How To Communicate Servant-Leadership

An Exploration of Relational Communication and Employee Outcomes

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Can supervisors intentionally communicate messages that signal traits of servant-leadership and that influence organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions? Organizational supervisors are in a unique position to influence the employee experience (Myers, Seibold, & Park, 2011). A substantial body of research has documented the ability of a supervisor to influence employee attitudes such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions (e.g., Bliss & Fallon, 2003; Brown & Yoshioka, 2003; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Fleishman, 1998; Jaskyte, 2003; McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2005; Walumbwa & Lawler, 2003). Within organizational behavior research, servant-leadership has emerged as one of the prominent leadership theories (Walumbwa, Hartnell, & Oke, 2010), because it embodies elements of morality, stewardship, and concern for the well-being of followers (Greenleaf, 1977). While both servant-leadership and interpersonal communication are understood to be inherently relational in nature (Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Greenleaf, 1977), what remains to be understood is how servant-leadership and

relational communication together lead to meaningful employee outcomes. Drawing from signaling theory, we examine messages of relational communication (Burgoon & Hale, 1984) and perceived servant-leadership as a path toward these outcomes.

Servant-leadership is described as "an understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader, emphasizing leader behaviors that focus on follower development, and de-emphasizing glorification of the leader" (Hale & Fields, 2007, p. 397). The body of empirical research surrounding servant-leadership has developed the theory conceptually, in measurement, and in model development (Parris & Peachey, 2013). In fact, servant-leadership has been shown to explain more variance in employee attitudes than Leader Member Exchange (LMX) theory and transformational leadership theories (Walumbwa et al., 2010). The literature on relational communication also includes evidence of relationships with employee outcomes, including job satisfaction (Mikkelson, Hesse, & Sloan, 2017; Richmond & McCroskey, 2000; Sharbrough, Simmons, & Cantrill, 2006), turnover and absenteeism (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2007, Mikkelson et al., 2017). Recently, relational communication has been examined within the context of leadership (Mikkelson, Sloan, & Hesse, 2019). As Bass (1990) noted, effective leadership depends on developing effective communication skills. The present study draws on signaling theory, proposing that supervisors send signals through relational communication messages to employees that lead to perceptions of servant-leadership.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how supervisors signal servant-leadership behaviors through relational communication messages of intimacy and dominance. With a sample of fully employed adults living in the U.S., we test a path analytical model

that proposes relational communication messages have direct effects on perceived servant-leadership and indirect effects on the employee outcomes of organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions. Drawing from signaling theory, this study is important for both theoretical and practical reasons. In the past, much of the empirical research on perceptions of servant-leadership at the individual level of analysis has focused on instrument development with follower outcomes (van Dierendonck, 2011). This study extends the literature to illustrate how relational communication messages of intimacy and dominance are antecedents to follower perceptions of servant-leadership. Because previous research has focused on recruitment of employees, but not on leadership between supervisors and employees, it also contributes to literature concerning signaling theory in organizations. In a practical sense, this study may contribute to more effective servant-leader training for organizations hoping to influence employee commitment, satisfaction, and turnover intentions. The rationale is that messages of intimacy and dominance are behavioral (Burgoon & Hale, 1984, 1987), and thus can be put into practice by supervisors who want to signal a servant-leadership orientation to followers.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we review relevant literature and present hypotheses. Then we discuss the methods for the study and report the findings. Finally, we offer theoretical and practical implications.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Signaling Theory

Signaling theory originated in biology and explains how animals attract mates (Carraher, 2015). In organizational behavior and human resource management, signaling theory posits that an agent (person

or organization) conveys information about itself to another party, leading to that party's perceptions of the agent. Spence (1978) explored signaling theory from the employing organization perspective. He argued that job applicants send signals, such as educational credentials, to influence employer perceptions of the applicant's ability to do the work.

Research on signaling theory has also focused on the employee perspective. Rynes (1991) argued that employees draw conclusions about a company based on signals the firm provides about its values, working conditions, culture, and other characteristics. For example, a firm that includes employee testimonials, value statements, and product quality rankings on its website signals information about that firm's characteristics to those outside the organization. Suazo, Martinez, and Sandoval (2009) extended this line of research by showing how organizations send signals specifically through human resource practices that create both psychological contracts (i.e., feelings of job security) and legal contracts (i.e., a job offer).

Because individuals signal in the ways they speak, behave, and interact with others, signaling theory is a useful lens for explaining the supervisor/employee relationship, particularly how supervisors communicate their leadership attributes to employees (Karasek & Bryant, 2012). In the present study, we discuss the signals supervisors send that lead employees to perceive them as servant-leaders, which, in turn predicts important employee outcomes of job satisfaction, commitment, and turnover intentions. As stated earlier, signals can be sent in a variety of ways. The signals examined in the present study are those communicated through the relational messages of intimacy and dominance. In what follows we explain our rationale for positing a positive relationship between relational

communication messages involving intimacy and dominance, and employee perceptions of servant-leadership.

Relational Communication

Relational communication is defined as, "both as primary themes for relational discourse and as the dimensions along which partners interpret and define their interpersonal relationship" (Burgoon & Hale, 1984, p. 194). Relational communication messages enable the development and definition of interpersonal connections, as relational communication messages are found in both verbal and nonverbal communication (Burgoon, Buller, Hale, & deTurck, 1984).

Relational communication provides a structure for understanding communicative exchanges within specific relationships and/or contexts (Burgoon et al., 1984). Burgoon and Hale (1987) asserted that intimacy and dominance were the two principal relational messages along which people communicate. Similarly, Dillard, Solomon, and Samp (1996) affirmed that dominance and affiliation (intimacy) form the basis of all relational messages and interpretations. As previous research has demonstrated, messages of intimacy and dominance signal key characteristics of the supervisor/employee relationship (Kelly & Westerman, 2014; McWorthy & Henningsen, 2014; Porter, Wrench, & Hoskinson, 2007; Richmond & McCroskey, 2000, Teven, 2007).

Dominance refers to the ability to influence others (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2000; Dillard, Soloman, & Palmer, 1999), whereas intimacy is understood as the degree of liking, trust, and inclusion (Burgoon & Hale, 1987). In the workplace, the use of dominance and intimacy messages have influenced employee attitudes and behaviors. For example, the communication of dominance was related to accomplishing tasks and completing work (Richmond, McCroskey,

& Davis, 1986), yet was negatively associated with employee satisfaction and organizational commitment (Mikkelson et al., 2017). Conversely, intimacy was positively associated with employee satisfaction (Mikkelson et al., 2017; Richmond & McCroskey, 2000, Teven, 2007), motivation (Porter et al., 2007), and negatively associated with employee burnout (Kelly & Westerman, 2014). Further, favorably perceived supervisors utilized more intimacy signals than unfavorably perceived supervisors (McWorthy & Henningsen, 2014).

Dominance. Dominance is a primary dimension individuals use to define their relationships (Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Burgoon, Johnson, & Koch, 1998; Dillard et al., 1999). According to Burgoon et al. (1998), "dominance consists of expressive, relationally-based strategies and is one set of communicative acts by which power is exerted and influence exercised" (p. 315). However, individuals with power (e.g., leaders), can often assert influence and maintain control without using explicit dominance messages (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Dunbar et al., 2014). Specifically, dominance indicates an attempt to control the behavior of another, whether explicitly or implicitly. The expression of dominance is complicated by the fact that most leaders have some measure of legitimate authority. It is unknown what employees expect when it comes to expressions of dominance. Do employees expect some level dominance because leaders have legitimate authority or do employees expect leaders to not express dominance because they are already in a position of power?

Dominance is commonly misunderstood as a negative communication expression (Burgoon, et al., 1998). Yet, not all aspects of dominance are negative as dominant individuals are more

relaxed and composed and by extension exercise more influence on others (Burgoon et al., 1998) and the expression of dominance is linked with supervisor credibility (Mikkelson et al., 2017).

Burgoon et al. (1998) created a measurement of dominance using multiple samples and found five components within the dominance construct: influence, conversational control, focus/poise, panache, and self-assurance. Specifically, influence represents one's persuasiveness. Conversational control indicates longer (and more) turns at talking. Focus/poise demonstrates the social skill of the communicator. Panache infers a strong presence through a dramatic and expressive style. Finally, self-assurance captures a sense of superiority or boldness.

Intimacy. Intimacy is the other primary dimension individuals use to understand and define their interpersonal relationships. Intimacy messages signal liking, positivity, warmth, and inclusion (Burgoon, Guerrero, & Manusov, 2011). Previous research has indicated the importance of leaders communicating intimacy to their employees. Specifically, intimacy messages are related to a relationship-oriented leadership style (Mikkelson et al., 2019). Intimacy messages are also positively associated with satisfaction, motivation, and organizational commitment (Mikkelson et al., 2017). It is thought that messages of intimacy signal interest, care, and positive regard in a work environment (Richmond & McCroskey, 2000).

Intimacy is a superordinate dimension that includes expressing affection, involvement, receptivity, trust, similarity, and depth (Burgoon & LePoire, 1999). Affection indicates the expression of positive affect towards another individual (Burgoon & Hale, 1984). Involvement signals interest and responsiveness. Receptivity expresses attentiveness, accessibility, and openness. Trust includes

sincerity, integrity and honesty. Similarity is the degree of connection, though shared attitudes, beliefs, characteristics, and experiences (Burgoon & Hale, 1984). Finally, depth indicates that there is a substantial relationship between the two individuals. In the workplace, leaders who communicate intimacy are perceived more favorably than leaders who do not express intimacy (McWorthy & Henningsen, 2014).

Servant-Leadership

First conceptualized by Greenleaf (1977), servant-leadership is a theory of leadership that places emphasis on follower well-being. In the essay, *Servant as Leader*, he wrote:

> The Servant-Leader is servant first. . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. . . 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? (p. 7)

A few characteristics set servant-leadership apart from other leadership theories. Servant-leadership is described not as a management technique, but way of life, in which a servant-leader is primarily motivated by the need to serve rather than the need for power (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). This motivation comes from an awareness of the unique human need for love and is driven by interests outside the self. The servant-leader also sees him or herself in a role of steward for the organization (Reinke, 2004). In other words, it is the responsibility of servant-leaders to care for the common interests and good of the whole as they provide direction

and vision (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2017). In fact, ten distinct characteristics of servant-leadership were developed by Spears (2010) through a systematic review of Greenleaf's (1977) writings. These are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Servant-leadership asserts that the focus on follower well-being first leads to the attainment of long-term organizational goals.

Servant-leadership has emerged as a prominent theory in the past few decades. While transformational leadership has reigned as the dominant positive leadership theory since the early 1980's, servant-leadership as a model has shown its uniqueness compared to transformational leadership. The primary difference being the paramount focus servant-leaders have on followers. In contrast, the principal foci of a transformational leader are organizational objectives and building commitment among followers toward achieving those objectives (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004). Empirically, servant-leadership plays an important role in explaining key variables. In their meta-analysis, Hoch, Bommer, Dulebohn, and Wu (2018) found that servant-leadership explains incremental variance in terms of organizational citizenship behaviors, employee trust in his or her supervisor, and employee attitudinal behaviors, such as engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment as compared to transformational leadership.

Servant-leadership's theoretical distinctiveness and its increased empirical legitimacy has led many companies to adopt it as the driving philosophy for their business (Spears, 2004). Noteworthy examples of companies that subscribe to servant-leadership include Starbucks, TDIndustries, Synovus Financial, Southwest Airlines, and Men's Wearhouse (Ferch, 2011). While servant-leadership is recognized as a distinct and effective model for influencing

employee outcomes, what is less understood is how to predict perceptions of servant-leadership among followers. For example, how does a manager whose principal desire is to serve and develop her employees communicate this orientation to followers?

Perceptions of Servant-Leadership and Relational Communication

The present study examines the ability for supervisors to rely on messages of relational communication as signals of a servant-leadership orientation. While there have been no studies examining the relationship between perceptions of servant-leadership and expressions of dominance specifically, effective communication is recognized as important for servant-leaders. For example, leaders must be able to clearly communicate a vision to followers in order to make that vision a reality (Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999). Additionally, specific types of communication, such as persuasion, signal important servant-leadership characteristics that lead to influence. Persuasion (rather than coercion) is described as "a powerful instrument for shaping expectations and beliefs - particularly in political, social and religious affairs" (Bass, 1990, p. 15), and is seen as a virtuous way to influence a group toward a goal (Greenleaf, 1977). Persuasion also relates to relational communication, as dominance messages of influence represents one's persuasiveness.

Likewise, messages of intimacy signal specific servant-leadership characteristics. Despite a lack of empirical research exploring employee perceptions of servant-leadership and supervisor messages of intimacy, there are conceptual connections in the literature. For example, one of the tenets of servant-leadership is the need to serve in a proactive way that fosters growth, an orientation that contributes to an environment of trust (Greenleaf, 1977). A potential way to signal this orientation may be through messages of

intimacy that express involvement, trust, and receptivity (Burgoon & LePoire, 1999). Additionally, there is evidence in the literature that relational trust is strongly associated with servant-leadership (Dannhauser & Boshoff, 2006; Joseph & Winston, 2005). The strength of the relationship between trust and servant-leadership was so strong that the two constructs were described as potentially synonymous (van Dierendonck, 2011). Because trust represents one of the core specific messages within the construct of intimacy, it is reasonable to expect a relationship to emerge between intimacy and perceptions of servant-leadership. Based on this rationale, we put forth the following hypothesis.

> *Hypothesis 1. There is a positive relationship between messages of relational communication (intimacy and dominance) and perceptions of servant-leadership.*

Employee Outcomes

Job satisfaction, organizational commitment and turnover intention are all easily measurable employee outcomes with direct links to valuable organizational outcomes. Job satisfaction is the positive or negative judgment about one's job (Russell et al., 2005). Job satisfaction is positively related to higher quality work, performance, and productivity (Katzell, Thompson, & Guzzo, 1992; Parker et al., 2003). Organization commitment refers to identification and involvement in an organization (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979), and has a small, positive relationship to productivity (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). Turnover intentions has been associated with decreased performance and customer service (Ton & Huckman, 2008). Importantly, all three of these employee outcomes appear to be interrelated with one another and each uniquely predict rates of actual turnover (Tett & Meyer, 1993).

Relational Communication and Employee Outcomes

The relationship between dominance and employee outcomes is complicated by how leaders enact dominance messages. Individuals with power, like supervisors, can often maintain influence and control without displaying dominance explicitly (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Dunbar et al., 2014). Yet, the overt and overstated use of dominance by a leader may backfire and create a problematic work environment. However, the positive and expected use of dominance can create strong perceptions of credibility (Mikkelson et al., 2017). The communication of intimacy, through messages of liking, positivity, warmth, and inclusion, may help to create a constructive work environment. While giving feedback to an employee, messages of intimacy may help reduce defensiveness and ensure that feedback is understood and put into practice (Steelman & Rukowski, 2004). Further, previous research has indicated a strong positive relationship between a leader's use of intimacy messages and employee outcomes like satisfaction and organizational commitment (Mikkelson et al., 2017).

Perceptions of Servant-Leadership and Employee Outcomes

Servant-leadership emphasizes sharing power, building a sense of community, serving others, and emphasizing teamwork (Greenleaf, 1977), which has a profound influence on the employee workplace experience. Empirical research on servant-leadership in organizational contexts have consistently demonstrated the positive influence of servant-leadership on meaningful employee outcomes, including team level effectiveness, follower well-being, and spirituality (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Related specifically to this study, substantial evidence illustrates how servant-leadership lowers employee turnover (Babakus, Yavas, & Ashill, 2010; Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, & Roberts, 2009a), increases job satisfaction

(Cerit, 2009; Chung, Jung, Kyle, & Petrick, 2010; Jenkins & Stewart 2010; Mayer, Bardes, & Piccolo, 2008), and increases organizational commitment (Cerit, 2009; Hamilton & Bean, 2005; Hale & Fields, 2007; Han, Kakabadse, & Kakabadse, 2010; Jaramillo et al., 2009a; Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, & Roberts, 2009b; Pekerti & Sendjaya, 2010). We expect employee perceptions of servant-leadership to relate in similar ways to employee outcomes in this study. Therefore, we put forth the following hypothesis.

> *Hypothesis 2a. There is a positive relationship between perceptions of supervisor servant-leadership and the employee outcomes of (a) job satisfaction and (b) organizational commitment.*

> *Hypothesis 2b. There is a negative relationship between perceptions of supervisor servant-leadership and the employee outcome of (c) turnover intention.*

Relational Communication, Perceptions of Servant-Leadership, and Employee Outcomes: Direct and Indirect Effects

It is a supervisor's job to manage employees in a way that achieves organizational goals. Employee perceptions of their supervisor's servant-leadership characteristics are important because the literature has shown such characteristics lead to key employee attitudes about the organization. For this reason, it is essential that supervisors be aware of the signals they transmit through the communication process to their employees. We anticipate that relational communication messages of intimacy and dominance and perceptions of servant-leadership have indirect effects on employee job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions. In order for an indirect relationship to be exist, we rely on Baron and Kenny's (1986) three conditions. First, we ask whether the

independent variables significantly predict perceptions of servant-leadership. As noted earlier, scholars have proposed the relationship between servant-leadership and communication is important, particularly in communicating persuasively rather than coercively (Greenleaf, 1977), communicating clearly and effectively (Bass, 1990), and communicating trust, credibility, and vision to followers (Farling et al., 1999). For some researchers, leadership style stems directly from the way leaders communicate (Mikkelson, York, & Arritola, 2015). Servant-leaders rely on a set of messages that communicate their willingness to engage in servant-leadership behaviors.

Second, we determine if messages of intimacy and dominance (independent variables) are significantly related to turnover intentions, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (dependent variables). Described earlier, previous empirical research supports these relationships.
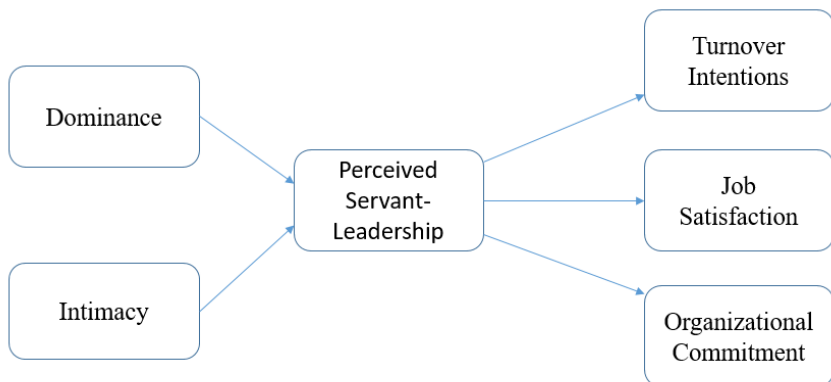
Third, we examine whether perceptions of servant-leadership influences employee outcomes after controlling for relational communication messages. In this instance, a supervisor who utilizes messages of intimacy and dominance may influence job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions because the way they communicate (both verbally and non-verbally) augments their presence as a servant-leader in the minds of their employees. In other words, a supervisor's communication tendencies may emerge as one of the traits of servant-leadership. For example, a supervisor who utilizes the intimacy message of receptivity, expressing attentiveness, accessibility, and openness, might be perceived as having the servant-leadership traits of humility and empowerment. By being accessible and empowering employees, servant-leaders may create an environment that facilitates high levels of satisfaction and

commitment while decreasing turnover intentions. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis (See Figure 1 for proposed model).

> *Hypothesis 3. Relational communication messages (intimacy and dominance) have direct effects on perceived servant-leadership and indirect effects on employee outcome variables (organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions).*

Figure 1: *Proposed Model*

METHOD

Participants

The participants ($N = 240$) were 137 (57.1%) male and 103 (42.9%) female full-time employees from a range of organizations living in the United States. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 74 years ($M = 34.00$ years, $SD = 10.25$). The length of the participants' employment at their current organization ranged from two months to 30 years ($M = 5.44$ years, $SD = 4.70$). Participants worked in a number of industries ranging from service, education, government, manufacturing, high-tech, as well as other industries. With respect to

the educational background of the participants, none held less than a high school diploma, 8.8% had a high school diploma or GED, 24.2% had some college, but no degree, 9.6% had an Associate's (2-year) degree, 41.3% had a Bachelor's (4-year) degree, 12.9% had a Master's degree, 1.7% had a Doctoral degree, and 1.7% had a professional degree (e.g. MD, JD). The majority (73.4%) was Caucasian, 9.2% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 7.9% were Hispanic, 11.7% were Black/African-American, 1.3% were Native American, and 1.7% were of other ethnic origins. These percentages add up to more than 100% because participants were instructed to check all applicable ethnicities.

Procedure

The participants were registered users of Amazon's Mechanical Turk website, specifically from the United States. Participation in the study consisted of a brief questionnaire designed to assess perceptions of supervisor servant-leadership and communication in the supervisor/employee relationship. We included an instructional manipulation check to reduce response sets and inattentive participants (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009). In exchange for participation, individuals who completed the questionnaire were given a small monetary award, which was deposited into their Mechanical Turk account at the end the survey. The questionnaire itself contained a series of close-ended, Likert-type questions along with important personal demographic information.

Measures

Dominance. Dominance was measured using Burgoon, Jonhson, and Koch's (1998) 31-item Interpersonal Dominance Instrument. Dominance is often understood as a negative behavior, yet the

instrument measures positive aspects of dominance as well. Specifically, the instrument measures influence, conversational control, focus and poise, panache, and self-assurance. We excluded conversational control items because of low item reliability with the rest of the scale. This behavior-based instrument is capable of discriminating between the most and least dominant individuals in a group and has been found to have similar ratings for participants and observers (see Burgoon et al., 1998; Burgoon & Dunbar, 2000; Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005). Example items include, "This person has a natural talent for winning over others" and "This person has a memorable way of interacting." This instrument can be used in multi-dimensional or global forms. Using Cronbach's alpha, the reliability coefficient was .87.

Intimacy. The participants indicated their recollections of involvement/affection, similarity/depth, and receptivity/trust, on Burgoon and Hale's (1987) 20-item intimacy subscale from the Relational Communication Scale (RCS). The RCS has been widely used and validated and is capable of discriminating immediate from nonimmediate behavior, dimensions of credibility, and communicator valence (Burgoon & Hale, 1987; Morr & Mongeau, 2004; Walther, 1994). Examples items include, "He/she was willing to listen to me" and "He/she was open to my ideas." This instrument can be used in multi-dimensional or global forms. Using Cronbach's alpha, the reliability coefficient was .96.

Perceptions of servant-leadership. Perceptions of servant-leadership were measured using the Servant-Leadership Survey, developed by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011). This 30-item scale included eight dimensions of servant-leadership, including empowerment, accountability, standing back, humility, authenticity,

courage, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship. Examples of items include, "My manager gives me the information I need to do well" and "My manager enables me to solve problems myself instead of just telling me what to do." This instrument can be used in multi-dimensional or global forms. Using Cronbach's alpha, the reliability coefficient was .97.

Turnover intention. Turnover intention was measured using Grawitch, Trares, and Kohler's (2007) the single item measurement, "I intend to seek employment outside of this organization in the next year."

Job satisfaction. Job satisfaction was measured using a single item from the Job Satisfaction Scale (Warr, Cook, & Wall, 1979). The item used asked, ''taking everything into consideration how do you feel about your job as a whole?'' This single-item instrument has been shown to be a valid general measure of job satisfaction (Wanous, Reichers, & Hudy, 1997).

Organizational commitment. Organizational commitment was measured using Meyer and Allen's (2004) TCM Organizational Commitment Survey, which is one of the most commonly used instruments to measure organizational commitment (Nicholson, 2009). For this study, we measured affective commitment, one of the three dimensions of commitment measured in the TCM Organizational Commitment Survey. The affective organizational commitment scale contains eight items, including, "This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me." Using Cronbach's alpha, the reliability coefficient was .88.

The scores on all scales had a theoretical range from 1 to 7, such

that higher scores indicated a greater level of the variable. The scores on all multiple-item scales represented the mean of the items comprising that scale. Some items were worded positively and others negatively to mitigate response sets. Means and standard deviations for all measures appear in Table 1.

Table 1: *Means, Standard Deviations, and Correalations*

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Years in Organization	5.44	4.70	1							
2. Salary	60.48	37.37	ns	1						
3. Intimacy	4.86	1.29	ns	ns	1					
4. Dominance	4.83	0.78	ns	ns	.74**	1				
5. Servant-Leadership	4.78	1.22	ns	ns	.86**	.78**	1			
6. Organizational Commitment	4.22	1.38	.16**	.22**	.60**	.49**	.64**	1		
7. Job Satisfaction	5.04	1.77	.18**	.21**	.53**	.44**	.62**	.80**	1	
8. Turnover Intentions	3.87	2.13	-.25**	-.24**	-.40**	-.39**	-.46**	-.69**	-.68**	1

Note. * p < .05 ** p < .01

RESULTS

We used a path analysis in AMOS to test hypotheses 1-3. Means, standard deviations, and correlations are presented in Table 1. We controlled for gender, supervisor gender, age, education, years in organization, and salary. Years in organization and job satisfaction showed significant correlations with employee outcome variables (See Table 1), so we included them in the model. Table 2 displays standardized coefficients for direct and indirect paths to employee outcomes. The control variables used in the model were significant: job satisfaction (β = .13), organizational commitment (β = .10), and turnover intentions (β = -.19). Salary was also related to job satisfaction (β = .12), organizational commitment (β = .13), and turnover intentions (β = -.15).

Table 2: *Standardized Coefficients for direct and Indirect Paths to Employee Outcomes*

Paths			β	95%	CI
Intimacy	Servant-Leadership		.63**	.53	.72
Dominance	Servant-Leadership		.32**	.21	.41
Servant-Leadership	Turnover Intentions		-.44**	-.54	-.32
Servant-Leadership	Job Satisfaction		.60**	.49	.69
Servant-Leadership	Organizational Commitment		.47**	.30	.60
Dominance	Servant-Leadership	Turnover Intentions	-.14**	-.21	-.08
Dominance	Servant-Leadership	Job Satisfaction	.19**	.13	.26
Dominance	Servant-Leadership	Organizational Commitment	.15**	.08	.22
Intimacy	Servant-Leadership	Turnover Intentions	-.28**	-.35	-.19
Intimacy	Servant-Leadership	Job Satisfaction	.38**	.29	.46
Intimacy	Servant-Leadership	Organizational Commitment	.30**	.20	.42
Intimacy	Organizational Commitment		.18*	.02	.32
Years at Organization	Turnover Intentions		-.20**	-.30	-.09
Years at Organization	Job Satisfaction		.13*	.04	.20
Years at Organization	Organizational Commitment		.10*	.01	.20
Salary	Turnover Intentions		-.15**	-.25	-.04
Salary	Job Satisfaction		.12*	.02	.22
Salary	Organizational Commitment		.13**	.01	.25

χ 2 (5) = 6.49, p = .48
CFI = .99
TLI = .99
RMSEA = .001, p close = .80
Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

There was a positive relationship between dominance and perceptions of servant-leadership (β = .32, $p < .01$), as well as between intimacy and perceptions of servant-leadership ($p < .01$) (β = .63). This finding supports Hypothesis 1: There is a positive

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relationship between messages of relational communication (intimacy and dominance) and perceptions of servant-leadership.

Perceptions of servant-leadership showed significant relationships ($p < .01$) with job satisfaction ($\beta = .60$), organizational commitment ($\beta = .47$). This supports Hypothesis 2a: There is a positive relationship between perceptions of supervisor servant-leadership and the employee outcomes of job satisfaction and organizational commitment.
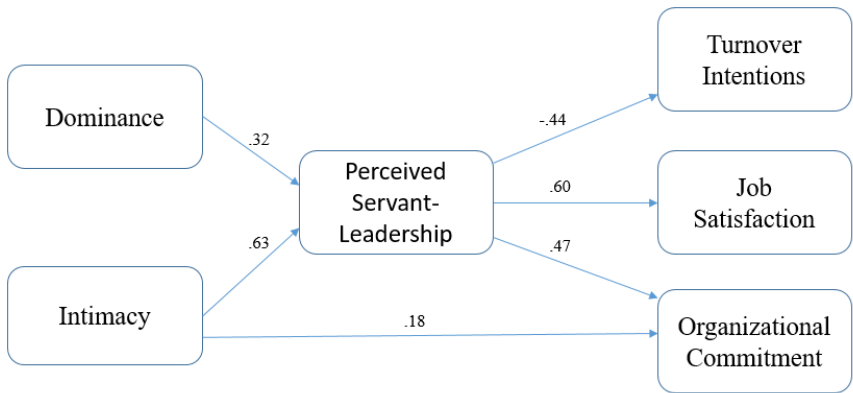
Likewise, perceptions of servant-leadership showed significant relationships ($p < .01$) with turnover intention ($\beta = -.44$). This finding supports Hypothesis 2b: There is a negative relationship between perceptions of supervisor servant-leadership and the employee outcome of turnover intention.

Hypothesis 3 was supported with the exception of one hypothesized indirect path. The relationships between dominance and employee outcomes of job satisfaction ($\beta = .19$), organizational commitment ($\beta = .15$), and turnover intention ($\beta = -.14$) were indirect and significant ($p < .01$). Likewise, the relationships between intimacy and the employee outcomes of job satisfaction ($\beta = .38$) and turnover intention ($\beta = -.28$) were indirect and significant ($p < .01$). Findings indicated that a direct affect was present ($p < .01$) in the relationship between intimacy and organizational commitment ($\beta = .30$). Five out of six relationships support Hypothesis 3: Relational communication messages (intimacy and dominance) have direct effects on perceived servant-leadership and indirect effects on employee outcome variables (organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions).

No other paths were statistically significant. Results of the path analysis for this study are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: *Path Analysis Results*

Fit indices for the proposed model (see Table 2) suggest a good model fit. The model had a non-significant χ^2, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) (0.02), the comparative fit index (CFI) (0.99), and the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) (0.99), all met critical values for a good model fit.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper was to draw on signaling theory as a lens to explore the linkage between relational communication messages of intimacy and dominance on the employee outcomes of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intention by focusing on the mediating role of perceptions of supervisor servant-leadership. The literature on signaling theory in organizations has covered a broad range of topics, including signals of job and organizational characteristics (i.e., corporate value statements), signals of employee abilities (i.e., education credentials), signals for managing crisis situations (accommodative and defensive signals), and signals for marketing products and

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consumer behavior (i.e., warrantees, advertising) (Karasek & Bryant, 2012). This study extends the literature on signaling theory in organizations by applying it to the supervisor/employee relationship. In the present study a supervisor's communication of intimacy and dominance messages act as signals of that supervisor's servant-leadership orientation.

The results suggest three main findings. First, we found positive direct associations between relational communication messages and employee perceptions of servant-leadership. According to signaling theory, messages of intimacy and dominance signal to the employee that the supervisor is a servant-leader. In a practical sense, when a supervisor communicates messages of persuasion (rather than coercion), warmth, and depth, his employees will interpret those signals as indications that the supervisor is oriented toward fostering follower well-being. In other words, if a supervisor's goal is to communicate their alignment with servant-leader values, communicating messages of both intimacy and dominance will aid them in that pursuit.

Second, we explored how employee perceptions of supervisor servant-leadership is associated to employee outcomes. Similarly, perceptions of servant-leadership related positively with job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and negatively with turnover intention. These findings are consistent with the literature (Parris & Peachey, 2013), and suggest that supervisors wanting committed, satisfied employees who plan to remain in the organization should focus on things outside the bottom line, such as listening, empathy, employee empowerment, building community, and commitment to the growth of people.

Third, we tested a path analysis exploring how relational communication messages (intimacy and dominance) have direct effects on perceived servant-leadership and indirect effects on

employee outcome variables (organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions). While perceptions of servant-leadership only partially mediated the relationship between messages of intimacy and organizational commitment, results of our model showed evidence supporting all five of the remaining paths. In other words, our findings suggest that supervisors who communicate messages of intimacy and dominance leads to their followers perceiving them as servant-leaders. This, in turn, increases job satisfaction and organizational commitment, while reducing turnover intention. For example, employees might perceive a supervisor who utilizes the dominance message of influence as persuasive (a servant-leadership characteristic). That same supervisor who utilizes messages of intimacy, such as involvement, trust, and depth communicates traits of listening, awareness, and commitment to the growth of people. This employee is more likely to become satisfied and committed to his or her job, and less likely to leave the organization. This is meaningful because employees with this attitudinal profile contribute to the organization with higher quality work, increased performance, and greater productivity (Katzell et al., 1992; Parker, et al., 2003).

The findings of this study may be helpful to institutions with the aim of promoting servant-leadership within their supervisory roles. Without the appropriate signals, it is possible that a servant-leader may not be perceived as such even if he or she authentically embodies servant-leadership values. Leadership behaviors are communicative by nature. However, it is not only what supervisors communicate, but how they communicate through messages of intimacy and dominance that signal employee perceptions of servant-leadership. For example, a leader who empowers followers (a servant-leadership characteristic) who does not utilize relational

communication messages of influence, poise, or trust may not be perceived as a servant-leader, but may be perceived as more of a laissez faire leader. Similarly, a leader who emphasizes forgiveness, but does not communicate this through messages of affection and involvement may be perceived as inauthentic, in which the employee may not trust that the leader is truly concerned for follower well-being. These findings may provide insight for institutions that hope to equip managers to effectively signal a servant-leadership orientation.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study informs the linkages between relational communication perceptions of servant-leadership and employee outcomes, we cannot assert causal relationships due to the cross-sectional nature of our data. Future research could utilize experimental or multi-level methods to establish causal relationships between relational communication, servant-leadership, and employee outcomes.

Our sample was also relatively limited in regards to race/ethnicity. While our sample was diverse with respect to industry, experience, and age, the vast majority of respondents indicated they were white/Caucasian. In order to increase generalization of findings to participants of other ethnicities, future studies should attempt to attain a more racially/ethnically diverse sample.

The present study examines the global measures of intimacy, dominance, and servant-leadership. Future research could explore how specific messages of intimacy and dominance, such as depth and poise/panache, influence specific characteristics of servant-leadership, such as humility and empowerment. Additionally, it is unknown what employees expect when it comes to expressions of

dominance, specifically. Future research could examine to what extent employees generally expect messages of dominance. Are these messages generally expected because of leaders' legitimate authority, or do employees expect leaders to not express much explicit dominance because leaders already hold a position of power?

In conclusion, this is the first study to explore the direct and indirect effects of relational communication, perceived servant-leadership, and employee outcomes. As more organizations seek to reduce turnover and increase job satisfaction and commitment, we expect future research to focus on the direct and indirect effects of intimacy and dominance messages on employee attitudes.

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