

## Research on the Influence Mechanism of Servant Leadership on Unethical Pro-supervisor Behavior

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### Abstract

**The unethical behavior of enterprises is always the focus of organizational behavior. The unethical pro-supervisor behavior is easy to be ignored by organizations and leaders because of its pro-leadership. Using social exchange theory, this paper discusses the influence of servant leadership on the unethical pro-supervisor behavior. The results show that the servant leadership has a significant positive impact on the unethical pro-supervisor behavior. This study has enriched the research on the influence mechanism of unethical pro-supervisor behavior, and has certain reference significance for enterprises to rationally adopt servant leadership and prevent unethical pro-supervisor behavior.**

### Keywords

**Servant Leadership; Unethical Pro-supervisor Behavior.**

### 1. Introduction

In today's society, unethical business events are common, which not only hurt the public, but also bring serious negative impact to the enterprises. The unethical behavior in enterprises has attracted the attention of scholars, and more and more researches have been carried out. So far, most of research have focused on the unethical behavior that benefit themselves. Recently, a new research direction is a kind of unethical behavior for the purpose of safeguarding the interests of supervisors, which is called "Unethical Pro-supervisor Behavior" (Johnson & Umphress, 2018).

Unethical pro-supervisor behavior includes both of these acts of commission and omission. Employees could conduct unethical acts of commission to help their supervisor such as lying to protect their supervisors or exaggerating their supervisor's job performance to help him/her look good. Or, employees could conduct unethical acts of omission such as withholding information that might damage their supervisor's reputation. Undoubtedly, the unethical pro-supervisor behavior will damage interests of organization or public. Therefore, it is of practical significance to study the causes and influence mechanism of organizational development. Unfortunately, there is little research on the unethical pro-supervisor behavior, and the understanding of its formation mechanism is insufficient.

Leadership style has an important impact on employees' attitude and behavior (Pfeffer, 1978). Previous research has found that self-sacrificial leadership and transformational leadership can promote the emergence of unethical pro-supervisor behavior. So will other positive leadership also have an impact on employees' unethical pro-supervisor behavior? At present, with the popularity of "people-oriented" management concept and the strengthening of individual self-awareness, employees pay more attention to their own interests and active development. Many people-oriented enterprises begin to appear the servant leadership, which is concerned about the interests of employees, supports the development of subordinates, and can bring sustainable performance to the organization (Van Dierendonck, 2011).

Research has confirmed that servant leadership is more likely to stimulate their subordinates to make extra work and efforts, promote organizational citizenship behavior (Panacio, Henderson, & Liden, 2015), promote employees to produce stewardship behavior, responsible behavior, and even engage in unethical behavior driven by reward motivation. Therefore, in the context of Chinese culture with high power distance, does the servant leadership, which emphasizes respect and care for employees, also have a negative effect that arousing employees' reward psychology, thus triggering employees' pro-supervisor motivation, and then producing unethical pro-supervisor behavior?

Based on the above analysis and discussion, this study explores and tests the impact of servant leadership on employees' unethical pro-supervisor behavior. We hope to enrich the research on the influence mechanism of unethical pro-supervisor behavior, and provide suggestions for the organization to effectively manage the servant leadership style and prevent the occurrence of employee unethical pro-supervisor behavior.

## **2. Theoretical Basis and Research Hypothesis**

### **2.1. Servant Leadership and Unethical Pro-supervisor Behavior**

Unethical pro-supervisor behavior is proposed by Johnson and Umphress in 2018, which is an extension of unethical pro-organization behavior. It refers to the unethical behavior that subordinates violate the moral norms, values or appropriate employee behavior standards in order to benefit their supervisors. There are two forms of unethical pro-supervisor behavior: one is to lie to protect the supervisor, and to exaggerate his / her work performance in order to make the supervisor look better; the other is to conceal the information harmful to the supervisor. There are two motivations for employees to implement unethical pro-supervisor behavior: one is to take the initiative to implement it. Employees care about their supervisors from the bottom of their hearts, and regard the success of supervisor as their own success, and then voluntarily make unethical pro-supervisor behavior (Johnson & Umphress, 2018). Second, passive implementation. Employees think that supervisors want them to lead unethical behaviors personally, or they have to lead unethical behaviors under the pressure of supervisors. However, whether it is active or passive implementation of unethical pro-supervisor behavior, employees can benefit from the pro-supervisor behavior, at the same time, win the favor of supervisors, and then benefit themselves (Mesdaghinia, Rawat & Nadavulaker, 2018).

Servant leadership was first proposed by Greenleaf (1977), which is a kind of other oriented leadership [18]. It gives priority to the personal needs and interests of followers, and extends their self-care to other organizations or larger groups (Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, Van Dierendonck, & Liden, 2018). Unlike other leadership whose main purpose is to improve organizational performance in terms of finance, servant leadership fully trusts employees, empowers them within their capabilities, meets their psychological and emotional needs, and helps them improve themselves. This attitude of supervisors makes employees feel the respect and trust from supervisors, and easily arouses employees' gratitude. Moreover, servant leadership has the characteristics of altruism. Servant supervisor puts the interests of employees in the first place, cares about the personal well-being of employees and shows altruism, thus establishing a trustworthy relationship with employees and cultivating an atmosphere of psychological safety and fairness (Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2011). Therefore, servant supervisor helps to meet the belonging needs of employees, and can establish positive emotional ties with employees. Employees tend to invest a lot of time and energy to maintain and strengthen this positive relationship, so as to enhance the motivation to repay supervisors (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016).

According to the theory of social exchange, the quality of social communication leads to the potential obligation of return to those who take actions for their own interests. This kind of relationship is often described as an unspoken reciprocal relationship. In this case, people will always seek opportunity to reward help until they perceive the existence of exchange balance (Blau, 1964). In the social environment created by servant supervisor, employees respond to supervisors' help by engaging in pro-supervisor behaviors (Walumbwa, Hartnell, & Oke, 2010). When the motivation of pro-supervisor of employees is strong enough, employees may regard the unethical pro-supervisor behavior as a positive social exchange to the supervisor, regardless of this kind of reward behavior is harmful to others inside and outside the organization (Johnson & Umphress, 2018). The stronger the servant leadership style is, the more likely the supervisor is to care for and empower employees. From the perspective of social exchange, the stronger the pro-supervisor motivation of employees. At this time, the probability of employees engaging in unethical pro-supervisor behavior will increase. Based on this, we propose the following assumption.

H1: Servant leadership has a positive impact on unethical pro-supervisor behavior.



Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1. Research Conclusion

Based on the theory of social exchange, this research constructs a theoretical model of the relationship between servant leadership and unethical pro-supervisor behavior. Research suggests that servant leadership positively and significantly influences the unethical behavior of employees.

#### 3.2. Theoretical Contribution

The theoretical contribution of this research has the following three aspects.

(1) Expanded the research on the antecedent variables of unethical pro-supervisor behavior. As a special type of unethical behaviors, unethical pro-supervisor behavior is easy to be ignored due to their pro-supervisor, which will bring harm to the supervisors themselves and the organization. Johnson and Umphress formally proposed the concept of unethical pro-supervisor behavior in 2018. At present, there are few studies about unethical pro-supervisor behavior. The discussion of the formation mechanism of unethical pro-supervisor behavior from the perspective of leadership style complements and perfects existing research about unethical pro-supervisor behavior.

(2) Servant leadership is a leadership style that actively seeks benefits for employees. Previous studies have verified that servant leadership can effectively promote employees' helpful behaviors and stimulate employees to engage in organizational citizenship behavior. However, there are more studies on the negative effects of servant leadership. This research empirically verifies the positive relationship between servant leadership and unethical pro-supervisor behavior, enriching the "dark side" of servant leadership.

#### 3.3. Management Inspiration

The conclusions of this research have a certain enlightenment for the practice of organization management. For supervisors, when adopting servant leadership, they must pay attention to the establishment of their own role models, abide by ethics at work, and actively guide

employees to ethical pro-supervisor and pro-organization behaviors; strictly implement the organization's rules and regulations, Punish unethical violations, establish an ethical and regular organizational atmosphere, add moral indicators to performance evaluation, and establish a sound moral reward and punishment system; when employees adopt unethical pro-supervisor or pro-organization behaviors, they should not take laissez-faire or supportive attitude, timely management and control, to avoid losses to the leadership or the long-term development of the organization.

### 3.4. Research Limitations and Prospects

Although this research has made a certain contribution to the research in the field of servant leadership and unethical pro-supervisor behavior, it also has some limitations. In the organization, there are many factors that can affect the moral level of employees, we can explore the influence of these factors on unethical pro-supervisor behavior more in the future. Future research can further investigate other moral clues. In the future, we look forward to studying the influence of more leadership styles on the unethical pro-supervisor behavior, especially the leadership styles that can inhibit the unethical pro-supervisor behavior.

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