

# The Relationship between Servant Leadership and Work Engagement Mediated Customer Orientation

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## Abstract

Based on analysis of the conservation of resources theory, social learning theory and social exchange theory, this study constructs a theoretical model of the relationship among servant leadership, customer orientation and work engagement. After the survey on 284 service employees the results show that servant leadership positively affects work engagement and customer orientation, employee's customer orientation positively affects employee's work engagement, and that employee's customer orientation plays a partial mediation role between servant leadership and employee's work engagement. This paper further expands the mediating mechanism of servant leadership's influence on employee's work engagement and provides theoretical reference for service management.

**Key words** : Servant Leadership, Customer Orientation, Work Engagement, Service Employees

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## 1. Study Background

In the increasingly competitive market environment of service industry, how to improve the service performance of service employees has become the key to the success of service enterprises (Bowen & David, 2016). Studies show that highly engaged service employees can significantly improve service performance of enterprises (Salanova, Agut, Peiró & José María, 2005), enabling the promotion of service employee's We to become a key concern of service enterprise managers.

The conservation of resources theory shows that employees is struggling to be continuously highly engaged in their career, which requires constant input of resources, for which leadership support serves as an important element of organizational resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Servant leadership always focus on their subordinates, providing support and help for their work and development to meet their needs, thus driving their subordinates to continue to engage in their work (Liden, Wayne, Liao & Meuser, 2014). It is found by reviewing the existing studies that servant leadership could directly enhance employee's work engagement, and promotes employee's work engagement through a series of mediating mechanisms (Liu, Yang, Tang, Mai & Li , 2018;Bao, Li & Zhao,2018). However, the mediating mechanisms' relation to servant leadership and employee's work engagement require further expansion. Most of the existing mediating variables are employees' perception of themselves, organizations and society, such as psychological needs, psychological empowerment, organizational identification, public service motivation, pro-social motivation and so on. Few researchers have introduced variables closely related to the nature of service employees' work as mediators of servant leadership and work engagement.

Liao and Subramony (2008) stated that service employees' cognitive attitudes towards customers has more directly impact on their service performance. Customer-oriented service employees actively realize and achieve customers' requirements and expectations about products and services (Kelley, 1992; Susskind, Kacmar Borchgrevink, 2003; Liao & Subramony, 2008). Servant leadership lay emphasis on 'service priority' and take meeting the needs of subordinates as their own responsibility. According to social learning theory, subordinates will internalize such attitude and behavior of servant leadership and adopt similar attitude and behavior towards customers (Greenleaf, 1997; Liden, Wayne, Zhao & Henderson, 2008). Furthermore, the conservation of resources theory holds that customer orientation can also function as an important resource element from employees themselves, and can promote employee's work engagement (Hobfoll, 1989). Therefore, will servant leadership further affect employee's work engagement by influencing employee's customer orientation?

In this regard, considering conservation of resources theory, social learning theory and social exchange theory, this study introduces customer orientation, a variable closely related to the nature of service employees' work, as a mediator in servant leadership and employee's work engagement, attempting to further expand the mediating mechanism of servant leadership influencing employee's work engagement, and provide theoretical reference for service practice management.

## 2. Study Objectives

2.1 Assessing whether servant leadership impact on employee's work engagement and customer orientation under Chinese service context, and whether employee's customer orientation effectively impact on employee's work engagement.

2.2 Assessing whether employee's customer orientation can be regarded as a mediator between servant leadership and employee's work engagement in Chinese service context.

## 3. Literature Review and Theoretical Hypothesis

### 3.1 Servant Leadership

The conception of servant leadership is proposed by Greenleaf (1970), who believed that servant leadership should first be a service provider, taking serving others and satisfying their followers as the first priority (Greenleaf, 1970). Later scholars further elaborated the concept of servant leadership based on Greenleaf. Among them, the definition of Ehrhart won extensive recognition. He defines servant leadership as a follower-centered leadership, which pays close attention to the development and progress of subordinates and has high moral quality and strong sense of responsibility (Ehrhart, 2004).

It is believed that servant leadership positively influences employees' attitudes and behaviors. In terms of employees' attitudes, Servant leadership can improve employee's job satisfaction (McCann, Graves & Cox, 2014), organizational commitment (Wang, 2010), Work engagement (Jorge & van, 2014) and customer orientation (Maden, Gztas & Topszumer, 2014), and weaken employee's turnover intention (Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko & Roberts, 2009). In terms of employees' behaviors, servant leadership has been proved to significantly improve employee's positive voice behavior (Zhu & Wang, 2015), creativity (Yoshida, Sendjaya, Hirst & Cooper, 2014), organizational citizenship behavior (Kwak & Kim, 2015), and reduce aggression in workplace (Hepworth & Towler, 2004).

### 3.2 Customer Orientation

The concept of customer orientation was first proposed by Levitt (1960) (Strong & Harris, 2004). In the past few decades, customer orientation has been perceived as a significant conception in marketing and has been extensively researched by scholars, but the academic circles have not reached unified views on the concept of customer orientation. Kelley (1992) regards customer orientation as an attitude variable and defines it as the degree to which service providers attach importance to customer's service needs and the extent to which service providers eager to devote time and energy to meet customer needs.

By reviewing the literature, it is found that leadership styles (Xu & Wang, 2016), organizational environment (Coelho, Augusto, Coelho & Sá, 2010), leadership support and colleague support (Liaw, Chi & Chuang, 2010;) in the organizational level significantly impact on customer orientation. Customer orientation can also significantly influence employees 'attitudes, emotions, and behaviors, for instance, job satisfaction (Gil, Berengue, Cervera & Moliner, 2005), organizational commitment (Kim, Leong & Lee, 2005), organizational citizenship behavior (Tian, 2017), and creativity (Qian & Jiang, 2017).

### 3.3 Work Engagement

Kahn (1990) made the debut of work engagement. He believed that work engagement refers to members of an organization controlling themselves and combining themselves with job roles. Schaufeli & Bakker (2003) argued that work engagement was an active and perfect working state covering the three dimensions of vitality, dedication and focus.

The job demands-resources model proposed by Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli (2001) shows that job resources at work (Bakker, Demerouti & Lieke, 2012), organizational support (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), team-member exchange (Bakker, Demerouti & Lieke, 2012), organizational justice (Park, Song & Lim, 2016) and other factors have a positive influence on work engagement. Customer orientation could be used as a significant resource supplement from individuals (Zablah, Franke, Brown & Bartholomew, 2012), which can also have an effective effect on work engagement.

### 3.4 Servant leadership and Employee's Work Engagement

This study holds that servant leadership can improve subordinates 'work engagement for the following reasons:

(1) According to the social exchange theory, in order to maintain and develop interpersonal relationships, the communicating party must correspondingly reciprocate other party (Liden, Wayne, Liao & Meuser, 2014). servant leadership take the development of subordinates as their own responsibility and give priority to the interests and needs of subordinates. Therefore, in return, employees would be more engaged in their working hours.

(2) According to the social learning theory, leaders have strong power, great status and high reputation in organizations, and they are often learned from and imitated by subordinates (Bandura, 1978). servant leadership takes serving and helping subordinates as its own duty, sets up a model of actively serving and helping others, subordinates will learn and imitate, and then more willing to actively engage in work.

(3) The conservation of resources theory shows that it is very difficult for employees to maintain a sustained high engagement in their work, which requires constant input of resources, for which leadership support functions as an important organizational resource supplement (Hobfoll, 1989). Servant leadership always focus on their subordinates, providing support and help for their work and development to meet their needs, thus driving their subordinates to continue to engage in their work (Liden, Wayne, Liao & Meuser, 2014). In addition, studies have shown that servant leadership can significantly increase employee's work engagement (Jorge & Dierendonck, 2014; Dong, Gao & Ma, 2018; Liu, Yang, Tang, Mai & Li, 2018).

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Servant leadership has a positive impact on employee's work engagement.

### 3.5 The Mediating Role of Employee's Customer Orientation

This study argues that servant leadership can further drive employee's work engagement by promoting employee's Customer orientation.

Customer orientation is an individual attitude of actively recognizing and reaching customers 'needs and expectations on goods and services (Susskind, Kacmar & Borchgrevink, 2003; Liao & Subramony, 2008). Servant leadership emphasizes on serving others and takes the satisfaction of subordinates 'needs and aspirations as the priority (Greenleaf, 1970). Besides, servant leaders are committed to develop their subordinates and equip them with such service attitudes and capabilities (Greenleaf, 1977). Such personal practices will provide employees through examples. According to social learning theory, subordinates will imitate the leadership's service attitude and behavior and show it in their work. Moreover, empirical studies have shown that servant leadership can positively influences employee's customer orientation (Maden, Göztaş & Topsümer, 2014; Xu & Wang , 2016). Therefore, this study believes that Servant leadership promotes the formation and development of employee's customer-oriented attitudes.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Servant leadership positively affects employee's customer orientation.

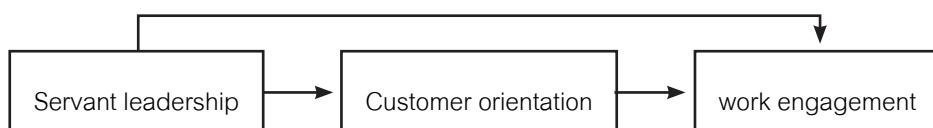
The conservation of resources theory shows that one of the basic motivations of individuals is to acquire, protect and cultivate their own resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Sustained work engagement consumes a lot of resources of employees, and customer orientation can serve as an important resource supplement from individuals (Zablah, Franke, Brown & Bartholomew, 2012). Specifically, customer orientation improves customer satisfaction and loyalty (Kim & Ok, 2010), promotes employee's job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Donavan, Brown & Mowen, 2004), supplements the resources consumed by employees in continuous engagement, and thus improves employee's work engagement. Furthermore, (Yoo & Arnold, 2014) empirical analysis of data from Korean insurance companies and financial companies based on the conservation of resources theory shows that customer orientation can positively affect employee's work engagement.

Hence, the following hypotheses are raised in combination with the above analysis:

H3: Employee's customer orientation has positive affect on employee's work engagement.

H4: Employee's customer orientation plays a mediation role between servant leadership and employee's work engagement.

**Fig. 1** Theoretical model of the relationship among servant leadership, employee's customer orientation and employee's work engagement



## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Samples and Data Collection

With its samples taken from employees in the service industry, this study is mainly aimed at those who frequently contact with the service objects, such as fitness coaches, training teachers, salesmen, receptionists, waiters, and tour guides, etc. Before the formal issuance of questionnaires, the personnel who issued the questionnaires were firstly trained in the research procedure. The questionnaire was firstly put in the sealed envelope by the research team members, and handed to the investigator after the service employees completed the questionnaire and sealed the envelope, thus ensuring that the information of the questionnaire was not directly exposed to the staff of the research team during the whole research process. Survey were collected from enterprise which are mainly located in Changsha, Zhuzhou and Xiangtan, Hunan Province, China.

With the help of HR managers in the enterprises surveyed, 350 questionnaires were sent out to employees in the service industry, and 312 questionnaires were recovered, with a recovery rate of 89.1%. 28 invalid questionnaires were excluded and 284 valid questionnaires were obtained, thus the validity rate of the questionnaires was 91.0%. Employee samples feature basically the same proportion of male (59.9%) and female (40.1%) in gender, a majority of young people in age, as evidenced by a proportion of people under 20 years old, between 21-30 years old and between 31-40 years old of 31.7%, 40.5% and 23.2%, respectively. Besides, the samples are also characterized by relatively high education level, among which those with high school education or above accounted for 79.9%, and those have worked for 1-5 years accounted for 85.9%.

### 4.2 Variable Selection and Measurement

The contents and expressions of the items in questionnaire for this study are faithful to the original scale version to the greatest extent. For the purpose of minimizing the subjective bias of researchers and improving the accuracy of the scale translation, the original scale was obtained by downloading in open literature or contacting the author, and the original Chinese expressions were maintained maximally for Chinese scales, while the English scales were 're-translated between Chinese-English' at least twice by several expert members of the research team (Brislin, 1980).

All the scales in this study were measured by Likert's 7-point scale, and the scale developed by Ehrhart (2004) was selected for the measurement of servant leadership, which features 7 dimensions and 14 measurement items. The scale compiled by Susskind, Kacmar and Borchgrevink (2003) with five items was adopted for the measurement of customer orientation. To measure work engagement, the Chinese version of UWES (Utrecht Work Engagement Scale) revised by Chinese scholars Zhang and Gan (2005) based on Chinese cultural background was adopted, which consists of 17 items, including 6 items on focus, 5 items on dedication and 6 items on vitality.

## 5. Data Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

### 5.1 Common Method Bias Test

The common method bias were tested by Harman single factor method, and SPSS23.0 was applied for principal component analysis of all the questionnaire items (Zhou & long, 2004). The first principal component was 38.591%, which did not explain most variables, indicating that this study is free from serious common method bias.

### 5.2 Reliability and Validity Test

#### 5.2.1 Reliability

The The Cronbach'  $\alpha$  coefficients of each scale were calculated by SPSS23.0.

The coefficients of The Cronbach'  $\alpha$  for servant leadership, customer orientation and work engagement were 0.931, 0.851 and 0.922, respectively, all of which were greater than 0.7, indicating that each scale has high reliability(Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2011).

#### 5.2.2 Convergent Validity Test

AMOSS 23.0 was used for confirmatory factor analysis. The servant leadership item loads ranged from 0.74 to 0.86, which were all greater than 0.55. The average variance extracted (AVE) was calculated to be AVE 0.625 according to factor loading, which was greater than 0.5, indicating that servant leadership had relatively good convergent validity(Fornell & Larcker,1981). The customer orientation item loads fell within the scope of 0.63-0.90, all of which were greater than 0.55, and the AVE value was 0.537, greater than 0.5, showing that customer orientation had relatively good convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker,1981). The work engagement item loads ranged from 0.59 to 0.88, which were all greater than 0.55, and the AVE value was 0.623, greater than 0.5, demonstrating that work engagement had relatively good convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker,1981).

#### 5.2.3 Discriminant Validity

AVE values were compared with the square of correlation coefficients between variables. As shown in Table. 1, taking servant leadership as an example, the AVE value is 0.625, which is much larger than the squared value of the correlation coefficient between servant leadership and other variables, suggesting that servant leadership has better discriminant validity. Similarly, it is found that both customer orientation and work engagement have good discriminant validity.

**Table. 1** Comparison of AVE Value and Square of Correlation Coefficients between Variables

Variable	Servant Leadership	Customer Orientation	Work Engagement
Servant Leadership	0.625		
Customer Orientation	0.092	0.537	
Work Engagement	0.307	0.241	0.623

Notes: The diagonal is the average variance extracted (AVE) of variables, and the values below the diagonal are the square of correlation coefficients between variables.

### 5.3 Hypothesis Testing

#### 5.3.1 Correlation Analysis of Variables

The mean and standard deviation of servant leadership, customer orientation and work engagement, and their correlation are shown in Table. 2. The correlation between variables is significant and falls within the scope of 0.304-0.554, demonstrating pairwise correlation among variables.

**Table. 2** Correlation Analysis of Variables

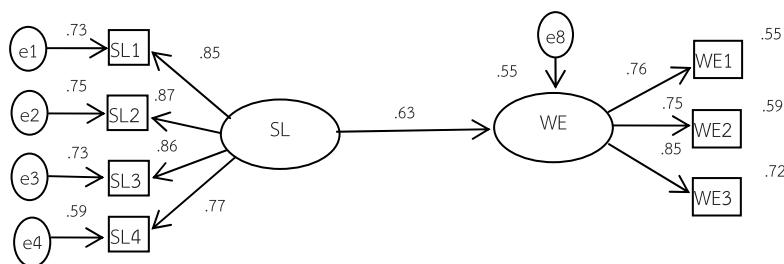
Variables and indicators	Servant Leadership	Customer Orientation	Work Engagement
Servant Leadership	1.000		
Customer Orientation	0.304 **	1.000	
Work Engagement	0.554 **	0.491 **	1.000

Notes: \*\* means significant at 0.5 level; \*\* means significant at 0.01 level. \*\*\* means significant at 0.001 level.

#### 5.3.2 Servant Leadership and Employee's Work Engagement

Due to large number of items on servant leadership and the small sample size, this study is prone to large parameter estimation bias. Thus, the balance method of factor method is adopted for the parceling of work engagement (Wu & Wen, 2011). In this study, Amoss 23.0 was used to test the hypothesis of the study model. The standardized path of structural model equation of servant leadership and employee's work engagement is shown in Fig. 2.

**Fig. 2** Structural Equation Model of servant leadership and Employee's work engagement



$$\chi^2 = 40.949 (p = .000); df = 13; \chi^2/df = 3.150; RMSEA = 0.087; CFI = 0.976;$$

$$GFI = 0.962; AGFI = 0.917; NFI = 0.965; IFI = 0.976; TLI = 0.961$$

As shown in Fig. 2,  $\chi^2/df = 3.150$ , RMSEA = 0.087, CFI = 0.976, GFI = 0.962, AGFI = 0.917, NFI = 0.965, IFI = 0.976, TLI = 0.961, all of which reach or exceed the fitting index acceptable to the model.

The hypothetical path of the structural equation model is shown in Table. 3. The path coefficient of servant leadership to work engagement is 0.593, and the P value is less than 0.001, which indicates that servant leadership has a significant impact on work engagement, thus the hypothesis H1 is tenable.

**Table. 3** Path Coefficient of Servant Leadership to Work Engagement

Path	Unstandardized coefficient	S.E.	C.R.	P
work engagement< - - - servant leadership	0.593	0.065	9.149	***

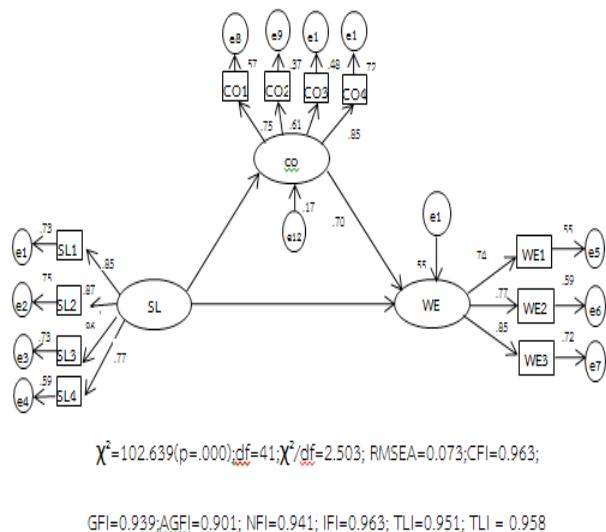
Notes: '\*\*' means significant at 0.5 level; \*\*\*' means significant at 0.01 level. \*\*\*\*' means significant at 0.001 level

### 5.3.3 The Mediating Role of Employee's customer orientation

In this paper, Bootstrap method is applied to test the mediating effect. The sample size is 1000, the confidence interval is 95%, and the structural equation model is constructed with AMOS 23.0.

According to the suggestions of Wen (2014) on the test of mediating effect, the specific steps are as follows:

(1) Firstly, test whether the effect of independent variates on dependent variates is significant, if the confidence interval does not contain 0, the total effect is significant; (2) test whether the indirect effect of independent variates on dependent variates is significant. If the confidence interval does not contain 0, the indirect effect is significant, and the mediating effect exists; (3) test the direct effect of independent variates on dependent variates. If the confidence interval of direct effect does not contain 0, it is partial mediation; if the confidence interval contains 0, it is complete mediation.

**Fig. 3** Structural Equation Model of Customer Orientation Mediation

As shown in Fig. 3,  $\chi^2/df = 2.503$ , RMSEA = 0.073, CFI = 0.963, GFI = 0.939, AGFI = 0.901, NFI = 0.941, IFI = 0.963, TLI = 0.951, TLI = 0.958, all of which reach or exceed the fitting index acceptable to the model.

Table. 4 shows that the path coefficient of servant leadership to customer orientation is 0.334 and P-value is significant, indicating that servant leadership has a significant positive impact on customer orientation, thus the hypothesis H2 is tenable; the path coefficient of customer orientation to work engagement is 0.470, P value is significant, indicating that customer orientation has a significant positive impact on work engagement, thus the hypothesis H3 is tenable.

**Table. 4 Path Coefficient of Customer Orientation Mediation Model**

Path	Unstandardized coefficient	S.E.	C.R.	P
customer orientation <---servant leadership	0.334	0.056	6.018	***
work engagement<---customer orientation	0.470	0.077	6.094	***
work engagement --- servant leadership	0.428	0.060	7.109	***

Notes: \*\* means significant at 0.5 level; \*\*\* means significant at 0.01 level. \*\*\*\* means significant at 0.001 level.

Table. 5 shows that the total effect value of servant leadership on employee's work engagement is 0.585, P-value is significant, and confidence interval does not contain 0, which shows that the model is meaningful. The indirect effect value is 0.157, P-value is significant, and the confidence interval does not contain 0, which shows that employee's customer orientation plays a mediating role between servant leadership and employee's work engagement, thus the hypothesis H4 is tenable. The direct effect value of servant leadership on employee's work engagement is 0.428, P value is significant, and the confidence interval does not contain 0, indicating that employee's customer orientation plays a partial mediation role between servant leadership and employee's work engagement.

**Table. 5 Testing of the Mediating Effect of Customer Orientation**

Effect	Non-standardized effect value	95% confidence interval		P
		lower limit	upper limit	
Total Effect	0.585	0.459	0.740	0.001**
Indirect Effect	0.157	0.089	0.251	0.001**
Direct Effect	0.428	0.310	0.566	0.001**

Notes: \*\* means significant at 0.5 level; \*\*\* means significant at 0.01 level. \*\*\*\* means significant at 0.001 level.

## 6. Study Results and Discussion

6.1 The positive influences of Servant Leadership on Employee's Work Engagement is verified, which is consistent with the previous study results of some scholars (Jorge & Dierendonck, 2014; Dong, Gao & Ma, 2018; Liu , Yang, Tangu, Ma & Li, 2018). However, previous studies are basically based on one or two theories of social learning, social exchange and conservation of resources, while this study integrates these three theories to explain the influences of servant leadership on employee's work engagement.

6.2 The relation of servant leadership and employee's customer orientation is constructed on the basis of the social learning theory, and the theoretical hypotheses are supported by data, which is consistent with the conclusions of previous studies (Maden, Göztaş & Topsümer, 2014; Xu & Wang, 2016). Considering the conservation of resources theory, the relationship between customer orientation and work engagement is constructed, and the theoretical hypothesis is supported by data. The study conclusion validates the study of Yoo & Arnold (2014). However, previous studies made by scholars focused on the pairwise relationship among these three variables, while this study, based on social learning theory, social exchange theory and conservation of resources theory, proves the relationship of servant leadership on work engagement mediated by customer orientation.

## 7. Conclusions

### 7.1 Basic Study Conclusions

According to conservation of resources theory, social learning theory and social exchange theory, and taking service employees as the survey subjects, this paper proposes and verifies the mediating mechanism of servant leadership's influence on employee's work engagement from the perspective of customer orientation. The results show that servant leadership positively affects employee's work engagement and customer orientation, employee's customer orientation positively affects employee's work engagement, and that employee's customer orientation plays a partial mediation role between servant leadership and employee's work engagement.

### 7.2 Theoretical Contribution

Firstly, this paper integrates the theories of social learning, social exchange and conservation of resources to explain the impact of servant leadership on work engagement, enabling the prediction and interpretation of servant leadership on work engagement to be more abundant and perfect. Secondly, this paper further expands the mediating mechanism of servant leadership on work engagement and proposes and validates the mediating role of customer orientation.

### 7.3 Managerial Implication

7.3.1 The study results show that servant leadership directly and significantly affects employee's work engagement, indicating that enterprises should change the traditional authoritative leadership style and implement the employee-centered servant leadership style. On the one hand, it is necessary to recruit and select managers with service traits; on the other hand, it is necessary to create an employee-centered service atmosphere within the enterprise.

7.3.2 The conclusion shows that servant leadership promotes employee's work engagement as mediated by customer orientation, which enlightens service enterprises to recruit extroverted, active and helpful employees with customer-oriented personality traits, and to implement customer-oriented ideas in staff training, empowerment and incentive system in order to improve the responsiveness and sensitivity to customers; besides, managers should take the lead to follow the employee-centered and customer-oriented principle, and create a good service atmosphere within the enterprise, thus cultivating and developing

employee's customer orientation consciousness and ability in such a good atmosphere.

#### 7.4 Limitations and Prospects

7.4.1 The study samples are mainly taken from service enterprises in Changsha, Zhuzhou and Xiangtan, Hunan Province, China. Whether the study conclusions are applicable to other industries and other areas requires further testing and confirmation. In the future, the sample range should be expanded to further enhance the universality of the conclusions of this study.

7.4.2 Despite the fact that many measures have been taken to control the common method bias, some limitations are still inevitable. In the future, more measures should be adopted to control the common method bias, such as assessing employee's customer orientation and work engagement by supervisors.

7.4.3 The mediating mechanism of servant leadership on service employee's work engagement is only discussed, with the function mechanism of situational factors neglected. Future attention should be paid to the influence mechanism of servant leadership on the work engagement of front-line service employees under the influence of different emotional factors.

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