When Servant Leadership Works Less: Motivationally Depleted Career Plateau as a Boundary Condition of the Servant Leadership–Work Engagement Relationship

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Abstract

Work engagement is a central concern for human resource development (HRD) because organizations invest in leadership development to foster employee growth and motivation. Yet developmental leadership may operate less effectively when employees perceive few opportunities for further career development. This issue is especially relevant in large Japanese firms, where career progression has historically depended on internal assignment, promotion, and employer-led development. Drawing on the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), this study examines whether perceived career developability conditions the servant leadership–work engagement relationship.

Servant leadership emphasizes followers' growth, autonomy, and well-being (Eva et al., 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011) and can function as a developmental job resource. Prior research links servant leadership to work engagement but shows that its effectiveness depends partly on relational conditions such as leader–follower social capital (De Clercq et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2020). This study proposes that its developmental relevance also depends on perceived opportunities for future growth. Imashiro et al.'s (2010) motivationally depleted career plateau captures an appraisal that one's work and career no longer provide meaningful opportunities for growth or challenge. Unlike work engagement, which concerns current energetic and affective connection to work, plateau concerns future developmental possibilities. Conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) further suggests that plateau may reduce the extent to which leader support can be connected to future development.

Hypothesis 1: Servant leadership is positively related to work engagement.

Hypothesis 2: Motivationally depleted career plateau attenuates the positive relationship between servant leadership and work engagement.

Method

Data were drawn from a November 2025 Internet survey of full-time employees aged 22–59 in Japanese firms with 300 or more employees. The sample comprised 166 nonmanagerial sales, service, administrative, and technical employees. Responses showing straight-line patterns or unusually short completion times were excluded during data collection in the parent survey. Servant leadership (SL) was measured with six items from the Japanese servant-leadership item pool developed by Kiuchi and Osaki (2020), motivationally depleted career plateau with three items adapted from the motivational-depletion dimension reported by Imashiro et al. (2010), and work engagement (WE) with the nine-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli et al., 2006; Shimazu et al., 2008). All measures used six-point response scales. Internal consistencies were $\alpha = .92$, .76, and .96, respectively. A three-factor model (CFI = .924, SRMR = .066) fit better than a one-factor model (CFI = .765, SRMR = .109); HTMT values ranged from .438 to .715, with plateau–engagement HTMT = .538. No focal data were missing. Age was retained as a parsimonious proxy for career stage because career stage is theoretically relevant to plateau perceptions. The OLS model regressed WE on age, mean-centered SL, mean-centered plateau, and their interaction: $WE = b_0 + b_1Age + b_2SLc + b_3Plateauc + b_4(SLc \times Plateauc) + \varepsilon$; the interaction was probed at ±1 SD. With N = 166, 80% power corresponded to an incremental effect of approximately $f^2 = .048$; the observed interaction was $f^2 = .070$.

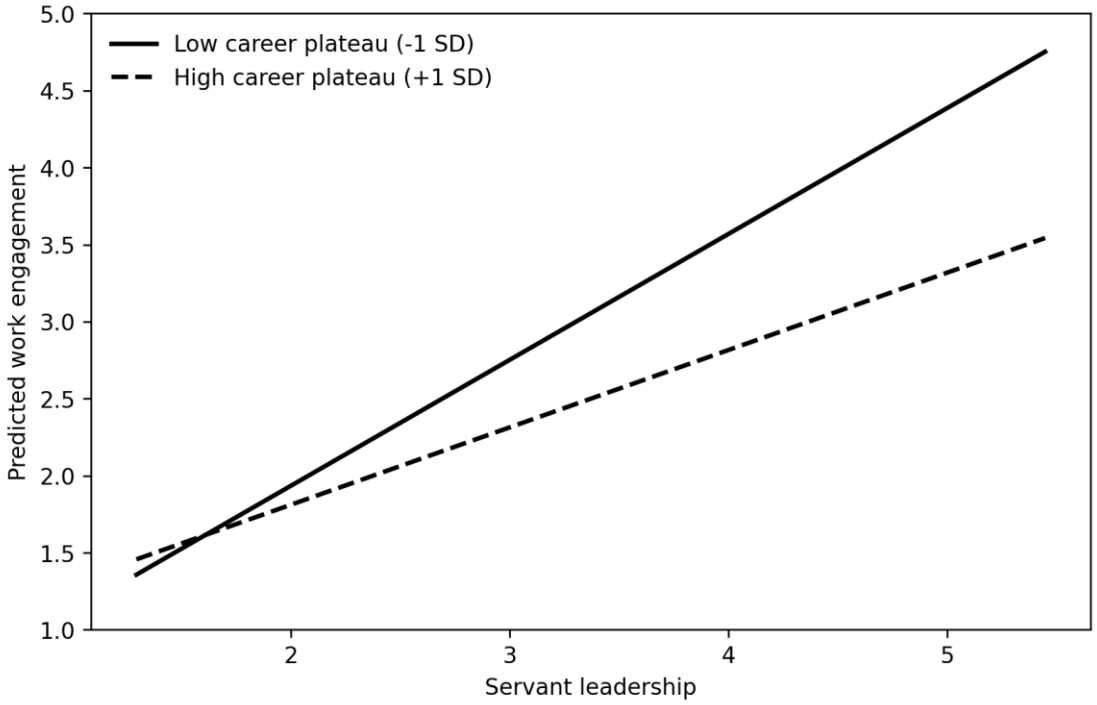
Results

Servant leadership was positively associated with work engagement (B = .660, 95% CI [.534, .786], $p < .001$), whereas motivationally depleted career plateau was negatively associated with engagement (B = −.250, 95% CI [−.364, −.135], $p < .001$). The interaction was significant and negative (B = −.142, 95% CI [−.224, −.059], $p = .001$), increasing explained variance by ΔR^2

= .032; the full model explained 54.0% of engagement variance. Simple slopes showed that servant leadership was more strongly related to engagement when plateau was low (2.89; B = .817, 95% CI [.651, .984], $p < .001$) than when plateau was high (5.11; B = .503, 95% CI [.358, .647], $p < .001$). Thus, plateau attenuated rather than eliminated the positive relationship.

Figure 1

Interaction Between Servant Leadership and Motivationally Depleted Career Plateau Predicting Work Engagement



Discussion

Theoretically, the findings extend servant leadership research by identifying perceived career developability as a boundary condition beyond relational mechanisms. Empirically, servant leadership remained positively related to engagement even at high plateau. For HRD practice, leadership and career development may need to be considered jointly. Future intervention research should test whether career dialogue, role redesign, learning opportunities,

or clearer pathways complement servant-leadership development. Cross-sectional self-report data limit causal inference and raise common method concerns. Future longitudinal research should further distinguish plateau from burnout and other related constructs.

Keywords: work engagement, servant leadership, career plateau

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