

People-oriented Servant Leadership and Employee Performance in the Kenyan Lower Eastern County Assemblies

Irene Mwendu Mbivya

Department of Leadership, PAC University

irene.mbivya@students.pacuniversity.ac.ke

Abstract: - *Servant leadership has increasingly become a defining characteristic of organizations that are attractive to employees. Despite the importance of servant leadership in the modern workplace, this study examined the people-oriented dimension of servant leadership and its effect on employee performance in Lower Eastern County Assemblies, Kenya. The study was underpinned by the servant leadership and the leadership member exchange theories which provided the conceptual link between the people dimension of servant leadership and performance of employees. The study drew from a positivist philosophy and descriptive research design. Data was collected from a sample of 120 respondents - both elected and non-elected: speakers of County assemblies, human resource managers, finance managers, technical staff managers, and leaders of junior staff in three county assemblies of the lower eastern region namely; Machakos, Kitui, and Makueni. A structured questionnaire with closed ended questions was used to collect data. The findings revealed that the leaders in the targeted assemblies were not keen on employee modelling, team building or shared decision-making. The findings have practical implications for leaders in county assemblies, it provides insights on the importance people-oriented servant leadership and its related factors that enhance employee performance. The study concluded that there is significant relationship between people-oriented dimension of servant leadership and employee performance of the Lower Eastern County Assemblies. The validity of the instruments was ascertained by content and face validity while reliability was worked out through test-retest procedure and Cronbach's alpha test to determine the reliable value. The study recommends that leaders in the targeted county-Machakos, Kitui and Makueni should re-evaluate their servant leadership practice and in particular firm up its people-oriented dimension in order to realize effective employee performance in their counties*

Keywords: County Assemblies, Employee Performance, People-oriented servanthood, Lower Eastern, Servant Leadership

Introduction

Employee performance which refers to the output's efficacy, quality, and efficiency (Cavaliere, 2017), is a useful factor reliable value for determining how valuable an employee is to the company or organization. It can be gauged in terms of general, speed and efficiency, quality and depth, trust, and consistency in the workplace (Gabris & Simo, 2017). Talent, high engagement, and years of service within the organization are all characteristics of high-performing individuals (Liu, 2019). For this reason, people are considered a significant investment, whose returns must be evaluated. Studies indicate that only 15% of employees are committed to their work and this number has remained stagnant over the last 15 years across the world, while 70% of the variance in employee commitment to goals or targets is attributed to the qualities of the leadership (World Bank, 2017). Employee performance has grown increasingly important in many countries, and today's executives must deal with shifting ethical norms and legislation. Leaders in the public sector charged with responsibility for governance need to pay attention to employee performance given the crucial role they play in steering service delivery. Studies across regions such as Asia (Al-Malki and Juan, 2018); USA (Hendrix, Born, and Hopkins, 2015); and in Africa (Ambali, Suleiman, Bakar, Hashim, and Tariq, 2017) indicate declining performance in public sector. In Kenya, reports provide evidence of leadership deficit at both county and national government levels (Afsar &

Masood, 2016). A report by Transparency International (2017) showed that Kenya's public institutions were struggling with integrity issues and that citizens themselves are paying for this vice in the form of poor public service delivery arising from the poor leadership within the public sector. Although the Kenya Labour Productivity improved by 1.01 % in 2019, compared with a growth of 0.43 % in the previous year, employee performance at the county levels is still wanting (Transparency International, Kenya, 2019). Further, the performance index in most counties in Kenya has been on a downward trend (Ascar, 2020) for instance the Counties of Kitui and Makueni which have always been below the top ten best performing counties (Ascar, 2020). The performance of Machakos County dropped from 61.4% (as the best performing county) in 2015, to 50.6% in 2020 at number nine out of 47 counties in Kenya. These challenges highlight the need for effective leadership approaches which address the myriad issues associated with inadequate performance of employees in Machakos, Makueni and Kitui county assemblies in Kenya. Servant leadership, the independent variable in this study, is defined as a leadership philosophy built on the belief that the most effective leaders strive to serve others, rather than accrue power or take control.

Literature review

Studies have shown that leadership plays a vital role in the success and performance of organizations and thus scholars have demonstrated a link between leadership and performance in organization (Carter, 2018; Shore et al. 2017; John, Rowley & Hu, 2019). Subsequently, there has been an increased attention to servant leadership recently because of its perceived influence on employee performance within an organization in Australia (Saleem & Zhang, 2020); (Hu & Liden, 2020); UK (Schwartz, 2016); and Nigeria (Albrecht, 2018). Servant leadership was selected because of its association with management of any organisation (Saleem & Zhang, 2020). Its potential to be a cure for poor employee performance has been highlighted since it tries to serve the interests and parties involved in an exchange relationship and transaction, rather than the self-interests for private gain associated with most public institutions' employees (Sarwar, Cavaliere, Ammar & Azal, 2021). Moreover, it is evident that servant leaders who focus on serving and helping their subordinates develop their sense of service and behavior (Hu & Liden, 2020). Servant leaders also serve as role models, provide guidance and training, and more often can pass on the characteristic of "service" to employees which transforms them into service-oriented followers (Sperber & Linder, 2019). It is distinct from other forms of leadership because of a leader's desire to care and to give people needs a priority especially of team members, over their own (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2018). Furthermore, the influence of servant leadership cannot be underestimated especially because of its link to ethics, virtues, and morality.

We recognize that servant leadership has four main dimensions: task-oriented dimension, character-oriented dimension, people-oriented dimension, and process-oriented dimension among others (Schaubroeck, Lam, & Cha, 2019), Task-oriented dimension is concerned with achieving productivity and success of an organization focusing on the leader's tasks and skills necessary for success such as; vision, goal setting, and leading (Carter, 2018). Character-oriented dimension creates the foundation for ethical organizations. Process-oriented dimension is concerned with increasing the efficiency of the organization by focusing the leader's ability to model and develop a flexible, efficient and open system through; modelling, team building, and shared decision-making among others (Hu & Liden, 2018). The people-oriented dimension of servant leadership, which is of interest in this study focuses on building relationships with employees in order to impact organizational processes.

This critical leadership behavior type enables leaders to build mutual respect, trust, and confidence

with their followers while also motivating and inspiring them to achieve their organization's strategic business goals and missions (DeChurch, Hiller, Murase, Doty, & Salas, 2016). People-oriented leadership focuses on strengthening and building the quality of relationship between leaders and followers. The leaders consider the individuals and the talents followers possess as crucial to a people-driven organization's ability to execute its business strategy. Participative and consultative leadership styles are two significant styles evident in people-oriented leadership (Amabile & Hartog, 2017).

Whereas scholars have examined aspects of servant leadership and its association with various outcomes (Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, Van Dierendonck & Liden, 2019). Most of the studies have explored the influence of the task-oriented dimension. For example, Favazz, Naheed & Hasan, (2019) study which examined the impact of different servant leadership styles on employee performance in India; Khalid (2016) and Ramay (2014) study in Uganda among others. A few studies such as that of Huang, Li, Qiu, and Yim (2018) study established that employees or followers will have high motivation in accomplishing their job, attain their full potentials, and work successfully under the observation of the leader. They concluded that people-oriented leaders have a positive attitude, and behavior, a high level of self-confidence and excellent communication skills. This leadership style is thus strongly linked to organizational commitment (Chong, Lee, Ismail, & Peachey, 2018). To ensure employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment, servant leaders apply people-driven leadership dimensions and consultative leadership style in their day-to-day operations. They also develop and maintain relationships with their staff Chong et al. (2018) and these form the basis for forming a close links with the workforce.

Empirical studies that relate the influence of personal dimension of servant leadership and its application in organization contexts in Africa specifically within county government establishments in Kenya remain unexplored.

Theoretical framework

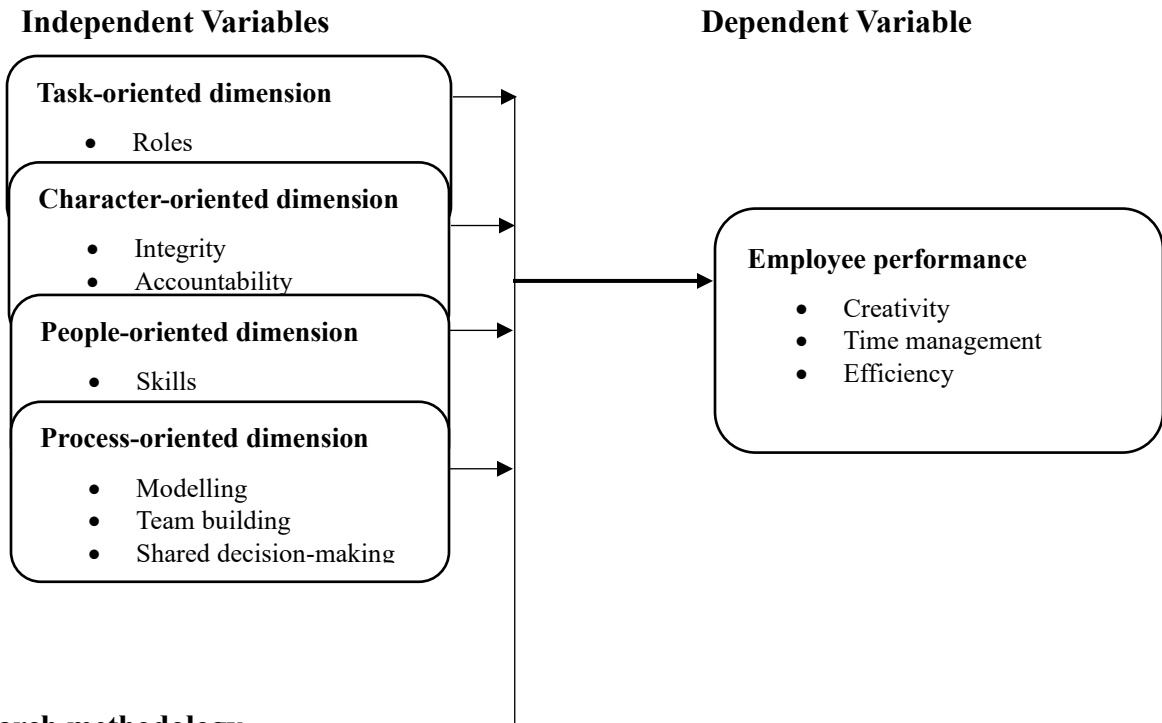
The study drew from the servant leadership theory characterized by Path-Goal Theory. This theory supports the independent variable, people-oriented dimension of servant leadership in the study. The Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory (Mangi, Abidi, Soomro, Ghumro, & Jalbani, 2017), demonstrates a conceptual link between people-oriented dimension of servant leadership and employee performance. It affirms that when leaders relate well with the workers the quality of these exchanges within an organization can influence employee outcomes. This study examined the people-oriented dimension related factors to assess its association with the downward trend in performance of the targeted counties. The study outcome should inform the long-term development blueprints going into vision 2030.

Based on the literature review on the people-oriented dimension of servant leadership, it is evident that an effective application of servant leadership shapes employee performance. Servant leaders build relationships with followers and thus this evaluation sought to examine the bonds and relationships that county leaders have with their employee. This was measured by examining the following indicators: empowerment, motivation and skills development. The performance of employees were examined based on the following employee creativity, time management and efficiency.

The study further sought to test the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis H1: There is no significant relationship between people-oriented dimension of servant leadership and employee performance in the Lower Eastern County Assemblies in Kenya.

The conceptual framework below illustrates this relationship.



Research methodology

The study employed a descriptive case study research design because of the interest in the “what” and “how does” of the research question (Ambali, 2017) underpinned within a positivist paradigm which contend that knowledge is revealed from a neutral and measurable (quantifiable) observation of activity, action or reaction to make it quantifiable and thus relies on measurement and reason, (Afsar & Badir, 2017). The design involved collecting quantitative or numerical data. A case study was appropriate because of the interest in in-depth, multi-faceted understanding (Ambali, 2017) of people-oriented servant leadership dimension in the targeted context. Overly, the design allowed for measurement of the trends of employee performance, a comprehensive description of the role of people-oriented servant leadership dimensions on employee performance of Machakos, Kitui and Makueni County Assemblies.

The target population in this study was 336 workers (165 elected members and 171 non-elected staff members) of the three targeted Lower Eastern County Assemblies (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). A sample size of 120 respondents was arrived at using Yamane’s formulae:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Stratified and random sampling was used to ensure that a balanced sample was arrived at as in the table below;

Table 1: Sample Size

<i>Category</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
Speakers of the County Assemblies	3	3
MCAs	162	49
Human resources officers	15	10
Finance officers	12	9
Technical staff	12	9

Junior/subordinate staff	132	40
Total	336	120

The unit of observation were: the speaker of the county assembly, members of the county assembly, human resources manager, finance manager, technical staff manager, and leaders of junior staff in each county. A simple random sampling approach was used to identify the staff members of the three counties. A structured questionnaire with closed ended questions was used for data collection because they are easy to administer, ensure confidentiality, save on time and convenient for collecting information from a larger sample (Bezuidenhout, Schultz, 2016; & Brohi, Jantan, 2017). The questionnaire had the following sections: demographic data, section two – the data on the influence of people-oriented dimension and employee performance. A likert scale of 1-5 was used to assess the responses. The face and content validity of the research instrument established by ascertaining the logical connection between the objectives and questionnaires. Cronbach Alpha’s coefficient (0.7-1.0) was used to determine the reliability of the instrument. A coefficient of 0.868 was obtained which signified a high dependability of the research instrument. A pretest of the research instrument was carried in the neighboring Kajiado County Assembly which borders Machakos and Makueni Counties. This was done to evaluate the feasibility, duration, cost, adverse events, and improve upon the study design prior to performance of a full-scale research project (Hunter, Neubert, Perry, Witt, Penney, & Weinberger, 2017).

Results and Discussions

This article aimed to determine the influence of people-oriented dimension of servant leadership on employee performance. The response rate (Table 2) and demographics (Table 3); Descriptive statistics summary (Table 4).

Table 2: Response Rate

<i>Particulars</i>	<i>Number of participants</i>
Sample Size	120
Participants available	116
Total response	116
Non – response bias	3.4%
Usable responses	96.6
Un – usable responses	4
Usable responses rate	96.6%

Out of the 120 respondents targeted, only 116 questionnaires were successfully completed and used for analysis. Based on percentage formula as recommended by Chen, Gully & Eden (2018): $r = \frac{116}{120} \times 100 = 96.6$ (where r is response rate), the response rate was 96.6%.

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics

Category	Percent
Gender	
Female	58.3
Male	41.7
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Age	
18-22 years	5.0
23-27 years	2.0
28-32 years	8.0
33-37 years	16.0

38-42 years	37.0
Over 43 years	32.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Level of Education	
Bachelor's Degree	41.4
Diploma	28.4
Masters	11.2
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Years of Service	
Less than 5 years	13.8
11-15 years	4.3
5-7 years	36.2
8-10 years	21.6
Above 15 years	4.3
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>

As per the results, middle-aged women in the study area are well represented within the public service at the county government level. This suggests that educated women within the sampled institutions have broken the bias by taking up leadership positions. It also implies that the three counties have offered the womenfolk an opportunity to occupy key roles in the public sector.

Descriptive analysis of the influence of people-oriented dimension of servant leadership on employee performance.

The study investigated the influence of people-oriented dimension of servant leadership on employee performance within the sampled Lower Eastern County Assemblies.

Table 4: Descriptive analysis of the influence of people-oriented dimension of servant leadership on employee performance

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S Dev.</i>
Teamwork is highly prioritized at the county assembly by the leaders.	25.5% 30.2	43.1% 50.6	12.3% 14.6	14.9% 17.6	7.2% 8.6	2.373	16.673
The leaders pursue on building efficient teams.	19.3% 23	39.8% 47	7.4% 9	24.5% 29	9.1% 11	2.647	15.401
The top management allows independence in decision-making and problem-solving by the employees at the county assembly.	19.3% 22	41.5% 48	7.4% 8	18.8% 26	9.1% 10	2.596	16.037
The leaders in the institution ensures that employees understand their roles.	19.3% 23	43% 36.4	19.3% 23	15.1% 18	9.1% 11	2.619	9.300
The top leadership considers relationships and rapport as vital and integral part of employee experience.	19.3% 23	39.8% 47	7.4% 9	24.5% 29	9.1% 11	2.631	15.401
Departmental leaders encourage creativity of employees in the teams.	19.3% 23	43% 36.4	19.3% 23	15.1% 18	9.1% 11	2.619	9.300
The leaders will work with employees to decide on how things should be done	24 20.2	41.5% 48	7.4% 8	18.8% 26	9.1% 10	2.611	16.056

The results suggest that employees within the three county assemblies under study work together towards a common organizational goal. This is in line with DeChurch, Hiller, Murase,

Doty and Salas (2016), that person-oriented leadership is a critical leadership behavior type because it enables leaders to build mutual respect, trust, and confidence with their followers while also motivating and inspiring them to achieve their organization's strategic business goals and missions. It could also mean that employee performance within the county assemblies has been enhanced through motivation and skills courtesy of teamwork.

Test of hypothesis

One hypothesis, examined how employee performance was influenced by the personal oriented dimension of servant leadership. The results are summarized in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Chi-Square Tests

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.000 ^a	6	0.011
Likelihood Ratio	9.561	6	0.144
N of Valid Cases	7		

a. 14 cells (100.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .43.

The Chi square results (Table 4.5) revealed that the p-value (0.011) was less than the conventional alpha value (0.05). We rejected the null hypothesis and conclude that *there is significant relationship between people-oriented dimension of servant leadership and employee performance of the Lower Eastern County Assemblies*. This is in line with Chong, Lee, Ismail, and Yazid (2018) case study which investigated the link between person-oriented leadership and employee outcomes and found that a people-oriented leadership style was significantly linked to performance.

This mean that the people-oriented dimension of servant leadership within the study area may enhance employee skills, motivation and empowerment and ultimate employee performance within the sampled county assemblies.

Regression results

Table 6: Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
(Constant)	9.440	0.200		0.843	0.488	-38.750	57.630
Task-oriented dimension	0.032	3.268	-0.301	-0.316	0.782	-15.091	13.027
Character-oriented dimension	0.274	0.344	-0.361	-0.795	0.510	-1.754	1.207
1 People-oriented dimension	-0.251	0.919	-0.904	-1.362	0.306	-5.205	2.703
Process-oriented dimension	0.947	1.248	0.553	0.759	0.527	-4.422	6.315

a. Dependent Variable: Employee performance

Regression results which tested the relationship between person oriented dimensions of servant leadership revealed that people-oriented dimension $\beta = -0.904$, or 90%, P value = 0.05. This implied that a unit increase in people-oriented dimensions of servant leadership leads to decline in employee performance by 90% when other variables are controlled. The T- test value was -1.362 less than 0.05 meaning the relationship was statistically insignificant. This observation contradicted the study by Chong, Lee, Ismail, and Yazid (2018) who found that a people-oriented leadership style was strongly linked to organizational commitment.

Pearson correlation test was computed to assess the relationship between people-oriented

dimension of servant leadership and employee performance. The findings are shown in Table 7:
 Table 7: Correlational Analysis of People-oriented Dimension of Servant Leadership and Employee Performance.

		Employee performance	People-oriented dimension
Employee performance	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.844*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.012
	N	28	28
People-oriented dimension	Pearson Correlation	-0.844*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.012	
	N	28	28

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results as shown in Table 1 revealed a strong negative relationship between people-oriented dimension of servant leadership and employee performance ($r = -0.844$, $p = 0.012 < 0.001$). This means that the relationship was weak and negative statistically significant. This was interpreted to mean that the more people-oriented dimension of servant leadership was embraced by the institutions in the study area, the poor the financial performance was likely to be sustained notwithstanding the minimal effect. This is consistent with Chong, Lee, Ismail, and Yazid (2018) who noted a negative relationship between people-oriented leadership style and organizational commitment.

The findings support the principles of the Leadership membership exchange theory which emphasizes the role of leadership relationships. The significant influence of people oriented dimension of servant leadership on employee performance aligns with the LMS perspective, as this dimension of leadership involves relationships that either promote growth or impede performance in the organisation. It illustrates how people oriented dimension of servant leadership can influence work outcomes.

Conclusion

The study concludes that people-oriented dimension of servant leadership was not favorable to employee performance in the study area since the sampled assemblies were not keen on employee modelling, team building or shared decision-making. Therefore, this study is significant to the staff and members of the Lower Eastern region county assemblies who would be able to realize the application of people-oriented servant leadership in enhancing employee performance at their county assemblies. Policy makers of the three counties can also benefit from the results of this study in making informed decisions about leadership approach at the county assembly level. It is recommended that the studied county assemblies evaluate the people-oriented dimension of servant leadership as it appears to be negatively associated with employee performance in order to experience greater employee performance within the organizations in their county assemblies.

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