

# How Servant Leadership Relates to Conflict Management Styles at Work

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## Abstract

Managing interpersonal conflict between employees and their supervisors continues to be challenging. Researchers have studied how leadership styles relate to conflict management in organizations, but little is known about how servant leadership relates to conflict management at work. Servant leadership is a management style in which one motivates his or her employees by serving them. The purpose of this study was to investigate how servant leadership dimensions exhibited by supervisors correlated with conflict management styles used by employees when employees experienced conflict with their supervisor. A web-based survey invitation was shared with social service employees resulting in a sample of 230 participants. Stepwise multiple regression analysis was used to determine if a predictive relationship existed between the servant leadership dimensions, measured by the Servant Leadership Scale, and helpful and unhelpful conflict management styles, measured by the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II. Servant leadership exhibited by supervisors correlated positively with both helpful and unhelpful conflict management styles used by employees.

**Keywords:** Interpersonal conflict • Servant leadership • Organizational procedures

## Introduction

Interpersonal conflict occurs frequently between employees due to communication difficulties, incongruent professional goals, and contradictory personal values [1-3]. On average, employees devote 3 to 16 hours per 40-hour work week managing interpersonal conflict [4]. Interpersonal conflict is destructive because it leads to increased job stress, workplace bullying, and frequent employee turnover [5,6]. Time that supervisors and employees spend attempting to manage interpersonal conflict increases emotional exhaustion, decreases job satisfaction, and hinders employee and organizational productivity [7]. Thus, employees have negative views of their organization's ability to function when organizational procedures are ineffective in managing interpersonal conflict [8].

## Servant Leadership and Organizational Conflict Management

Several researchers maintain that servant leadership promotes helpful conflict management styles in the workplace [9,10]. When supervisors practice servant leadership, their employees experience less emotional exhaustion, and have greater trust in their supervisor and organization [11-13]. Servant leadership also motivates employees to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors [14,15], which implies that servant leadership encourages employees to go above and beyond when helping coworkers. Further, employees sustain engagement and collaboration in their work [16-18] and engage in helpful behaviors [19] when their supervisor is a practitioner of servant leadership.

Through his theory of servant leadership, Greenleaf [20] maintained that effective leadership is the result of eight fundamental principles: listening and understanding, acceptance and empathy, community and stewardship, awareness and perception, healing and serving, persuasion, conceptualizing, and foresight. Greenleaf [20] defined a servant leader as an individual who has an instinctive longing to help others, and this individual's desire to help others

transforms into a yearning to lead. Servant leaders are viewed as stewards in their organizations as they accept that it is their responsibility to help followers maintain restorative relationships [20] which are achieved by helping followers manage conflict effectively [10]. In order to maintain restorative relationships, servant leaders actively seek to understand social problems from the perspectives of their followers before they offer direction [20,21]. However, leadership styles that promote healthy relationships, like servant leadership, may not necessarily lead to the usage of helpful conflict management styles [10,18,22]. Altmäe et al. [22] found that organizational leaders who focused more on building relationships with their staff favored the obliging conflict management style over the integrating and compromising conflict management styles.

Researchers found that in an academic setting, college students who maintained favorable views of servant leadership preferred using the integrating and compromising conflict management styles when involved in interpersonal conflict [10]. In work settings, research has shown that supervisors who have been perceived as servant leaders attempted to help their employees work together to resolve interpersonal conflict [9,11]. However, supervisors and employees view conflicts differently [3,23] and these incongruent beliefs are the foundation of interpersonal conflict [3,24,25].

A few researchers have studied the specific relationship between servant leadership and conflict management [10,26,27]. Researchers have assessed how employee self-report of their own attitudes regarding collaboration related to their self-report of their own servant leadership characteristics [28], and how college students' self-report of their own attitudes towards servant leadership related to their self-report of their own preferred conflict management styles [10].

Researchers have also evaluated how employee's report of servant leadership used by their direct supervisor related to employee's report of conflict management styles used by their direct supervisor [27]. In spite of research on the connection between servant leadership and preferred conflict management styles in business and university settings [10,27,28], researchers have not studied how employee perceptions of servant leadership used by their direct supervisor influences the conflict management styles of these employees.

Some researchers have argued that servant leadership is not beneficial in all workplaces [29]. Researchers have suggested that organizational components like different beliefs of individual members and employees' level of satisfaction with the organization can negatively influence the effectiveness of servant leadership [29,30]. The purpose of this study was to evaluate whether servant

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leadership dimensions used by supervisors were predictors of subordinate employees' preferred conflict management style, when there was a disagreement between the employee and their supervisor.

## Methodology

Survey Monkey was used to combine the Servant Leadership Scale and the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II into one web-based survey. Following data collection, five stepwise multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine which of the seven servant leadership dimensions displayed by supervisors predicted the five possible conflict management styles preferred by employees. This study addressed the following hypotheses.

H<sub>1</sub>: The seven servant leadership dimensions used by a supervisor will positively predict the integrating conflict management style used by an employee.

H<sub>2</sub>: The seven servant leadership dimensions used by a supervisor will positively predict the compromising conflict management style used by an employee.

H<sub>3</sub>: The seven servant leadership dimensions used by a supervisor will negatively predict the avoiding conflict management style used by an employee.

H<sub>4</sub>: The seven servant leadership dimensions used by a supervisor will negatively predict the obliging conflict management style used by an employee.

H<sub>5</sub>: The seven servant leadership dimensions used by a supervisor will negatively predict the dominating conflict management style used by an employee.

## Population and Sampling

In 2014, there was an estimated 650,000 individuals working as social workers [31], and this target population size did not include non-social workers employed by social service organizations. Convenience sampling was used to recruit social service employees who reported to a direct supervisor. Human resource departments and organizational leaders at social service agencies were contacted to recruit employees. Master's level students in social service-related academic programs were also recruited to participate in this study. In using convenience sampling, the purpose was to develop a diverse population of employees from several different types of social service organizations.

## Servant Leadership Scale

The Servant Leadership Scale was used to evaluate how employees perceived servant leadership in their supervisor. The Servant Leadership Scale consists of 28 items divided equally among seven subscales (i.e., conceptual skills, empowering, helping subordinates grow and develop, putting subordinates first, behaving ethically, emotional healing, and creating value for the community) that were designed to measure servant leadership dimensions in work settings [32]. Construct validity was assessed by comparing how the Servant Leadership Survey and the Servant Leadership Scale measured servant leadership [33]. Correlations between the Servant Leadership Survey and the Servant Leadership Scale ranged from .02 to .85, confirming that the Servant Leadership Scale measured servant leadership similar to the Servant Leadership Survey [33]. With Cronbach's alpha values ranging from  $\alpha = .86$  to  $\alpha = .94$ , van Dierendonck and Nuijten [33] also found that the Servant Leadership Scale provided a reliable measure of servant leadership.

## Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II

The Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II was used to evaluate the conflict management styles of employees. Rahim and Magner [34] developed the 28 item Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II to measure five different conflict management styles consisting of avoiding, compromising, dominating, integrating, and obliging. This instrument was designed to measure preferred conflict management styles of employees when they were engaged in an interpersonal conflict with their direct supervisor [34]. Rahim and Magner [34] conducted a confirmatory factor analysis of the 28 item Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II which obtained Goodness-of-Fit Indices scores of

.93 to .98, confirming the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II was a valid instrument [34]. Brewer found that the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II was a fairly reliable instrument in measuring conflict management styles as the Cronbach's alpha scores ranged from  $\alpha = .66$  to  $\alpha = .81$ .

## Results

Over a period of 4 months (October 14, 2017 to February 20, 2018) Survey Monkey was used to collect data from workers employed by social service organizations who reported to a supervisor. Five stepwise multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine if seven servant leadership dimensions (i.e., conceptual skills, empowering, helping subordinates grow and develop, putting subordinates first, behaving ethically, emotional healing, and creating value for the community) used by supervisors predicted five conflict management styles (i.e., integrating, compromising, obliging, dominating, and avoiding) used by employees when they were involved in a conflict with their supervisor.

### Integrating

Table 1 shows the results of the first stepwise regression analysis that was conducted to evaluate how servant leadership dimensions predicted the integrating conflict management style. The results of this analysis indicated that there was a correlation between emotional healing  $F(1, 227) = 53.539, p < .05$  and the integrating conflict management style. Emotional healing ( $\beta = .437, t = 7.317, p = .000$ ) positively correlated to the integrating conflict management style.

### Compromising

Table 2 shows the results of the second stepwise regression analysis that was conducted to evaluate how servant leadership dimensions predicted the compromising conflict management style. The results indicated that there is a correlation between two servant leadership dimensions (i.e., emotional healing and putting subordinates first)  $F(1, 227) = 53.539, p < .05$  and the compromising conflict management style. Emotional healing ( $\beta = .390, t = 3.824, p = .000$ ) positively correlated with compromising conflict management style. However, putting subordinates first ( $\beta = -.206, t = -2.024, p = .044$ ) negatively correlated with compromising conflict management style.

### Avoiding

Table 3 shows the results of the third stepwise regression analysis that assessed how servant leadership dimensions predicted the avoiding conflict management style. The results of the analysis indicated that there is a

**Table 1.** Servant Leadership Dimensions Predicting Integrating.

Predictor Variables	B	SE	B	t	Sig.
1. Emotional healing	.240	.033	.437	7.317	.000

Note: Model 1,  $F(1, 227) = 53.539$ ; (EV) represents variables excluded from the model;  $p < .05$

**Table 2.** Servant Leadership Dimensions Predicting Compromising.

Predictor Variables	B	SE	B	t	Sig.
1. Emotional healing	.128	.033	.390	3.824	.000
2. Putting Subordinates First	-.072	.036	-.206	-2.024	.044

Note: Model 2,  $F(2, 225) = 8.433$ ; (EV) represents variables excluded from the model;  $p < .05$

**Table 3.** Servant Leadership Dimensions Predicting Avoiding.

Predictor Variables	B	SE	B	t	Sig.
1. Helping subordinates grow and Develop	-.202	.043	-.301	-4.739	.000

Note: Model 1,  $F(1, 226) = 22.461$ ; (EV) represents variables excluded from the model;  $p < .05$

correlation between helping subordinates grow and develop  $F(1,226) = 22.461$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and the avoiding conflict management style. Helping subordinates grow and develop ( $\beta = -.301$ ,  $t = -4.739$ ,  $p = .000$ ) negatively correlated with avoiding conflict management style.

## Obliging

Table 4 displays the results of the fourth stepwise regression analysis that evaluated how servant leadership dimensions predicted the obliging conflict management style. The results of the analysis indicated that there was a correlation between the servant leadership dimensions of empowering and conceptual skills  $F(2,225) = 6.938$ ,  $p < .05$  and the obliging conflict management style. Empowering ( $\beta = -.276$ ,  $t = -3.691$ ,  $p = .000$ ) negatively correlated with obliging conflict management style. However, conceptual skills ( $\beta = .171$ ,  $t = 2.285$ ,  $p = .024$ ) positively correlated with obliging conflict management style.

## Dominating

Table 5 displays the results of the final stepwise regression analysis that was conducted to evaluate how servant leadership dimensions predicted the dominating conflict management style. The results of this analysis indicated that there is a correlation between the servant leadership dimensions of empowering and conceptual skills  $F(2,225) = 7.032$ ,  $p < .05$  and the dominating conflict management style. Empowering ( $\beta = .275$ ,  $t = 3.677$ ,  $p = .000$ ) positively correlated with dominating conflict management style. However, conceptual skills ( $\beta = -.185$ ,  $t = -2.481$ ,  $p = .014$ ) negatively correlated with dominating conflict management style.

**Table 4.** Model 2: Servant Leadership Predicting Obliging.

Predictor Variables	B	SE	B	t	Sig.
1. Empowering	-.173	.047	-.276	-3.691	.000
2. Conceptual skills	.111	.049	.171	2.285	.023

Note:  $F(2,225) = 6.938$ ; (EV) represents variables excluded from the model;  $p < .05$

**Table 5.** Servant Leadership Dimensions Predicting Dominating.

Predictor Variables	B	SE	B	t	Sig.
1. Empowering	.170	.046	.275	3.677	.000
2. Conceptual skills	-.120	.048	-.185	-2.481	.014

Note:  $F(2,225) = 7.032$ ; (EV) represents variables excluded from the model;  $p < .05$

## Discussion

The findings from this study validated that the servant leadership dimension of emotional healing used by supervisors correlated positively with the integrating conflict management style used by employees. Emotional healing used by supervisors also correlated positively with the compromising conflict management style used by employees. The results of this study are consistent with past literature [9,28], as this current investigation showed that emotional healing used by supervisors encouraged employees to use the integrating and compromising conflict management styles. Further, putting subordinates first, also used by supervisors, correlated negatively with the compromising conflict management style. Results showed that employees had the tendency to use compromising less when they perceived that their supervisor put their needs first. As servant leaders proactively work to meet the needs of their employees, there is reduced need for employees to engage in compromising behaviors.

Intriguingly, findings showed that the servant leadership dimension of helping subordinates grow and develop used by supervisors negatively correlated with the avoiding conflict management style used by employees. Meaning that during disagreements with their direct supervisor, employees were less likely to avoid resolving the conflict when they perceived that their supervisor wanted to help them grow and develop. Helping subordinates grow and develop is used when a supervisor ensures that their subordinates are working towards their highest potential [20,35]. The servant leadership dimension of helping

subordinates to grow and develop, displayed by supervisors, discouraged employee participants from using the avoiding conflict management style during disagreements with their supervisor. This is a constructive finding when the goal of conflict management is not to avoid the conflict, but to address disagreements collectively.

A negative correlation was observed between empowerment used by supervisors and the obliging conflict management style used by employees. When employees perceived their supervisor as empowering, they were less likely to use the obliging conflict management style. A supervisor who is empowering is one that trains their staff reject passivity and be proactive in learning and pursuing a leadership role [20,29]. These findings affirm that when there is a conflict between supervisors and their employees, empowering used by supervisors helps employees to take an active role in resolving the disagreement with their supervisor.

Additionally, conceptual skills used by supervisors were found to positively correlate with the obliging conflict management style used by employees. This finding inferred that employees will use the obliging conflict management style more to resolve a conflict with their supervisor when they perceive that their supervisor displays conceptual skills. Conceptual skills used by supervisors also negatively correlated with the dominating conflict management style used by employees. This finding implied that employees will choose to be less competitive with their supervisor when they trust that their supervisor is an effective visionary who can organize and implement abstract thoughts successfully.

Another interesting finding was that empowerment used by supervisors positively correlated with dominating conflict management style used by employees. This finding confirmed that during conflicts between employees and their supervisor, employees were more likely to use the dominating conflict management style to resolve the interpersonal conflict when their supervisor worked to empower them. Even though the dominating conflict management style may be viewed as negative [34], it is potentially beneficial for employees to know the right time to respectfully confront their supervisor. A servant leader would not view an employee engaged in respectful confrontation as a hierarchical power issue [29]. Servant leaders would view the behaviors of their employees as an effort to offer them valuable information which in turn could lead to effective collaboration [20,29,35].

## Implications for Practice

Business leaders who display servant leadership can help employees work together to manage organizational challenges like interpersonal conflict because these leaders are typically focused on serving, maintaining effective communication, actively addressing problems, and sustaining healthy relationships [10,18,20]. Findings from this study confirmed that dimensions of servant leadership predicted helpful and unhelpful conflict management styles. For instance, the servant leadership dimension of emotional healing played an important part in promoting the integrating and compromising conflict management styles. Helping supervisors to develop skills in emotional healing can be the catalyst that encourages their employees to use the integrating and compromising conflict management styles when managing interpersonal conflict. Further training and helping supervisors to implement the servant leadership dimensions of helping subordinates grow and develop and conceptual skills could potentially help employees to refrain from using the avoiding and dominating conflict management styles.

Related to social change, the most significant findings were that a servant leadership dimension (putting subordinates first) negatively correlated with a helpful conflict management style (compromising), and that several dimensions (empowering and conceptual skills) positively correlated with unhelpful conflict management styles (dominating and obliging). These findings are important as individuals maintain the belief that servant leadership ideologies align only with the integrating and compromising, which are considered to be helpful conflict management styles [10]. Even though studies have found that servant leadership positively related to helpful conflict management practices [9,10,28], several findings from this study contradict the positive connection between servant leadership and helpful conflict management styles.



In reality, we would want to see the finding that supervisors who engaged putting subordinates first negatively correlated with employees who used the compromising conflict management style. These findings displayed that when involved in an interpersonal conflict, supervisors who put the needs of their staff first will work to ensure that the resolution is need fulling for their employees. The finding that has the potential to lead to the most social change was that empowerment used by supervisors positively correlated with the dominating conflict management style used by their employees. Although the dominating conflict management style is typically viewed as unhelpful, a healthy competition, where employees respectfully question their superior, may encourage growth within the supervisor-employee relationship. Some dimensions of servant leadership may help to promote healthy interpersonal conflict [36-38] that, if managed effectively, can lead to new knowledge and experiences that help supervisors and their staff grow and develop professionally.

### Recommendations for Future Research

Although the relationship between servant leadership and conflict management styles has been studied, this was the first time a study investigated how servant leadership dimensions used by supervisors predicted conflict management styles used by employees. Replication of this study would be beneficial in social service organizations. Further investigation may confirm the findings of this study or identify new findings. Conducting this study in business industries besides social services may help to generalize findings to a more diverse employee population. The business type may be an additional variable to consider in further investigating how servant leadership used by supervisors predicts conflict management styles used employees.

This study confirmed that there is a connection between some dimensions of servant leadership used by supervisors and conflict management styles used by employees. As servant leadership is believed to promote collaboration [29], it was interesting to find that empowerment used by supervisors correlated positively with dominating used by employees. Future research could continue to investigate why some dimensions of servant leadership positively correlated with conflict management styles (i.e., dominating and obliging) that are perceived to be unhelpful.

The reason why there was a negative correlation between conceptual skills and the dominating conflict management style might be explained by future studies that investigate how trust impacts the relationship between conceptual skills used by supervisors and dominating conflict management styles used by employees. From a theoretical standpoint the concept of trust between supervisors and employees might explain why conceptual skills positively correlated with the obliging conflict management style and negatively with the dominating conflict management style. Researchers have found that servant leadership used by a supervisor fostered trust between the supervisor and their staff [11,13]. A future study might evaluate if trust mediates the relationship between dimensions of servant leadership used by supervisors and conflict management styles used by employees.

### Conclusion

Interpersonal conflict is multifaceted often resulting in several problems that need to be carefully considered when developing a resolution. Understanding how to effectively manage interpersonal conflict can help to clarify if it is possible for interpersonal conflict to be used to enhance organizations. Research findings from this study confirmed that servant leadership used by supervisors correlated with helpful and unhelpful conflict management styles. This information will be beneficial in helping supervisors to improve interpersonal conflict management between themselves and their staff. This study was a starting point that identified new questions regarding the effectiveness of servant leadership with helping to improve conflict management in the workplace. The findings of this study also provide direction for future questions that can further test the empirical benefits of servant leadership in the workplace.

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