (2018) review of the adaptive performance literature, they note that there are two general research paradigms that have dominated the literature: the performance evaluation (domain-general) paradigm and the task change (domain-specific) paradigm. The task change paradigm examines adaptive performance primarily through a training and development lens and tends to focus on how individual difference variables and task characteristics contribute to effectively responding to changes in one’s work tasks. In this branch of research, scholars have argued that being able to complete tasks is not adequate in a continually changing work environment. Employees also need to fully comprehend the nature of task demands and have
the requisite knowledge and skills to adapt to changes in work tasks effectively. For example, employees need both cognitive and metacognitive skills to plan, act, and track their behaviors when a change occurs to interpret the change and apply relevant knowledge successfully (Huang et al., 2018; Pulakos et al., 2000). Most research in this stream has been conducted using experimental studies that manipulate and assess participants' responses to changes in work tasks in laboratory settings. These studies tend to focus on fairly short time frames.

The performance evaluation paradigm is similar to the task change paradigm in that researchers have largely sought to understand what individual differences (e.g., employee personality and cognitive characteristics) predict employee adaptive performance. However, this research has tended to adopt a broader perspective and has primarily been conducted in field (vs. laboratory) settings using a wider window of time. In this branch of research, scholars have tended to assess employee adaptive performance using supervisory evaluations of their adaptability at work. For example, in their seminal research in the area, Pulakos et al. (2000) proposed an eight-dimensional taxonomy of adaptive performance, which includes dealing with uncertain and unpredictable work situations, technologies, and procedures; learning work tasks; demonstrating interpersonal adaptability; handling emergencies or crisis situations; solving problems creatively; demonstrating cultural adaptability; handling work stress; and demonstrating physically oriented adaptability. Pulakos et al. (2002) then subsequently tested various dispositional predictors of the components of this taxonomy (Pulakos et al., 2002).

A number of studies have shown that various individual differences, training techniques, and learning strategies are associated with employee adaptive performance. Individual differences such as cognitive ability (Pulakos et al., 2002), political skills (Blickle et al., 2011), and
personality traits, such as openness to experience and conscientiousness (Shoss et al., 2012), emotional stability (Pulakos et al., 2002), and extraversion (Blickle et al., 2011), were found positively related to adaptive performance. From the training techniques perspective, error-management training (which lets participants make mistakes instead of avoiding mistakes as a part of the learning experience) has been found to enhance employee adaptive performance (Ivancic & Hesketh, 2000). Furthermore, Bell and Kozlowski (2008) investigated different training strategies for active learning, such as emotion-control strategies, error framing, and exploratory learning, and found that exploratory learning has the greatest influence on adaptive performance (Bell & Kozlowski, 2008). Despite this evidence that various individual differences and training strategies can enhance employee adaptive performance, we have a rudimentary understanding of how contextual factors influence employee adaptability (Huang et al., 2018). There is some evidence suggesting that the leadership style of one’s supervisor (e.g., leader visioning, transformational leadership) can impact employee adaptive performance (Charbonnier-Voirin et al., 2010; Griffin et al., 2010); however, research in this domain has been sparse and the mechanisms underlying this relationship require further elaboration. Indeed, in the present research, I propose that servant leadership may exert a more potent influence on employee adaptability than other models of leadership due to its greater capacity to enhance employee thriving (vitality and learning) and their self-esteem in the organization (OBSE).
CHAPTER 4: HYPOTHESES GENERATION

In this chapter, I present my proposed research model (see Figure 1, page 7) and outline the specific hypotheses that will be tested. Although servant leadership has recently attracted considerable attention in the leadership literature, the current study extends beyond extant research by examining the relationship between servant leadership and both employee thriving and adaptive performance, and also exploring potential mediating and moderating mechanisms. Drawing on the integrative model of human growth at work of thriving and models of self-esteem (e.g., sociometer theory), this research proposes that servant leadership will be positively related to thriving at work and adaptive performance via its influence on employee organization-based self-esteem (OBSE). I also posit that various demographic and relational factors will moderate the relationship between servant leadership and OBSE. Accordingly, I will first discuss the hypothesized relations between servant leadership and employee thriving at work and adaptive performance. I will then articulate how OBSE mediates these relations, and the potential contingency variables that may alter the effects of servant leadership on these outcomes.

4.1 Servant Leadership and Thriving at Work

As discussed in Chapter 3, thriving at work is a socially embedded phenomenon that is driven by a number of different contextual enablers. Chen and Kanfer (2006) have argued that leadership is one of the most critical factors that impacts employee work motivation (Chen & Kanfer, 2006). Spreitzer et al. (2012) identified five key mechanisms that leaders could influence in organizations that help employees to thrive at work. These are decision making discretion, sharing information, climate of trust/respect, performance feedback, and environmental
volatility (Spreitzer & Porath, 2012, 2014). In this research, I propose that servant leaders should contribute to employee thriving by influencing each of these mechanisms and enhancing one’s OBSE.

In the integrative model of human growth at work of thriving, providing decision making discretion is about empowering employees and recognizing them. When employees feel that things are under their control and have a voice, this will elevate their feelings of competence and autonomy. Servant leaders empower their followers, invest in their development, and give them a sense of control (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011), which can stimulate a sense of thriving at work. As Spreitzer et al. (2012) stated, leaders should empower their employees even when they make some mistakes. Making mistakes is an important and natural component of the learning process that is an integral component of one’s sense of thriving. The interpersonal acceptance dimension of servant leadership may also contribute to an employee’s decision-making discretion. Because this dimension helps leaders build empathy, see things from others’ perspectives, and accept them for who they are, employees are more likely to feel that their supervisor has confidence in their abilities and the decision they make (van Dierendonck, 2011). In this respect, servant leaders tend to enhance decision-making discretion not only by empowering employees to exercise their judgment and make consequential decisions in conducting their work, but also by instilling confidence in their employees.

Sharing information and performance feedback are also mechanisms that act as catalysts for employee thriving. Servant leaders provide direction to employees and clarify what is useful for their followers and the organization (Liden et al., 2015; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). They are transparent and authentic in how they interact with their employees and provide
meaningful guidance and direction that enhance employee learning and personal growth. Servant leaders not only share information with employees in an open and honest manner, but they also provide feedback on their performance. When delivered appropriately, performance feedback reinforces the value of the work that is performed, and it enables employees to enhance their job-related knowledge and skills, which can strengthen one’s sense of learning and vitality (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014; Wallace et al., 2016).

Environmental volatility is another contextual factor in the model which negatively impacts thriving at work (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). Although servant leaders can not control levels of environmental volatility, they can lead and support their followers in a manner that minimizes the negative impact of this uncertainty (Chen et al., 2015; Hebert, 2003). In a volatile environment, servant leaders continue to coach their followers and provide direction, which can buffer the negative impact of environmental volatility by reducing anxiety. Indeed, previous research indicates that servant leadership can influence employees’ commitment to change by decreasing the anxiety caused by high uncertainty (Kool & van Dierendonck, 2012; Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2014).

Finally, servant leaders demonstrate behaviors that should assist in cultivating a climate of trust and respect (Spreitzer & Porath, 2012). Servant leaders put their self-interest aside and put their followers’ interests first (Flynn et al., 2016). They listen and understand their followers’ needs, but they also challenge them and coach their employees to reach their goals (van Dierendonck, 2011; Walumbwa et al., 2018). Indeed, research has suggested that when employees face a balance of difficulty and challenge in their work tasks, this can stimulate task engagement, which promotes thriving (O’Leary & Ickovics, 1995). Related to building a climate
of trust and respect, Paterson et al. (2014) maintain that employee perceptions of a supervisor support climate are also a key enabler for thriving at work. A supervisor support climate can be created by focusing on the well-being of the employees, developing their careers, and recognizing their work (Zhang et al., 2008). In this regard, servant leaders can play a central role in building a climate of support in the organization, which can enhance an employee’s sense of growth and thriving in the organization. Based on the preceding, I propose the following initial hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:** Servant leadership is positively related to follower’s thriving at work.

4.2 Servant Leadership and Adaptive Performance

As discussed in Chapter 3, servant leaders prioritize the needs of their followers and provide both task and socio-emotional resources that support the performance of their employees. They empower their followers to perform to the best of their ability, convey authenticity and transparency, and treat their followers with respect and fairness (van Dierendonck, 2011). Accordingly, meta-analytic evidence has shown that servant leadership is positively associated with various measures of employee performance, including overall performance, organizational citizenship, and counterproductive performance (Hoch et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020). Very few studies, however, have examined leadership variables in relation to adaptive performance (Huang et al., 2018; Jundt et al., 2015). This has been unfortunate as supervisors can significantly impact employee perceptions of stress and their ability to adapt to changing job requirements (Charbonnier-Voirin et al., 2010; S. J. Zaccaro & Banks, 2004).
In this research, I propose that servant leadership will influence employee adaptive performance by offering increased socio-emotional and task-related support to employees and nurturing employees’ career and personal growth and development. By offering guidance and feedback, empowering employees and seeking their input on work-related decisions, and enabling employees to develop their work-related knowledge and skills, servant leaders should enhance employees’ sense of competence and belongingness (relatedness) in the organization, which can increase their adaptive performance. Thus, I hypothesize the following:

**Hypothesis 2:** Servant leadership is positively related to follower’s adaptive performance.

### 4.3 Mediation Role of Organization-Based Self-Esteem

Shaped by one’s organizational experiences, an employee’s self-esteem is vital in understanding their behavior and attitudes at work (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). Thus, I propose that organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) will play a central role in mediating the effects of servant leadership on employee thriving and adaptive performance. In the next section, I will discuss the nature of self-esteem and OBSE. I will then discuss the role of employee perceptions of OBSE in mediating relations between servant leadership, thriving at work, and adaptive performance.

#### 4.3.1 What Is Self-Esteem?

Self-esteem (also referred to as global self-esteem) may be defined as “one’s positive or negative attitude toward oneself and one’s evaluation of one’s own thoughts and feelings overall in relation to oneself” (Park & Park, 2019, p. 1). More generally, self-esteem reflects one’s overall evaluation of their self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965; Rosenberg et al., 1995). It reflects personal
thoughts about how a person sees themself as an individual (Pierce & Gardner, 2004) and also
reflects whether an individual “sees him[her]self as a competent, need-satisfying individual”
(Korman, 1970, p. 32). Since personal feelings are at the core of this concept, and feelings can
fluctuate over time, self-esteem can also change. Scholars have identified two general types of
self-esteem: state self-esteem and trait self-esteem. State self-esteem refers to how a person
feels about themself at a particular moment in time, whereas trait self-esteem relates to how a
person generally (or most typically) feels about themself (MacDonald & Leary, 2011).

Individuals derive their self-esteem through three primary sources, including reflected
assessment of others, self-perceptions of one’s own attitudes and their results, and social
comparison (Schwalbe, 1988). In other words, people assess what others think about them, what
they think about themselves, and how they compare to other people. Based on this process of
self-evaluation, individuals make judgments regarding their self-worth. Self-esteem has also
been conceptualized as being a hierarchical phenomenon that can be viewed at different levels
and can focus on specific dimensions (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). For example, there are global,
task-specific, and situation-specific forms of self-esteem (Pierce & Gardner, 2004; Simpson &
Boyle, 1975). With respect to situation-specific forms of self-esteem, individuals may feel high or
low self-esteem in different domains and contexts. For example, an individual may feel high self-
esteeem at home while also experiencing low self-esteem at work or among friends. Given the
focus in this study on one’s work experiences, the current research will examine a particular
4.3.2 What is Organization-Based Self-Esteem?

Organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) may be defined as “the degree to which an individual believes him/herself to be capable, significant, and worthy as an organizational member” (Pierce & Gardner, 2004, p. 593). In other words, OBSE refers to one’s self-evaluation of whether they see themselves as a competent and valued member of an organization.

Studies have shown that although OBSE is a unique construct, it is positively correlated with global self-esteem (Pierce & Gardner, 2004), generalized self-efficacy (Gardner & Pierce, 1998; Lee, 2003), as well as both collective and job-specific self-efficacy (Kark et al., 2003). These findings reinforce that OBSE reflects perceptions of one’s own competence and capability; however, it also possesses a strong relational component, as it emphasizes how one views themselves as a member of an organization.

4.3.3 Servant Leadership and Organization-Based Self-Esteem

While the leadership behaviors displayed by one’s supervisor may be expected to play an integral role in an employee’s OBSE, very few studies have examined these effects. Some previous work has demonstrated that spiritual leadership and other leader behaviors can enhance OBSE by demonstrating care and appreciation through increased coaching (Elloy & Randolph, 1997; Sholikhah et al., 2019). The current study builds on this previous work by examining the role of servant leadership in shaping OBSE, and in turn, the influence of OBSE on employee thriving at work and adaptive performance.

Previous studies have shown that when employees are empowered, they experience an increased level of self-control and self-confidence (e.g., van Dierendonck, 2011; Zhu et al., 2004).
Moreover, a supportive work environment positively impacts employee perceptions of their organization and can heighten an employee’s sense of identity and self-respect (Walther & Brunch, 2008). Because servant leaders prioritize the needs of their followers and contribute to the development of a work environment that conveys caring and concern for employees, this can enhance OBSE. Indeed, organizational care has been shown to be an important antecedent of OBSE (Mcallister & Bigley, 2002; Vecchio, 2000). Organizational care reflects “a deep structure of values and organizing principles centered on fulfilling employees' needs, promoting employees' best interests, and valuing employees' contributions” (Mcallister & Bigley, 2002, p. 895). Servant leaders understand their employees' needs, try to fulfill these needs, and value their contributions by standing back and demonstrating respect and trust in their capabilities. When employees feel their organization cares for them and their leaders support them, they should report higher OBSE.

Research on OBSE has also highlighted the importance of employee autonomy in building employees’ self-esteem (Lee, 2003; Pierce et al., 1989; Pierce & Gardner, 2004; Vecchio, 2000). When employees have more autonomy and a greater sense of self-direction, they develop high self-esteem in the organization by decreasing jealousy and envy at work (Vecchio, 2000) and demonstrating organizational care that employees are trusted, valuable and competent (Mcallister & Bigley, 2002)

Servant leaders provide more autonomy to their employees by seeking their input and involving them in decision-making, taking their skills and interests into account when assigning work tasks, and offering them opportunities for skill development and learning (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016a). Over time, these employees become more autonomous in their work activities,
which will lead to higher OBSE. Given servant leaders aim to foster greater autonomy and build a supportive work climate that conveys care and concern for employees and instills a greater sense of inclusion (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016), I propose the following:

**Hypothesis 3:** Servant leadership is positively related to organization-based self-esteem.

4.3.4 Organization-Based Self-Esteem, Thriving at Work, and Adaptive Performance

Drawing on sociometer theory and principles of self-consistency, in this section, I argue that OBSE will influence employee thriving at work and adaptive performance, and play an instrumental role in mediating the effects of servant leadership on these outcomes. OBSE has been shown to be associated with various employee work attitudes, including job satisfaction, commitment, and work engagement, as well as various indicators of job performance, such as task performance and OCB (Pierce et al., 2016a; Pierce & Gardner, 2004; Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004); however, we have a limited understanding of whether and how OBSE may influence employee thriving and adaptability.

According to sociometer theory, self-esteem operates as a sociometer that controls the level of whether a person is being accepted or rejected by others; therefore, it motivates the individual to act to minimize the chance of rejection or exclusion (Leary et al., 1995). Naturally, human beings try to avoid exclusion from social groups and strengthen their social bond. We all need to establish a minimum level of inclusion in relationships with others to survive and reproduce. In order to maintain our relationships with others successfully, we need a system to track the reactions of others, such as looking for clues to understand whether or not they will exclude us or, more specifically, a system that alerts us if there is a change in our status of
inclusion. Accordingly, Leary et al. (1995) argue that self-esteem provides a key signaling mechanism that regulates one’s social actions. For instance, a person may believe that a situation that lowers his/her self-esteem may negatively impact his/her social ties and may take action to reduce potential losses in their self-esteem. Principles of sociometer theory can be readily applied in work settings. Employees will attempt to establish and protect their social bonds with others, gather information on how they are perceived, and invest in completing tasks/projects earnestly in order to enhance their sense of competence and belongingness (relatedness) in the organization. In this regard, higher levels of OBSE should help employees to establish and maintain their sense of identity and acceptance in the organization and should also motivate them to display positive work behaviors in the organization (Bowling et al., 2010) and reduce counterproductive work behaviors (Liu et al., 2015).

Previous research has indicated that OBSE is negatively related to feelings of anxiety, stress, exhaustion, and burnout in organizations (Bowling et al., 2010; Pierce et al., 2016b; Tong et al., 2015). Moreover, when employees feel supported by their organization and team, this leads to higher levels of self-confidence and a sense of relatedness (Brown et al., 2017). When individuals feel valued by, and a stronger sense of connection with their work team, this can enhance thriving at work by fostering a sense of trust, respect, and belongingness (Liu & Bern-Klug, 2013). Based on this evidence and a key premise of the integrative model of human growth at work of thriving that higher levels of relatedness and self-worth (competence) contribute to thriving, I hypothesize the following:

**Hypothesis 4:** Organization-based self-esteem is positively related to thriving at work.
In addition to influencing thriving at work, OBSE will also be positively associated with employee adaptive performance. In line with sociometer theory, individuals with higher self-esteem should be less susceptible to negative effects of workplace stressors and strains and factors that may threaten one’s sense of self-worth and competence (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2003; Penhaligon et al., 2013; Tong et al., 2015). Furthermore, self-consistency theory (Korman, 1970) posits that individuals seek to maintain consistency in their self-image and will act in accordance with these perceptions (Dipboye, 1977; Hahn & Mathews, 2018). According to this perspective, individuals with higher OBSE will exhibit more positive behaviors in the organization and perform well since these positive behaviors are aligned with, and will reinforce, their sense of self (Korman, 1970; Lee, 2003). Consistent with this premise, previous research has indicated that OBSE is related to higher employee work engagement and performance (Bowling et al., 2010; Gardner et al., 2004; Liu et al., 2013; Toth et al., 2019); however, the relationship between OBSE and employee adaptive performance has yet to be tested. Given that OBSE may buffer the negative effects of workplace stressors and should foster behavior that is consistent with one’s self-image, I hypothesize the following:

**Hypothesis 5:** Organization-based self-esteem is positively related to adaptive performance.

Informed by extant models of employee thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005; Spreitzer & Porath, 2014) and self-esteem (Korman, 1970; Leary et al., 1995), I postulate that OBSE will play a central role in mediating the effects of servant leadership on both employee thriving and adaptability. As noted previously, servant leadership will influence employee OBSE and thriving by strengthening and supporting the contextual enablers that stimulate employee thriving at
work. When individuals are exposed to a supportive supervisor climate, they will be more willing to work collaboratively and thrive (Kahn, 1990; Paterson et al., 2014). In such a climate, individuals will feel trusted by their supervisors, which will lead to higher self-esteem and positive emotions that cultivate a sense of vitality. According to the integrative model of human growth at work, trust and respect are also key antecedents of thriving at work. Because trust and respect increase perceptions of self-worth, and servant leaders demonstrate trust and respect by focusing on the interests and needs of their employees, seeking their input, and empowering them (Liden et al., 2008), this should enhance employee OBSE and their thriving in the workplace. Indeed, previous work has shown that leader behavior that demonstrates greater acceptance and inclusion of followers can increase employees’ sense of feeling valued and their thriving at work (e.g., van Dierendonck, 2011; Zhu et al., 2019). Finally, feedback is a key mechanism that also fosters employee thriving (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). Servant leaders prioritize the personal and professional growth of their followers and display behaviors that support their employees’ development, including providing coaching, guidance, and feedback on their work performance (Eva et al., 2019; Liden et al., 2013; van Dierendonck, 2011). This developmental support and feedback can enhance employee thriving by assisting employees in acquiring knowledge and skills that enhance their confidence and sense of belonging in the organization (Wallace et al., 2016). Taken together, I hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 6**: Organization-based self-esteem mediates the relationship between servant leadership and thriving at work.

Consistent with the preceding rationale and the premise that thriving at work encourages employee adaptability (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). I also propose that OBSE will mediate the
relationship between servant leadership and employee adaptive performance. As outlined above, servant leaders nurture and support the autonomy of their followers while also building a strong relationship with them (Cai et al., 2018; Chiniara & Bentein, 2016a; van Dierendonck, 2011). Furthermore, servant leaders assist in developing the knowledge and skills of their followers, which can enhance their OBSE and their capacity to adapt to shifting work demands. In line with sociometer theory and the self-consistency perspective on self-esteem, employees who experience higher OBSE should also display a higher motivation to perform and adapt to changing work demands to sustain their higher levels of self-worth and sense of belonging. Based on this theoretical and empirical evidence, I hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 7**: Organization-based self-esteem mediates the relationship between servant leadership and adaptive performance.

As illustrated in Figure 1, I also propose that thriving is positively related to adaptive performance. In their integrative model of human growth at work, Spreitzer and Porath (2014) propose that thriving cultivates increased employee adaptability. As noted previously, thriving at work consists of both vitality and learning. In the task change paradigm, training and learning are emphasized as key antecedents of employee adaptive performance (Chen et al., 2005; Hahn & Mathews, 2018). Employees who have stronger perceptions of learning will be more adaptable since they can identify and foresee organizational problems, and they are also more likely to possess the knowledge and skills needed to adapt effectively (Spreitzer et al., 2005; Zeng et al., 2020). Furthermore, increased vitality can also facilitate employee adaptive performance. Positive emotions associated with vitality can increase employees’ eagerness and motivation to
adapt and can assist them in responding to more challenging and potentially ambiguous work demands (Bindl et al., 2012; Zeng et al., 2020). I, therefore, hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 8**: Thriving at work is positively associated with employee adaptive performance.

4.4 Moderating Influences of Power Distance, Organization Tenure

As shown in **Figure 1**, I propose that the relationship between servant leadership and employee will be contingent on two moderating variables: employee power distance, and organizational tenure. Specifically, I argue that lower levels of employee power distance and higher organizational tenure should strengthen the influence of servant leadership on OBSE as these variables should increase levels of relational proximity and exposure to the servant leadership behaviors of one’s supervisor. Below, I further elaborate on these moderating hypotheses.

4.4.1 Power Distance

In his pioneering research on cultural groups, Hofstede (1980) introduced the concept of power distance, which he described as “the extent to which a society accepts the fact that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 1980, p. 45). This concept has also been applied at the individual level, and its effects have been examined in relation to a number of employee work perceptions and behaviors (Daniels & Greguras, 2014; Farh et al., 2007; Kirkman et al., 2009). At the individual level, power distance reflects “the extent to which an individual accepts the unequal distribution of power in institutions and organizations” (Clugston et al., 2000, p. 9). In other words, employees with a low power distance orientation
think that individuals should have equal authority and share power in the organization, whereas employees with a high power distance orientation accept differences in status and are more submissive to those higher in the organizational hierarchy (Yang et al., 2017). For example, individuals who report high power distance are more likely to believe that leaders in organizations should maintain more formalized and distant relationships with employees, and they do not expect leaders in the organization to actively seek employees’ input when making work-related decisions (Chen et al., 2013). Servant leaders encourage higher levels of employee autonomy and help their followers to develop and grow personally and professionally. In this regard, servant leaders also seek their employees’ input on how to better incorporate their interests and needs in assigning their work and making other key work-related decisions (Hale & Fields, 2007). Because employees lower in power distance seek to share power and influence in their relationship with others and value the opportunity to share their input and ideas (Daniels & Greguras, 2014), servant leadership should more strongly influence the OBSE of followers lower in power distance. In contrast, because employees higher in power distance are less likely to expect their supervisor to adopt a consultative approach and develop a more personalized relationship with them, servant leadership may exert a weaker influence on the OBSE of followers who espouse stronger power distance values.

Previous studies have suggested that employees with low power distance tend to react more positively to supportive leader behaviors. For example, Kirkman et al. (2009) found that power distance moderates the relationship between transformational leadership and procedural justice, such that the relationship is more positive when employees report lower power distance. Similarly, Yang et al. (2007) found that the positive relationship between servant leadership and
both creative self-efficacy and team efficacy is strengthened for employees with lower power distance. Guided by this evidence and the premise that followers lower in power distance will be more receptive to the more personalized approach and the corresponding social and task-related support provided by servant leaders, I propose the following:

**Hypothesis 9**: Power distance moderates the influence of servant leadership on OBSE, such that the positive relationship between servant leadership and OBSE will be strengthened when employee power distance is lower.

### 4.4.2 Organization Tenure

In addition to power distance, an employee’s length of time in the organization may also moderate the influence of their supervisor’s servant leadership on their OBSE. Previous research has indicated employee organizational tenure is positively associated with OBSE (Lee, 2003; Pierce & Gardner, 2004). Because a longer tenure in the organization provides a greater opportunity for employees to learn about and incorporate the organization’s values and garner recognition and respect for others in the organization, this can lead to increases in OBSE. Similarly, when employees work in the same organization for a long time, they will build more trust and a stronger relationship with their supervisor. In this respect, they will have a greater opportunity to experience and benefit from their supervisors’ servant leadership behavior, which will amplify the influence of servant leadership and OBSE. Thus, I hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 10**: Organization tenure moderates the influence of servant leadership on OBSE, such that the positive relationship between servant leadership and OBSE will be strengthened when employee organizational tenure is higher.
4.5 Summary of Hypotheses

In this chapter, I presented a conceptual model (Figure 1) in which OBSE is hypothesized to mediate the relationship between servant leadership and thriving at work and adaptive performance guided by sociometer and self determination theory. I further propose that power distance may weaken the relationship between servant leadership and OBSE, whereas organization tenure may strengthen this relationship. Table 1 provides a summary of each of the hypotheses that will be tested in this research.

Table 1. Summary of Hypotheses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>H1</th>
<th>Servant leadership is positively related to follower’s thriving at work.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>Servant leadership is positively related to follower’s adaptive performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>Servant Leadership is positively related to org-based self-esteem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4</td>
<td>Organization-based self-esteem is positively related to thriving at work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5</td>
<td>Organization-based self-esteem is positively related to adaptive performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6</td>
<td>Organization-based self-esteem mediates the relationship between servant leadership and thriving at work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H7</td>
<td>Organization-based self-esteem mediates the relationship between servant leadership and adaptive performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H8</td>
<td>Thriving at work is positively associated with employee adaptive performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H9</td>
<td>Power distance moderates the influence of servant leadership on OBSE, such that the positive relationship between servant leadership and OBSE will be strengthened when employee power distance is lower.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H10</td>
<td>Organization tenure moderates the influence of servant leadership on OBSE, such that the positive relationship between servant leadership and OBSE will be strengthened when employee organizational tenure is higher.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 5: METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the research methodology for the study and involves three main sections. In the following section, information about the sample, participants, and the data collection strategy will be provided. The measures or each of the constructs will then be discussed, followed by an overview of the data analytic methods.

5.1 Research Setting and Design

To test the conceptual model (see Figure 1), I conducted a quantitative study with a private company. Participants in the study included the employees of a multinational technology company named Green Company (pseudonym). Green Company was founded in 1999 in Canada. It currently has offices in Ireland and the Philippines. With over 12 million users, Green Company operates globally. Green Company is interested in learning more about servant leadership and whether it may be beneficial to invest in this approach to leadership. Thriving at work and adaptive performance are also key concepts for the organization since they need creative and engaged employees who are committed to continuing to learn and who are able to adapt to shifting demands and volatility in the fast-changing technology industry.

Data collection was conducted in Green Company’s Philippines office, which has grown from 3 employees to 350 employees over the last 10 years. Almost half of the company’s operations are being handled in this office. All employees (both those in individual contributor and supervisory/managerial roles) were invited to participate in the study. Employees work in various jobs, including highly technical jobs such as XML Operator, QA Tester, Profiler, and sales & marketing jobs such as account manager, product support representative, product training
specialist, and graphic designer. Supervisors are team leaders such as Profiling & QA team leader, sales & marketing team leader, business support team leader, product support team leader, and XML team leader. Their overall objective in their work is to develop, maintain, and market an online platform which has both web and mobile application interfaces.

The proposed research employed a time-lagged survey design, in which three separate online surveys were administered approximately four weeks apart (Time 1, 2, and 3). This three-wave design reflected the sequential ordering of variables presented in the proposed model (Figure 1) and assisted in minimizing potential common method bias (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2003). A four-week time interval between surveys was chosen in order to balance the need to secure adequate levels of participation (minimize participant attrition) while also reducing potential response biases (Mitchell & James, 2001).

An email was sent to employees to invite them to participate in the study. This email invitation briefly described the purpose of the project, the timeline for administering each survey, and additional information required to obtain informed consent (e.g., description of privacy safeguards, the option to opt out of the study, etc.). A link to the first survey was then provided. The email invitation informed employees that the purpose of the research project was to examine how various individual and workplace factors (e.g., leadership) impact employee attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (e.g., satisfaction and performance) and well-being. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and no incentives were provided. Employees willing to participate in the study had access to the survey by clicking the survey link in the email invitation. The survey was administered through Carleton University’s Qualtrics survey system, which uses high levels of security to protect data privacy. Participants were assured that all
responses would be kept strictly confidential and that the data would only be used for research purposes and reported at the aggregate level.

At Time 1, employees responded to the first online survey. In this survey, employees were asked general demographic and background questions (i.e., gender, age, education, organization tenure) and to rate their respective supervisor’s servant leadership behavior (see “Measures” below). I received 275 responses, so the participation rate for this survey was 85%. Approximately four weeks later (Time 2), employees received the second online survey. In this survey, employees were asked to complete measures assessing the proposed mediating variable (organization-based self-esteem) and the moderating variables (i.e., power distance) in the proposed model. This time I received 271 responses. The participation rate for this survey was 84%. Approximately four weeks after the second survey (Time 3), employees received the third and last online survey, and the participation rate was 80% with 238 employee responses. All employees rated their level of thriving at work in this survey. Moreover, supervisors rated their respective employees’ adaptive performance. Because self-ratings on performance variables may be subject to response bias (e.g., socially desirable responding), supervisor ratings were collected to enhance the validity of this assessment. In order to ensure that supervisor and subordinate responses can be matched in the data set, a list of employees (and their corresponding supervisors) was requested from the organization. All employees were also asked to provide their names when responding to the survey so that their responses could be matched across the three surveys. After finalizing data collection and matching the responses, random IDs were assigned to each employee, and the names were removed from the data set completely to maintain data privacy and protect the anonymity of respondents. In total, after removing cases with incomplete
responses (e.g., cases with incompleted surveys or in which respondents could not be matched with a supervisor), the total sample size for the study was 182 employees, who were rated in terms of their adaptive performance by 24 supervisors.

5.2 Measures

The following is a description of the scales used to measure each variable in the study. For each measure, scale items will be averaged to produce an overall score. Appendix 3 provides a list of each of the measures, including the items and the rating scales used to assess each variable.

**Servant Leadership:** For this study, van Dierendonck et al.'s (2017) SLS-18 measure was used to assess servant leadership (time 1). This measure is a shortened version of van Dierendonck and Nuijten’s (2011) 30-item Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) and was developed to increase the cross-cultural generalizability of the SLS (van Dierendonck et al., 2017). Thus, the SLS-18 only includes dimensions (and items) that have demonstrated cross-cultural equivalence (similar responses across cultures) and measures five dimensions of servant leadership: empowerment, humility, standing back, stewardship, and authenticity (van Dierendonck et al., 2017). Sample items include: “My manager gives me the information I need to do my work well,” “My manager learns from criticism,” “My manager keeps himself/herself at the background and gives credits to others,” “My manager emphasized the importance of paying attention to the good of the whole,” “My manager is open about his/her limitations and weaknesses.” In completing the SLS-18, participants indicate their level of agreement with each item using a 7-
point rating scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.97.

*Organization-based self-esteem:* OBSE was measured at time 2 using the 5-item version of Pierce’s (1989) OBSE scale. This measure has been used in other studies (Scott et al., 2008; Toth et al., 2019) and has been shown to possess similar psychometric characteristics (e.g., internal consistency) to the 10-item measure version of this scale (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). Participants will be asked to indicate their levels of agreement with each item using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Sample items include: “I count around here,” and “I am taken seriously around here.” Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.94.

*Power Distance:* Dorfman & Howell’s (1988) 6-item measure was used to assess power distance (time 2). This measure assesses power distance in an organizational context and has previously been used in Asian samples (e.g., Farh et al., 2007). Sample items include: “Managers should make most decisions without consulting subordinates,” and “It is frequently necessary for a manager to use authority and power when dealing with subordinates.” Participants will respond to each item using a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.83.

*Organization Tenure:* Employees were asked to report the length of time they have been employees in the organization (years and months) at time 1 (along with other demographic information).

*Thriving at work:* This construct was assessed using Porath et al.’s (2012) 10-item Thriving at Work scale (time 3). This measure has demonstrated high levels of internal consistency and
construct validity and is the most commonly used measure of thriving at work (Brown et al., 2017; Porath et al., 2012; Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). Sample items include: “I find myself learning often” and “I feel alive and vital.” In accordance with previous research (Niessen et al., 2012; Paterson et al., 2014; Walumbwa et al., 2018), scores were averaged across all items to form the overall measure of thriving. Participants recorded their responses on a 7-point rating scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.93.

**Adaptive Performance:** Supervisors assessed their employees’ adaptive performance using four items from Blickle et al.’s (2011) measure of adaptive performance (time 3). Using a 5-point rating scale (1 = never, 5 = always), the supervisor evaluated the extent to which their employees display various adaptive behaviors (Blickle et al., 2011). Sample items include: “This employee handles successfully emergencies, interruptions, and losses at work” and “This employee handles successfully unforeseen events and crisis situations at work.” Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.92.

**Control variables:** Age (years of age) and gender (0 = male; 1 female) were tested as potential control variables in the proposed model. There is some evidence to suggest that age and gender may influence employee adaptive performance (DeArmond et al., 2006) and that women may be more likely to report lower levels of thriving in some jobs (e.g., Niessen et al., 2012; Purvanova & Muros, 2010).

**5.3 Data Analyses for Hypotheses Testing**

As outlined in Chapter 4, this research involved testing a path model in which servant leadership is expected to influence thriving at work and adaptive performance via its effects on
OBSE. Furthermore, power distance, and organizational tenure were positioned as moderating the influence of servant leadership on OBSE (see Figure 1). As a first step, basic descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and zero-order correlations were estimated to provide a basic understanding of the variables and the relationships between them. To test the measurement model and assess the distinctiveness of each of the perceptual variables assessed in the study, confirmatory factor analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS AMOS Version 28 software.

Lastly, path analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses in the proposed model. Because employees in the sample are nested within supervisors (i.e., in some cases, multiple subordinates rated the same supervisor and vice versa), the multilevel “complex survey data” path analysis procedure in Mplus 8.4 (Muthen & Muthen, 2017) was used to correct standard errors for possible non-independence due to individuals being clustered within units. This analytic approach has been used in a number of previous studies testing path models with clustered data (Liu et al., 2015; Schaubroeck et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2016; Zheng et al., 2021). This procedure uses a sandwich estimator (with a weighted log-likelihood function) to compute estimates of the standard errors and model parameters (Asparouhov, 2005, 2006; Muthen & Muthen, 2017).
CHAPTER 6: RESULTS

This chapter reports the results of the statistical tests of the proposed model. First, data screening procedures, descriptive statistics, and zero-order correlations are reported. Results from the confirmatory factory analyses will then be presented, testing the distinctiveness of the measures used in the study, followed by path analysis results providing more detailed tests of the proposed hypotheses.

6.1 Data Screening

Before conducting the main analyses, data screening procedures were employed to ensure that the collected data fit the assumptions of our planned analyses. Data were inspected for outliers and multivariate normality.

The presence of univariate outliers was examined using Mahalanobis distance, and the influence of the outliers was examined using Cook’s distance methods. Mahalanobis distances identified a small number of outliers, i.e., 2 outliers or 1.1% of the sample for dependent variable thriving and 3 outliers 1.6% of the sample for dependent variable adaptive performance. In order to make decisions for the outliers, Cook’s distance values were computed. The values ranged from 0 to .180 for dependent variable thriving and 0 to .067 for dependent variable adaptive performance. Since these values were less than the 1.0 threshold, these outliers were assessed as having a minor influence and were not removed from the data set (Stevens, 1984).

Table 2 reports skewness and kurtosis coefficients for each of the main variables included in the study. The largest skewness and kurtosis coefficients were -1.09 and 1.8,
respectively (i.e., for servant leadership) which fell into the acceptable range (i.e., absolute skewness value <2 and kurtosis <7) (Kim, 2013).

Table 2. Skewness and Kurtosis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Skewness</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SL</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>-1.09</td>
<td>1.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBSE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thriving</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adaptive Performance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Power Distance</td>
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<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization Tenure</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>-1.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Singularity and multicollinearity among independent variables were assessed by reviewing the bivariate correlations among variables and the variance inflation factor (VIF) statistics. As indicated in Table 3, VIF statistics were checked for both dependent variables, adaptive performance and thriving, and all coefficients were under the thresholds of .1 for tolerance and 10 for VIF (Dormann et al., 2013). Bivariate correlations among independent variables (see Table 4) were also confirmed to be under the threshold of .7 (Dormann et al., 2013), which indicates that there was not an issue with singularity. Taken all together, it was confirmed that singularity and multicollinearity were not an issue in the data set.
### Table 3. Multicollinearity (VIF Statistics)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Collinearity Statistics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tolerance</td>
<td>VIF</td>
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<tr>
<td>Servant Leadership</td>
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</table>

**Note:** Dependent Variable = Adaptive Performance

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Collinearity Statistics</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tolerance</td>
<td>VIF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Servant Leadership</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBSE</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Distance</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization Tenure</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Dependent Variable = Thriving at work

### 6.2 Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations among all of the variables are presented in Table 4. Ratings of servant leadership \((M = 5.20, SD = 1.20)\), OBSE \((M = 5.20, SD = 1.02)\), thriving \((M = 5.45, SD = 0.98)\), and adaptive performance \((M = 3.73, SD = 0.91)\) were in the moderate range with significant variation in the responses. As expected, servant leadership was found to be positively correlated with both thriving at work \((r = .27, p < .01)\) and adaptive
performance ($r = .21, p < .01$), providing support for hypotheses 1 and 2. In addition, servant leadership was found to be positively associated with OBSE ($r = .41, p < .01$). OBSE was also positively correlated with both thriving at work ($r = .27, p < .01$) and adaptive performance ($r = .17, p < .01$). In terms of the potential control variables, women were found to report higher levels of servant leadership ($r = .17, p < .05$), OBSE ($r = .21, p < .05$), and adaptive performance ($r = .34, p < .01$). Age was not related to any of the primary variables in the model. I, therefore only retained gender as a control variable in the analysis.
Table 4. Means, Standard Deviations and Zero-order Correlations of the Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. SL (E)</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. OBSE (E)</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>.41**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Thriving (E)</td>
<td>5.45</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. AP (S)</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Pwr Dist (E)</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Org Ten (E)</td>
<td>54.33</td>
<td>32.52</td>
<td>-.30**</td>
<td>-.25**</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>-.20*</td>
<td>-.24**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Gender (E)</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.21*</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N= 155-173; *p < .05; **p < .01; (E)= Subordinate; (S)= Supervisor; SL = servant leadership; OBSE = organization-based self-esteem; AP = adaptive performance; Pwr Dist = power distance; Org Ten= organization tenure; Gender 0= male, 1=female
6.3 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Before testing the hypotheses, I ran a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) using AMOS software to check the validity and distinctiveness of the measures in the proposed model. The hypothesized (baseline) five-factor model consisted of servant leadership, OBSE, thriving, adaptive performance, and power distance, which were each specified as distinct but correlated factors. This five-factor model was tested against several competing models, including a four-factor model that was the same as the five-factor model but merged servant leadership and OBSE into one factor; two different three-factor models: one that combined servant leadership, OBSE, and thriving into one factor, and the second combined OBSE and power distance into one factor, and thriving and adaptive performance into one factor (i.e., this model tested whether scales were more likely to be correlated based on when they were administered – time 1, 2, or 3). Finally, the proposed five-factor model was also compared to results from a two-factor model that combined all of the employee-rated constructs into one factor but tested adaptive performance (the only supervisor-rated construct) as a separate factor, and a one-factor model which specified that all of the variables would load onto one factor.

1 Organization tenure was not included in the CFAs as it is a single item measure.
Table 5. Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>TLI</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
<th>AIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One-factor model</td>
<td>768</td>
<td>3448.21</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>3716.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-factor model</td>
<td>767</td>
<td>3038.85</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>3308.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three-factor model</td>
<td>765</td>
<td>1968.88</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>2242.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three-factor model (2)</td>
<td>765</td>
<td>2844.78</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>3118.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four-factor model</td>
<td>762</td>
<td>1855.69</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>2135.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five-factor model</td>
<td>758</td>
<td>1351.44</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>1639.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Five-factor model that includes all variables except for organization tenure

Four-factor: same as 5-factor but merge servant leadership and OBSE into one factor

Three-factor (2): same as 5-factor but merge servant leadership, OBSE, and thriving at work into one factor

Three-factor: same as 5-factor but merge OBSE, power distance, into one factor, and also thriving at work and adaptive performance into one factor

Two-factor: have all variables combined into one factor, except for adaptive performance.

One-factor: have all variables combined into one factor

As shown in Table 5, results indicated that the hypothesized five-factor model provided a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 1351.44$, $df = 758$, CFI = .91, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .07). The hypothesized five-factor model provided a significantly better fit to the data than any of the alternative models tested including: the four-factor model ($\chi^2 = 1855.69$, $df = 762$, CFI = .83, TLI = .81, RMSEA = .09), either of the three-factor models tested ($\chi^2 = 1968.88$, $df = 765$, CFI = .81, TLI = .79, RMSEA = .09; $\chi^2 = 2844.78$, $df = 765$, CFI = .68, TLI = .64, RMSEA = .12), the two-factor model ($\chi^2 = 3038.85$, $df$
= 767, CFI = .65, TLI = .61, RMSEA = .13) or the one-factor model ($\chi^2 = 3448.21$, $df = 768$, CFI = .59, TLI = .53, RMSEA = .14). Taken together, results from these CFAs supported the distinctiveness of the scales used to measure each construct included in this research.

### 6.4 Path Model Estimation and Tests of Main Hypotheses

In order to test the overall pattern of the indirect effects outlined in the proposed model (see Figure 1), a path model was first tested specifying that OBSE would partially mediate the influence of servant leadership on employee thriving and adaptive performance. Specifically, OBSE was regressed on thriving at work and adaptive performance, and OBSE was regressed on servant leadership. To represent partial mediation, this model specified direct paths between servant leadership and both thriving and adaptive performance. This model was then compared against a model which specified full mediation of OBSE (i.e., the same relationships were specified as in the partial mediation model, but direct paths were not included between servant leadership and thriving or adaptive performance). Results for the hypothesized partially mediated model provided a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 3.11$, $df = 2$, RMSEA = .06, CFI = .98, TLI = .92, SRMR = .03). As expected, coefficients in this model for the direct paths between servant leadership and thriving ($B = .17$) and servant leadership and adaptive performance ($B = .11$) were each statistically significant ($p < .05$). In contrast, results for the full mediation model did not provide an adequate fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 10.21$, $df = 4$, RMSEA = .09, CFI = .90, TLI = .77, SRMR = .03).
Based on these results, I retained the partial mediation model and reported on findings from this model.

As indicated in Table 6, results indicated that servant leadership is positively related to OBSE (Model 1a: $B = .30, p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 3. Furthermore, OBSE is also significantly positively associated with both thriving at work (Model 1b: $B = .17, p < .05$) and adaptive performance (Model 1c: $B = .11, p < .05$), providing support for both Hypotheses 4 and 5. To further assess whether servant leadership influences thriving at work and adaptive performance via OBSE, indirect effects were computed in Mplus using a bootstrapping procedure with 10,000 replications. Consistent with hypothesis 6, this analysis revealed a significant indirect association between servant leadership and thriving through OBSE, as evidenced by a 95% bootstrap confidence interval that does not include zero (indirect effect = .07; LL = .00, UL = .13). Likewise, the indirect effect of servant leadership on adaptive performance though OBSE was also statistically significant (indirect effect = .04; LL = -.00, UL = .09), providing support for Hypothesis 7.

Lastly, in line with Hypothesis 8, thriving at work was found to be positively associated with adaptive performance ($B = .11, p < .05$). Taken together, these results relating to the path coefficients and the tests of indirect effects provide support for the direct and indirect effects specified in the proposed path model. Specifically, these results signal that servant leadership influences both thriving at work and adaptive performance partly through OBSE. Moreover, thriving at work and adaptive performance are significantly related to each other. Next, tests of the proposed moderating effects will be discussed.
Table 6. Mplus results for the hypothesized model (coefficients and standard errors)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>OBSE</th>
<th>Thriving at work</th>
<th>Adaptive Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1a</td>
<td>Model 2a</td>
<td>Model 1b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Variable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Variable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Servant Leadership</td>
<td>.30(.09)***</td>
<td>.22(.07)***</td>
<td>.17(.08)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Org Tenure</td>
<td>-.00(.00)</td>
<td>.22(.10)*</td>
<td>.22(.10)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Distance</td>
<td>-.12(.06)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediator</td>
<td>OBSE</td>
<td>.22(.10)*</td>
<td>.22(.10)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$N = 182$ at individual level; $N = 24$ supervisors. Servant leadership is grand-mean centered. Unstandardized regression coefficients are shown $^* p < .05$, $^** p < .01$, $^*** p < .001$
6.4.1 Moderation Results

In order to test Hypotheses 9 and 10, power distance and organization tenure were specified in the path model as moderators of the relationship between servant leadership and OBSE. As shown in Table 6, the interaction term for servant leadership and power distance was significantly associated with OBSE ($B = -.12, p < .05$). To further probe the nature of this effect, a plot of this interaction is displayed in Figure 3. Consistent with hypothesis 9, simple slopes analyses revealed servant leadership was more strongly positively correlated with OBSE when power distance is low ($B = .39, p < .001$) than when power distance is high ($B = .13, p < .05$). Indeed, at high (vs. low) levels of power distance, the relationship between servant leadership and OBSE is non-significant. As illustrated in Figure 3, it is interesting to note that when leaders were lower in servant leadership, participants low in power distance appeared to be significantly more likely than those high in power distance to report diminished OBSE. In other words, it appears that the differences in simple slopes for low and high power distance employees may be largely owing to differences between employees who are experiencing low levels of servant leadership. Finally, with respect to the hypothesized moderating effect of organization tenure on the servant leadership – OBSE relationship, the interaction between organization tenure and OBSE was not found to be statistically significant ($B = .00, p > .05$), failing to support hypothesis 10.
6.5 Supplemental Analysis

Although previous research has highlighted the importance of assessing both dimensions of thriving at work together (Paterson et al., 2014), I conducted exploratory analyses to test whether servant leadership and OBSE may be differentially related to the two main dimensions of thriving at work: vitality and learning. Accordingly, I first conducted a regression analysis in which both vitality and learning were regressed on servant leadership. Results from this analysis indicated that servant leadership is positively related to both learning and vitality; however, the relationship between servant leadership and learning ($B = .28, p < .001$) is discernibly stronger than that for vitality ($B = .19; p < .01$). To further assess the relationship between servant
leadership, OBSE, and the two dimensions of thriving, I tested a similar path model as that outlined in Figure 1 in which OBSE was positioned as partially mediating the effects of servant leadership on thriving; however, the thriving and learning dimensions were assessed separately as correlated factors\(^3\). In this path model, servant leadership was found to be positively related to OBSE \((B = .30)\). Furthermore, OBSE was significantly positively associated with both vitality \((B = .12)\) and learning \((B = .22)\). The indirect effect of servant leadership and learning via OBSE was .07, while the indirect effect was .08 for vitality. Taken together, these results suggest that servant leadership has a somewhat stronger influence on the learning than the vitality dimension of thriving, and a similar pattern exists for the influence of OBSE on the two thriving dimensions.

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\(^3\) Adaptive performance was removed from this model given the focus in the analysis on relations between OBSE and the two dimensions of thriving as the focal outcome variables.
CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

7.1 Overview of Findings

This research provides several novel insights and theoretical contributions relating to the research literature on servant leadership, thriving, and adaptive performance. First, this study extends beyond previous research on servant leadership by investigating two understudied attitudinal and behavioral outcomes: employee thriving at work and adaptive performance. A sizable body of research has emerged indicating that servant leadership is associated with various employee attitudes, ranging from job satisfaction and work engagement to perceptions of justice (Hebert, 2003; Khan et al., 2015; Kool & van Dierendonck, 2012; Mayer et al., 2008; van Dierendonck et al., 2014). Moreover, servant leadership has been shown to be associated with various measures of employee performance, including OCB, counterproductive behavior, proactive behavior, and creativity (Hoch et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020; Liden et al., 2008; Newman et al., 2017; Panaccio et al., 2015). However, we have a limited understanding of whether and how servant leadership may influence employee perceptions of thriving and adaptability at work. Consistent with the integrative model of human growth at work (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014), followers of servant leaders will be more likely to experience a sense of thriving as they will feel included in the decision-making process, they will receive more developmental and task-related feedback from their supervisor, and they will work in an environment in which trust and respect are valued and information is more readily shared. By demonstrating these leader behaviors and nurturing a follower’s sense of competence and belongingness (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016a; Liu & Bern-Klug, 2013), servant leaders may cultivate stronger perceptions of OBSE and in turn, greater employee thriving. Indeed, supplemental analyses indicated that servant leadership and OBSE
were significantly positively associated with both the learning and vitality dimensions of thriving, suggesting that servant leadership and OBSE influence both the cognitive and affective components of this construct. Thus, this research provides a novel contribution to the research literature by highlighting that servant leadership influences employee thriving in part through its effects on OBSE.

This research also provides a unique contribution to the literature by demonstrating that servant leadership may facilitate employee adaptive performance. Previous work has suggested that servant leaders may positively influence different components of employee work performance (e.g., Hoch et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020); however, results from this study also indicate that servant leaders may enhance followers’ willingness to learn and adjust to changing job and workplace demands. Servant leaders provide greater autonomy to their employees by offering them growth opportunities and involving them in the decision-making process (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016b; Spreitzer and Porath, 2013). As a result of providing this greater sense of autonomy, and the development of followers’ knowledge, skills, and abilities, this should heighten an employee’s sense of competence and social connection, increasing their OBSE. Furthermore, when employees have higher OBSE, they may be less susceptible to the negative effects of stress, will seek to maintain their higher levels of OBSE, and they may continue to feel energized and confident in their ability to perform well despite facing uncertainty or setbacks (Tong et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2022). In line with these arguments, OBSE was found to mediate the influence of servant leadership on adaptive performance.

Results from this research also signal, however, that the effect of servant leadership on OBSE is more pronounced for followers who are lower on power distance. Previous research has
indicated that power distance can moderate the influence of different forms of leadership on employee work perceptions and behaviors. For example, Lin, Wang, and Chen (2013) reported that the negative relationship between abusive supervision and employees’ well-being was stronger when employees’ power distance orientation was lower. They argued that employees lower on power distance will see themselves as more equal in status and more interpersonally close to their supervisor, which will strengthen the effect of abusive leader behavior. More recently, Yang et al. (2017) found that servant leadership may exert a stronger effect on both creative self-efficacy and team efficacy when team members report lower power distance. The current study complements this previous work by demonstrating that servant leadership may also more strongly influence OBSE when followers are lower on power distance. Because followers lower on power distance may be more receptive to the more personalized approach adopted by servant leaders and to capitalize on the greater decision-making latitude and growth opportunities provided to them, this may be more likely to enhance their OBSE.

Unlike power distance, organization tenure was not found to significantly moderate the relationship between servant leadership and OBSE. Initially, I predicted that organization tenure should strengthen the influence of servant leadership on OBSE, as longer tenured employees may have a greater opportunity to develop a close relationship with their supervisor, benefit from their supervisors’ servant leadership behavior, and also potentially garner more recognition and respect from others in the organization. It may be, however, that because servant leaders tend to be more focused on the development of their employees and attuned to issues of fair treatment and inclusion (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016; Shore et al., 2018), they may provide more individualized attention to employees who have been with the organization for a shorter period
of time and who might be in greater need of guidance and support from them. In this respect, servant leader behavior can also play a critical role in enhancing perceptions of OBSE for employees who are newer to the organization. Further research is needed exploring the influence of organizational tenure, and the duration and depth of the leader-follower relationship, in moderating the effects of servant leadership on follower perceptions and behaviors.

More broadly, this research contributes to the literature on thriving at work and adaptive performance by responding to calls to explore the role of contextual factors, including leadership behaviors, on the development of employee thriving and adaptability (e.g., Huang et al., 2018; Kleine et al., 2019; Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). Previous studies have suggested that, in addition to supportive supervisory behaviors (e.g., Paterson et al., 2014; Russo et al., 2018), different leadership styles, such as transformational leadership (Kleine et al., 2019) and empowering leadership (Li et al., 2016), can foster employee thriving at work. Furthermore, servant leadership has recently also been linked to the display of individual thriving at work (Usman et al., 2021; Wang, Meng, & Cai, 2019). This study replicates and extends these findings by signalling that servant leadership may fuel employee thriving in part through enhanced OBSE.

Finally, recent reviews of the adaptive performance literature have highlighted the role of leaders in encouraging the display of employee adaptive performance (Huang et al., 2014, 2018; Park & Park, 2019); however, only a few studies have empirically tested the influence of leadership variables on adaptive performance. For example, leader support has been identified as an important antecedent of adaptive performance (Chiaburu et al., 2013), while at the team level, transformational leadership climate has also been found to have a positive impact on employee adaptive performance (Charbonnier-Voirin et al., 2010). More recently, Kaya and
Karatepe (2020) examined servant leadership as a predictor of adaptive performance in frontline jobs in the hospitality sector, and found that servant leadership may influence adaptive performance through enhanced work engagement. Building on this work, I argue and find that OBSE may play a key role in mediating the effect of servant leadership on employee adaptive performance. Furthermore, in line with the integrative model of human growth at work (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014), I found that employee thriving may also contribute to the display of employee adaptive performance. Previous studies have demonstrated that thriving may evoke the display of various positive employee work behaviors, including organizational citizenship behavior (e.g., Li et al., 2016; Raza et al., 2017), innovation (e.g., Wallace et al., 2016), and overall job performance (e.g., Paterson et al., 2014; Porath et al., 2012; Prem et al., 2017). Moreover, factors such as a commitment to continuous learning have been identified as critical for fostering adaptive performance (e.g., Han & Williams, 2008). Results from this research complement these findings by indicating that thriving at work is positively associated with employee adaptive performance. Due to their greater sense of growth and learning, employees who report higher levels of thriving at work may be more adaptable because they are more likely to possess the knowledge and skills needed to adapt effectively, and they may be better equipped to identify and foresee organizational problems. Furthermore, positive emotions associated with vitality can increase employees’ motivation to adapt and provide the energy and drive needed to respond effectively to more challenging and potentially ambiguous work demands.

As noted by Huang et al. (2014), in order to more fully understand the factors that foster adaptive performance at work, we need to investigate the condition, the person, and the interaction between the condition and the person. In this research, I incorporated this guiding
interactionist framework by examining servant leadership, a key contextual factor (or condition), and its influence on thriving and adaptive performance via OBSE (a person-level factor), as well as the interaction between servant leadership and power distance and organization tenure (condition X person factors) on these outcomes. Additional research is needed applying this interactionist lens and examining the influence of other contextual factors (e.g., leadership styles, such as inclusive leadership; organizational climate; team composition factors) on adaptive performance to further advance the literature in this domain.

7.2 Practical Implications

In this research, servant leadership was found to be positively associated with thriving at work and adaptive performance. In earlier chapters, I highlighted why thriving at work and adaptive performance are vital for long-term organizational success. In order to foster a work environment in which servant leadership is more prominently displayed, organizations should consider implementing training and development programs, and other HR practices (e.g., selection, performance management) that assist in building and reinforcing employees’ servant leadership capabilities. Several companies have invested in developing servant leadership in their workforce, including Starbucks, Nordstrom’s, Marriott International, Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen, and FedEx, and have reported various benefits associated with this approach (Jathanna, 2023; Kourteva, 2021). For example, key features of the work environment and some of the positive outcomes observed in these companies are: (1) they prioritize not only customers but also their staff and franchisees, (2) they demonstrate empathy and concern for the wellness of employees, (3) they utilize employee surveys to listen to (and act on) the concerns of employees, and (4) they
create a positive, supportive environment for their employees; who in turn, provide better service to clients (Jathanna, 2023; Kourteva, 2021; Leadx, n.d.).

In addition to providing training and development opportunities relating to servant leadership, companies also need to encourage and support the display of these leadership behaviors after training. For example, in GE, the top management team identified key leadership behaviors in line with servant leadership which were deemed to be particularly important for organizational success. These behaviors were “act with humility,” “lead with transparency,” and “deliver with focus.” Every employee in the company, irrespective of level (i.e., individual contributor or manager), is rated on these behaviors as a part of their annual performance evaluation. Through this process, GE openly shares its expectations with respect to specific leadership behaviors that should be displayed, they actively promote the display of these behaviors, and feedback is provided to employees on whether they are exhibiting these behaviors or they need improvement. Adopting this approach of incorporating servant leadership into the performance management system should further assist organizations in conveying and reinforcing the importance of demonstrating these behaviors.

In addition to reinforcing servant leader behaviors in an organization’s performance management system, organizations should also consider assessing servant leader behaviors in their selection systems, particularly in evaluating applicants for managerial positions. For instance, structured questions may be asked in the interview to assess servant leadership (e.g., “What approach have you taken to develop your team members?”; “Are there any projects that you are working on voluntarily for the community or for developing people in your organization?” “How frequently do you have one-on-one meetings with your employees?”; “Tell me about a
time when you delegated a challenging task or project to your employee and provided ongoing support and feedback to them?”). By assessing one’s servant leadership capabilities in selection and performance management processes, and providing training and post-training support, this should assist in building a work environment that values and encourages the display of these behaviors.

Indeed, in practical terms, there are various challenges that servant leaders may encounter when demonstrating servant leadership. For example, sometimes servant leadership may be misperceived as a sign of weakness since it entails displaying communal behaviours, such as humility, standing back, and stewardship, in addition more agentic behaviors (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). It also can be very cognitively and emotionally demanding as providing detailed feedback, finding opportunities for employees to grow, and attempting to respond to the unique needs of each employee require a lot of time, energy, and attention. In this respect, organizations need to not only ensure that the core principles and behaviors related to servant leadership are clearly communicated to employees throughout the organization, but they also provide resources to support leaders’ well-being. In this regard, organizations can introduce wellness programs (e.g., mindfulness training: Sonnentag & Frese, 2013) or other initiatives that enable leaders to better balance work and family demands (e.g., flexible work arrangements: Allen, 2013) so that they have the energy and resources needed to demonstrate servant leadership. Moreover, organizations should endeavour to create an open environment in which workplace stress and well-being is not viewed as a taboo topic, but leaders should be able to talk about their own well-being openly with their supervisors and HR representatives (Kaluza et al., 2020). Previous research has indicated that higher levels of anxiety and burnout are associated with
fewer transformational leadership behaviors and greater display of abusive supervision (e.g., Byrne et al., 2014; Harms et al., 2017; Steele, 2011). Further research is needed examining the influence of servant leadership on leader well-being, and how to support the well-being of servant leaders.

Finally, results from this research indicate that servant leadership may foster employee thriving and adaptive performance. Given the importance of employee thriving and adaptive performance in contributing to employee well-being (e.g., Kleine et al., 2019; Spreitzer et al., 2012; Stevenson & Farmer, 2017; Walumbwa et al., 2020) and also enhancing other workplace outcomes (Huang et al., 2014; Kleine et al., 2019), organizations should also monitor the levels of employee thriving and adaptability in their workforce. Microsoft, for example, has recently started measuring employee thriving to identify areas where it may be low or declining, so that action plans can be developed and implemented to boost levels of thriving (Klinghoffer & McCune, 2022).

7.3 Limitations

Some of the methodological strengths of this research include using a time-separated survey design (i.e., 3 waves of data collection) and two rating sources (supervisors and followers), which minimized problems associated with common method variance. In addition, model testing using the complex survey procedure in MPlus accounted for potential non-independence in the data (followers nested within groups of supervisors) and I tested and controlled for potential influences of key demographic factors (e.g., gender) in the research model.
Despite these strengths, this research also has some key limitations. First, one of the primary limitations of the study relates to the nature of the sample: participants were from the same organization in the same country. Previous research has indicated that a person's cultural background, and the cultural values they espouse, can significantly influence the development of their self-esteem (Bleidorn et al., 2016). For instance, people with more individualistic (vs collectivistic) values form unique self-conceptions, which can result in differences in the way self-esteem is perceived (Wang & Ollendick, 2001). Building on this research, this study found that power distance moderated the influence of servant leadership on OBSE. Given that power distance, and other values, such as individualism and collectivism, may vary across countries (Hofstede, 1980), further research is needed examining the generalizability of this study's findings in other countries. For example, it may be that servant leadership exerts more robust effects on OBSE in countries/cultures higher in collectivism, in which social connections and one's sense of being valued by others forms a more critical component of one's self-esteem. Studies are also needed testing whether these findings generalize to other industries and employees in different occupations.

Second, due to constraints on survey length, shorter measures of some constructs were used. For example, due to its greater cross-cultural equivalence, servant leadership was assessed using the SLS-18, a shortened 18-item measure developed based van Dierendonck and Nuijten’s (2011) longer (30-item) multidimensional Servant Leadership Survey (SLS). Moreover, adaptive performance was assessed using Blickle et al.'s (2011) 4-item measure. Although CFAs and indicators of internal consistency (Cronbach Alpha’s coefficients) for these scales provided evidence supporting their reliability and discriminant validity, future studies might benefit from
using longer measures that provide broader assessments of the content domain of these constructs.

Lastly, results from this research suggest that OBSE plays an important role in mediating the effects of servant leadership on thriving and adaptive performance; however, the pattern of results indicates partial (vs full) mediation for these relationships. In this respect, further research is needed exploring other potential explanatory mechanisms. For example, in line with self-determination theory (e.g., Deci et al., 2017), servant leadership may influence employee thriving and adaptability through psychological need fulfillment processes. Although the integrative model of human growth (Spreitzer et al., 2014) is partly based on principles of self-determination theory, need fulfillment processes were not directly assessed in this study. Similarly, causality orientations (autonomous, controlled, impersonal motivation) delineated in SDT (e.g., see Deci & Ryan, 2008) may shed additional light on how servant leadership influences employee work attitudes and behavior. Recent research suggests that when leaders are autonomously motivated they understand the value of the work, are more inspired, and are more likely to engage in transformational leadership behavior (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2020). Since a key impetus for servant leadership is a desire to serve first, autonomous motivation may likewise be a key predictor of servant leadership. At the same time, however, servant leaders may also foster greater autonomous motivation in their followers, which will, in turn lead to more positive follower work attitudes and performance. As discussed earlier, servant leaders provide their followers with a supportive environment that can enhance their sense of competence and self-esteem. Previous studies suggest that autonomous motivation can play an integral role in the development of self esteem (e.g., Uruthirapathy & Dyke, 2022). Accordingly, additional research
is needed probing how servant leadership may impact an organization’s work environment (e.g., climate) and the development of their followers’ sense of autonomous motivation.

7.4 Future Research Directions

The current study enhances our understanding of servant leadership and how it relates to key employee outcomes, including employee thriving and adaptive performance. In addition to further probing the process mechanisms underlying these effects, additional research is needed exploring whether and how servant leadership influences other individual and organizational outcomes. For example, recent research suggests that servant leadership may assist in building employee resilience (Eliot, 2020). Further research is needed examining this relationship, and how servant leadership can foster resilience and contribute to energizing the workforce at different levels in the organization (i.e. at the individual, work group, and organization levels - e.g., see Baker, 2019; Hartmann et al., 2020 for reviews). As noted earlier, research is also needed examining how servant leadership impacts leader well-being. There is some evidence, for example, that adopting a servant leadership style can be detrimental to a leaders’ work-life balance due to the greater demands placed on the leader and the depletion of their resources (e.g., ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). Moreover, a recent study showed that servant leadership behavior creates emotional exhaustion, which may also elicit stronger perceptions of work-home conflict for the leader (Zhou et al., 2020). Further research is needed examining the influence of servant leadership on different measures of well-being and both potentially positive (e.g., perceived meaning in work, career progression) and negative outcomes (e.g., susceptibility to burnout, work-family interference) associated with employing a servant leadership style.
Although results from this research are consistent with previous work indicating that servant leadership can be beneficial in fostering various positive employee work perceptions and behaviors (see Eva et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020), additional studies are needed examining the role of context in determining which leader behaviors may be most appropriate, as well as potential negative effects of servant leadership. Contingency theories of leadership (e.g., Ayman et al., 1995; Hersey et al., 1979) emphasize that different leadership styles may be more effective in different circumstances. For example, in a situation where followers are inexperienced or lack knowledge, a more directive leadership style (e.g., providing clear instructions and close supervision) may be beneficial to ensure their understanding and development (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009). On the other hand, in situations where followers are highly skilled and motivated, a more delegating leadership style (e.g., granting autonomy and empowering decision-making) could be more effective in promoting innovation and engagement (Thompson & Glasø, 2015).

According to this contingency perspective, the key to effective leadership is the ability to adapt and employ different leadership behaviors based on the needs of the situation and the individuals involved (Ayman et al., 1995; Zaccaro et al., 2009). In this respect, further work is needed integrating this contingency approach with models of positive leadership, including servant leadership and transformational leadership. Given its emphasis on responding to follower needs, it may be that servant leadership is associated with greater leader adaptability, and in turn, enhanced leader effectiveness. At the same time, servant leadership may be less effective when followers are more self-interested (vs prosocial) and may be more inclined to exploit the greater trust and support provided by servant leaders. Additional studies are warranted investigating these questions.
Consistent with a contingency lens, results from this research indicated that power distance moderated the influence of servant leadership on OBSE. In addition to other cultural variables (e.g., individualism-collectivism), variables related to depth and quality of other relationships in the organization should also be examined as potential moderators of the influence of servant leadership on OBSE. For example, co-worker support may moderate the influence of servant leadership on OBSE and other work perceptions and behaviors. Co-worker support can play an important role in impacting one’s overall experience at work and has been linked to various positive employee work attitudes, including different dimensions of employee work satisfaction (Ali & Kashif, 2020; Chang et al., 2016; Morrison, 2005; Sias, 2005). Employee perceptions of co-worker support, and in particular, the extent to others in the organization are perceived to value one’s contributions, also reflect a core element of employee OBSE (e.g., Liu et al., 2013). When individuals have close colleagues at work, they can ask for help whenever they need it, share their personal thoughts openly and honestly, and encourage, listen to, and rely on others for support and feedback (Li, 2017). In line with the sociometer theory, when individuals have strong social connections at work, this will increase their sense of feeling acknowledged, valued, and accepted, which will boost one’s OBSE. Substitutes for leadership theory (Kerr & Jermier, 1978) proposes that leader behavior may exert a weaker influence on employee perceptions and behaviors when other factors in the work environment, including alternative sources of social and task-related support, exist in the organization. Consistent with this perspective, Li et al. (2013) found that transformational leadership exerted a weaker influence on employee citizenship and taking-charge behaviors when employees reported higher levels of social identification with other workgroup members (Li et al., 2013). Theoretically, co-worker
support may therefore moderate the influence of servant leadership on OBSE, such that the positive relationship between servant leadership and OBSE can be diminished when employee workplace friendship prevalence is higher. Lastly, given the changing nature of work and the rise of remote/hybrid work arrangements, future studies should investigate the role of technology and remote work on the display of servant leadership and how it may influence employee thriving and adaptive performance. Because servant leadership has a strong relational component, and working remotely can create more social distance between leaders and followers (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Bell et al., 2023), future studies should examine whether followers working remotely (or in hybrid arrangements) may have different experiences and responses to servant leaders than those who work in person.

7.5 Conclusion

Given the constantly changing nature of work, and research highlighting the importance of perceptions of thriving in enhancing employee motivation and performance (Kleine et al., 2019; Spreitzer & Porath, 2014), employee thriving and a capacity to adapt to changing workplace demands are critical to fostering organizational success. Previous research has suggested that various employee attributes and work perceptions may contribute to employee thriving and adaptability; however, we have a limited understanding of how other factors in the work context, including the leadership style employed by one’s supervisor, may influence these outcomes. In this research, I proposed and found that servant leadership is positively associated with both employee thriving and adaptive performance. Moreover, OBSE played a central role in mediating these effects, suggesting that servant leadership may foster a sense of social connection, competence, and feeling valued in the organization, which, in turn, may fuel employee thriving
and adaptive performance. Results also indicated, however, that the relationship between servant leadership on OBSE was more pronounced when employees reported lower levels of power distance, signaling that these employees may be more receptive and responsive to the more personalized approach provided by servant leaders. Taken together, this research highlights the integral role that servant leadership may play in enhancing employee thriving and also a willingness to learn and adapt to changing work demands. Additional research is needed examining how servant leadership influences other outcomes in organizations as well as the effects of servant leadership on the well-being and career success of the leaders themselves.
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APPENDICES

Scale Items

**Thriving at Work - Porath et al., 2012**

*Learning Dimension*

1. I find myself learning often.
2. I continue to learn more as time goes by.
3. I see myself continually improving.
4. I am not learning. (Reverse code)
5. I am developing a lot as a person.

*Vitality Dimension*

6. I feel alive and vital.
7. I have energy and spirit.
8. I do not feel very energetic. (Reverse code)
9. I feel alert and awake.
10. I am looking forward to each new day.

(7-point response scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree)

**Adaptive Performance - Blickle et al., 2011**

1. This employee handles successfully emergencies, interruptions, and losses at work.
2. This employee handles successfully unforeseen events and crisis situations at work.
3. This employee adapts successfully to changes and innovations in his/her job.
4. This employee is very adaptable.
(5-point response scale: 1=Never; 5=Always)

**Servant Leadership - van Dierendonck et al., 2017**

1- My manager gives me the information I need to do my work well.
2- My manager encourages me to use my talents.
3- My manager helps me to further develop myself.
4- My manager encourages his/her staff to come up with new ideas.
5- My manager keeps himself/herself in the background and gives credits to others.
6- My manager is open about his/her limitations and weaknesses.
7- My manager learns from criticism.
8- My manager emphasizes the importance of focusing on the good of the whole.
9- My manager gives me the authority to take decisions which make work easier for me.
10- My manager is not chasing recognition or rewards for the things he/she does for others.
11- My manager is often touched by the things he/she sees happening around him/her.
12- My manager has a long-term vision.
13- My manager appears to enjoy his/her colleagues’ success more than his/her own.
14- My manager emphasizes the societal responsibility of our work.
15- My manager offers me abundant opportunities to learn new skills.
16- My manager shows his/her true feelings to his/her staff.
17- My manager learns from the different views and opinions of others.
18- If people express criticism, my manager tries to learn from it.

(7-point response scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree)
Organization-based Self-esteem - Pierce & Gardner, 2004

1- I count around here.
2- I am taken seriously around here.
3- I am a valuable part of this place.
4- I make a difference around here.
5- I am trusted around here.

(7-point response scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree)

Power Distance - Farh et al., 2007

1- Managers should make most decisions without consulting subordinates.
2- It is frequently necessary for a manager to use authority and power when dealing with subordinates.
3- Managers should seldom ask for the opinions of employees.
4- Managers should avoid off-the-job social contacts with employees.
5- Employees should not disagree with management decisions.
6- Managers should not delegate important tasks to employees.

(5-point response scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree)