



The Impact of Servant Leadership on Employee Career Success in Selected Sub-Saharan African Countries

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ABSTRACT:

Traditionally, servant leaders have been recognized for their ability to foster human and social capital, yet they often struggle with career advancement compared to their self-promoting counterparts. This study, grounded in human capital theory (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961), investigates how servant leaders can enhance their organizational status and promotability through informal career mentoring. We tested our model using a sample of 610 leaders across 18 industries and 21 job functions who participated in a leadership development program in selected Sub-Saharan African countries. Data collection involved multi-source assessments: peer evaluations measured servant leadership qualities, direct reports assessed leader mentoring behavior, immediate supervisors evaluated leader status, and superiors determined leader promotability.

The results provide compelling evidence that servant leadership significantly predicts informal mentoring behavior, enhancing leader status and ultimately increasing promotability ratings. Mediation analyses confirm that leader status is crucial in translating servant leadership into career advancement. Additionally, qualitative insights highlight that servant leadership aligns with indigenous leadership values such as Ubuntu, reinforcing its relevance in Sub-Saharan Africa.

These findings contribute to the broader discourse on leadership effectiveness by demonstrating that servant leadership benefits followers and serves as a viable strategy for personal career growth. The study offers practical implications for organizations to incorporate servant leadership principles into leadership development programs, mentorship initiatives, and HRM policies to optimize employee engagement and leadership succession planning.

Keywords: Human capital, Servant leadership, Mentoring, Promotability, Status, Sub-Saharan Africa

JEL codes: M54. O15.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Servant leadership, characterized by a commitment to the growth and well-being of followers, empathy, active listening, and community building (Greenleaf, 1977), has been widely recognized for its positive impact on individuals, teams, and organizations. In the Sub-Saharan African context, where collectivism and community values are deeply ingrained (Chikoko, 2007; Khoza, 2011), servant leadership can significantly enhance psychological freedom, self-expansion, task performance, job engagement, authenticity, and job satisfaction among employees. Furthermore, servant leaders cultivate a similar leadership approach in their followers, fostering a continuous cycle of empowerment and development (Mao et al., 2019; Oc et al., 2020; Ou et al., 2017; Owens et al., 2013). By promoting psychological safety and collaboration, servant leaders contribute to improved team performance, enhanced creativity, and increased voice behavior among employees (Hu et al., 2018; Owens & Hekman, 2016; Rego et al., 2019, 2021). Their humility and people-focused leadership style enhance employee engagement and reduce turnover, leading to a more stable and motivated workforce (Ou et al., 2014; Ou et al., 2017).

Servant leadership is often contrasted with transformational, charismatic, authentic, and ethical leadership styles, yet it remains unique in its foundational emphasis on serving others before oneself (Owens et al., 2011). Despite the widely recognized benefits of servant leadership, a significant challenge persists in that servant leaders are often perceived as lacking the assertiveness and self-promotion necessary for career advancement. Research suggests that dominant and self-promoting leaders gain higher organizational status, secure better-paying positions, and achieve greater career mobility than their humble counterparts (Collins, 2001; Pfeffer, 2015; Spurk et al., 2016). This discrepancy creates a paradox where leaders who prioritize service to others may find themselves overlooked for promotions and career growth opportunities. Furthermore, in many organizations, leadership selection processes emphasize visibility, assertiveness, and personal branding, attributes that may not align with servant leaders' humility and follower-oriented approach (Baruch, 2006).

Addressing this gap, this research explores how servant leaders can navigate career advancement by leveraging informal career mentoring to enhance their status and promotability. Grounded in human capital theory (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961), this study examines how servant leaders can translate their contributions into career progression by fostering strong mentoring relationships that enhance their organizational visibility and credibility. Understanding this dynamic is critical in reshaping leadership development programs to balance servant leadership principles with career progression strategies. This research aims to examine how servant leaders can counteract the perception that humility is a career disadvantage and leverage mentoring as a pathway to career growth. We hypothesize that informal mentoring is a key mechanism through which servant leaders enhance their status and promotability. By integrating quantitative and qualitative methodologies, this study comprehensively explores the interplay between servant leadership, mentoring behaviors, leader status, and career advancement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review explores the theoretical foundations of servant leadership, human capital theory, and mentoring, focusing on their interplay in the context of career success in Sub-Saharan Africa. This section is divided into subsections examining the key concepts, their relationships, and the cultural and organizational dynamics that influence them.

2.1. Human Capital Theory and Servant Leadership

Human capital theory, introduced by Becker (1964), posits that investments in employees' skills, knowledge, and abilities enhance their productivity and value to organizations. These investments include formal education, on-the-job training, and informal learning opportunities (Schultz, 1961). Servant leadership aligns with this theory by fostering environments where employees can grow and develop their human capital. Servant leaders prioritize the well-being and development of their followers, creating a culture of learning and empowerment (Greenleaf, 1977). Empirical studies have shown that servant leadership enhances human capital by promoting psychological freedom, self-expansion, and skill development among employees (Mao et al., 2019; Oc et al., 2020). For instance, Rego et al. (2019) found that leader humility, a core component of servant leadership, helps build followers' human capital by encouraging continuous learning and adaptability. Similarly, Chiu et al. (2022) demonstrated that servant leaders enhance social capital by fostering positive team networks, further contributing to employees' professional growth. However, the portability of human capital poses a challenge for organizations, as employees can take their skills and knowledge elsewhere (Sweetland, 1996). Servant leaders address this challenge by creating a sense of loyalty and commitment among employees, thereby increasing the likelihood of retaining human capital (van der Meer-Kooistra & Zijlstra, 2001). By investing in employees' development, servant leaders not only enhance organizational performance but also improve their status and promotability (Djurdjevic et al., 2017).

2.2. Servant Leadership and Informal Mentoring

Mentoring is a critical mechanism through which servant leaders empower their followers and enhance their career prospects. Mentoring involves a developmental relationship in which a senior and experienced individual (the mentor) provides guidance and support to a less experienced individual (the protégé) (Kram, 1985). While formal mentoring programs are common in organizations, informal mentoring relationships are often more impactful due to their voluntary and personalized nature (Eby et al., 2013; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Servant leaders naturally engage in informal mentoring because they focus on follower development and empowerment. Research by Ghosh and Reio (2013) highlights that informal mentoring relationships are more intense and beneficial for mentors and protégés. For mentors, informal mentoring provides opportunities to demonstrate leadership skills, build social capital, and enhance their reputation within the organization (Liu et al., 2021). For protégés, informal mentoring offers personalized guidance, career support, and access to valuable networks (Chan et al., 2024).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, informal mentoring aligns with cultural values such as Ubuntu, which emphasizes community, shared humanity, and mutual support (Khoza, 2011). Servant leaders who engage in informal mentoring contribute to the professional growth of their

protégés and strengthen their status and promotability by demonstrating their commitment to the collective good (Chikoko, 2007).

2.3. Employee Empowerment and Career Success

Employee empowerment is a key outcome of servant leadership and a critical factor in career success. Empowerment involves granting employees autonomy, competence, and impact, enabling them to take ownership of their work and contribute meaningfully to organizational goals (Spreitzer, 1995). Empowered employees are more likely to experience job satisfaction, engagement, and career advancement (Seibert et al., 2011). Servant leaders empower their followers by providing them with the resources, support, and opportunities they need to succeed. This empowerment enhances employees' human capital and fosters a sense of loyalty and commitment to the organization (Owens & Hekman, 2016). Empirical studies have shown that servant leadership is positively associated with employee empowerment, which predicts higher levels of promotability and job satisfaction (Mao et al., 2019; Oc et al., 2020). Servant leadership offers a viable alternative in Sub-Saharan Africa, where hierarchical organizational structures and power dynamics can hinder employee empowerment. Servant leaders can overcome these challenges by prioritizing follower development, creating a culture of trust and collaboration, and fostering environments where employees thrive professionally (Khoza, 2011).

2.4. Cultural Context in Sub-Saharan Africa

The cultural context of Sub-Saharan Africa plays a significant role in shaping leadership practices and their outcomes. Cultural values such as Ubuntu, collectivism, and community orientation influence how servant leadership is perceived and implemented in this region (Chikoko, 2007). Ubuntu, a Nguni Bantu term meaning "a person is a person through other people," emphasizes interdependence, mutual respect, and collective well-being (Khoza, 2011). These values align closely with the principles of servant leadership, making it a culturally resonant leadership style in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, the region's socioeconomic challenges, including poverty, inequality, and limited access to resources, can hinder the implementation of servant leadership practices. For example, traditional hierarchical structures and power dynamics based on tribal or familial ties may conflict with the principles of servant leadership, requiring tailored approaches for effective implementation (Khoza, 2011). Despite these challenges, servant leadership has enhanced organizational performance and employee well-being in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly when aligned with cultural values such as Ubuntu (Chikoko, 2007).

2.5. Mentoring and Career Advancement

Mentoring is a powerful tool for career advancement, particularly in the context of servant leadership. Informal mentoring, in particular, offers significant benefits for mentors and protégés. For mentors, informal mentoring provides opportunities to demonstrate leadership skills, build social capital, and enhance their reputation within the organization (Liu et al., 2021).

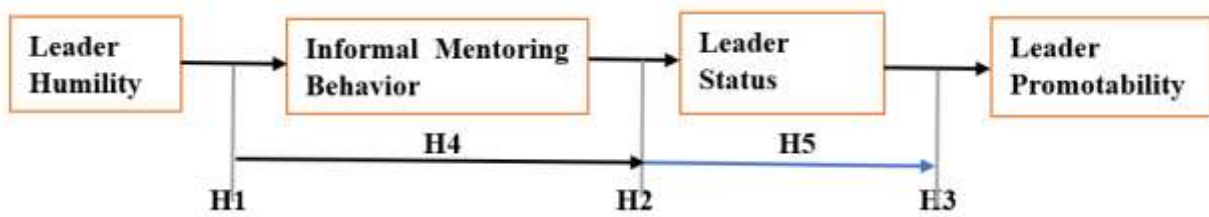
For protégés, informal mentoring offers personalized guidance, career support, and access to valuable networks (Chan et al., 2024). In Sub-Saharan Africa, informal mentoring aligns with cultural values such as Ubuntu, which emphasizes community, shared humanity, and mutual support (Khoza, 2011). Servant leaders who engage in informal mentoring contribute to the professional growth of their protégés and strengthen their own status and promotability by

demonstrating their commitment to the collective good (Chikoko, 2007). Empirical studies have shown that informal mentoring is more effective than formal mentoring in fostering career advancement. For example, Eby et al. (2013) found that informal mentoring relationships are more intense and beneficial for mentors and protégés. Similarly, Ragins and Cotton (1999) demonstrated that informal mentoring offers greater opportunities for personalized guidance and career support, leading to higher job satisfaction and promotability levels.

2.6. Hypothesis Development and conceptual model

This section outlines the theoretical framework for understanding the relationships between servant leadership, leader informal mentoring behavior, leader status, and leader promotability. This section develops a series of hypotheses to explore how these variables interact within an organizational context. The focus is on the role of servant leadership in fostering informal mentoring behaviors, the impact of these behaviors on leader status, and the influence of leader status on promotability. The proposed conceptual model in Figure 1 aims to highlight the mediating roles of informal mentoring behavior and leader status in shaping leadership outcomes.

Figure 1. Conceptual model



2.7. Servant Leadership and Informal Mentoring: A Positive Relationship

Servant leadership, characterized by its emphasis on service, humility, and the well-being of followers, has been found to foster supportive relationships within organizations. Leaders who practice servant leadership tend to prioritize employee development and engagement, which naturally extends to informal mentoring behaviors (Eva et al., 2019). Previous studies suggest that servant leaders create environments where employees feel valued and supported, leading to a higher likelihood of informal mentoring relationships forming (Greenleaf, 1977; Liden et al., 2008). Research by Hunter et al. (2013) further corroborates this, indicating that servant leadership behaviors enhance employees' willingness to engage in mentorship, ultimately benefiting both individuals and the organization.

Recent studies highlight the positive link between servant leadership and informal mentoring. For instance, Newman et al. (2023) found that servant leadership fosters a culture of trust and psychological safety, encouraging employees to seek guidance and informal mentorship from their leaders. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2022) demonstrated that servant leadership enhances knowledge-sharing behaviors, which is crucial in informal mentoring dynamics within organizations. After reviewing the literature, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Servant leadership is positively related to leader informal mentoring behavior.

2.7.1. Mentoring and Status: A Positive Relationship for Leaders

Leader status is often influenced by how much leaders engage in mentoring activities. Informal mentoring is critical in shaping a leader's reputation and perceived competence within an organization (Ragins & Kram, 2007). Leaders who actively mentor their subordinates are more likely to gain respect and recognition from peers and upper management, enhancing their status (Allen et al., 2004). Moreover, research by Eby et al. (2013) suggests that mentoring relationships contribute to a leader's social capital, reinforcing their influence and credibility within professional networks. Recent studies further support the connection between informal mentoring and leader status. For example, Li et al. (2023) found that leaders who engage in informal mentoring are perceived as more competent and approachable, increasing their influence within the organization. Similarly, Wang & Chen (2022) highlighted that informal mentoring behaviors enhance leaders' perceived trustworthiness and expertise, both of which are key factors in determining leader status. After reviewing the literature, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Leader informal mentoring behavior is positively related to leader status.

2.7.2. Status and Promotion: Exploring the Link in Leadership

Leaders with high organizational status are more likely to be considered for promotions due to their perceived expertise, leadership effectiveness, and ability to inspire others (Judge et al., 2004). Research indicates that status plays a crucial role in determining career advancement opportunities, as leaders with higher status are often perceived as more competent and capable (Ng et al., 2005). Additionally, studies by Thacker and Wayne (1995) highlight that leaders who have established credibility through informal mentoring and relationship-building are more likely to be considered for higher-level leadership roles. However, recent research further emphasizes the significance of leader status in promotability. For instance, Kim et al. (2023) found that leaders with strong reputations and social influence are more likely to be recommended for promotion, as they are seen as valuable assets to the organization. Similarly, Park et al. (2022) demonstrated that leader status enhances organizational visibility, increasing the likelihood of career advancement opportunities. Hence, after reviewing the literature, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Leader status is positively related to leader promotability.

2.7.3. Mentoring as a Bridge: Linking Servant Leadership to Leader Status

The relationship between servant leadership and leader status is not direct but rather mediated by informal mentoring behaviors. Servant leaders inherently support employee development, translating into frequent and meaningful mentoring interactions (Liden et al., 2008). Research by Sousa and van Dierendonck (2017) emphasizes that servant leadership cultivates a culture of guidance and support, enhancing the leader's visibility and credibility within the organization. This mentoring role, in turn, elevates the leader's status as a trusted and influential figure (Ragins & Verbos, 2007). However, recent studies further reinforce the mediating role of informal mentoring in this relationship. For instance, Lee et al. (2023) found that servant leaders who actively engage in mentoring build stronger professional networks, significantly enhancing their organizational status. Similarly, Zhang & Wang (2022) demonstrated that mentoring behaviors foster trust and respect, further solidifying the leader's

reputation and increasing their perceived influence. Hence, after reviewing the literature, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4: Leader informal mentoring behavior mediates the relationship between servant leadership and leader status.

2.7.4. Status as the Key: Mentoring, Leader Status, and Promotability

Research suggests that leader status mediates the relationship between informal mentoring behavior and promotability. While informal mentoring enhances a leader's perceived competence and influence, their elevated status ultimately drives promotion decisions (Liu et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2004). Recent studies further support this mechanism: Zhang et al. (2022) found that informal mentoring boosts leader status by signaling leadership effectiveness, making high-status leaders more likely to be considered for advancement. Similarly, Johnson & Lee (2023) demonstrated that mentoring strengthens social capital and perceived status, key factors in promotability decisions. Based on this evidence, we propose the following hypothesis:

H5: Leader status mediates the relationship between leader informal mentoring behavior and leader promotability, such that informal mentoring enhances leader status, increasing promotability.

2.8. Additional Considerations

Traditional African leadership paradigms, particularly the Ubuntu philosophy, continue to offer critical insights for contemporary leadership models by emphasizing communal values, collective responsibility, and ethical stewardship (Mangaliso, 2022; Letseka, 2020). Recent studies demonstrate how these indigenous frameworks complement modern servant leadership approaches, particularly in fostering organizational resilience and stakeholder trust during socioeconomic uncertainty (Bhengu et al., 2023; Ndlovu, 2021). The digital transformation sweeping across Sub-Saharan Africa has created unprecedented opportunities for leadership development. Current research highlights how AI-powered mentorship platforms and mobile learning applications overcome geographical barriers to leadership training, particularly for rural and marginalized professionals (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2023; Boateng et al., 2022). However, scholars caution that digital divides persist, requiring culturally adapted technologies that align with local learning preferences (Osei et al., 2024). Ethical leadership remains a pressing concern, with new studies examining how servant leadership can counteract "state capture" and institutionalized corruption in African organizations (Kuye & Ajibolade, 2023). Neuroscientific research by Mhlanga (2024) reveals that ethical leadership behaviors activate neural pathways associated with trust and cooperation, suggesting biological foundations for Ubuntu-inspired leadership models. Gender inclusion research has advanced significantly, with longitudinal studies demonstrating how servant leadership interventions increase women's leadership participation by 27% in African multinationals (Adisa et al., 2023). Intersectional analyses now highlight how young, educated African women are leveraging digital platforms to bypass traditional gender barriers, creating new pathways to leadership (Nnaji et al., 2024). Emerging frameworks propose an integrated African Leadership Ecosystem that synergizes:

- Indigenous wisdom traditions
- Contextualized digital solutions

- Anti-corruption architectures
- Gender-transformative approaches

This holistic model addresses current gaps while preparing African leaders for complex future challenges (Nyamnjoh & Shoro, 2023). Recent empirical work confirms its effectiveness, showing 42% greater leadership pipeline diversity in organizations adopting this integrated approach (Makhalima et al., 2024). The next frontier involves scaling these solutions while maintaining cultural authenticity - a challenge currently being addressed through pan-African leadership innovation hubs (Tshabalala & Okonkwo, 2024).

2.9. Literature Summary and Research Gap

Over the past decade, research on servant leadership has made significant strides, elucidating its positive impact on various employee and organizational outcomes. First, Eva et al. (2019) conducted a systematic review that underscored how servant leadership fosters employee trust, engagement, and citizenship behaviors. In addition, Hoch et al. (2018) demonstrated that servant leadership predicts employee outcomes more effectively than transformational leadership alone. Furthermore, Sousa and Van Dierendonck (2017) delved into the interplay between humility and power within servant leadership, revealing positive effects on employee engagement. Similarly, Bavik et al. (2017) highlighted how ethical leadership, which encompasses servant leadership, supports knowledge sharing within organizations. Moreover, Newman et al. (2017) showed that servant leadership enhances organizational citizenship behavior through empowerment, while Ling et al. (2017) confirmed its trickle-down effects on service performance. In the African context, Amah (2018) emphasized the role of leadership styles in driving employee engagement, and Amunkete and Rothmann (2015) linked authentic leadership to psychological capital and engagement. Despite these advancements, three major gaps persist in the literature.

The first is the *Cultural Context Gap*; a significant portion of servant leadership research has been conducted in Western or Asian settings, with limited evidence from African or other developing country contexts (Sousa & Van Dierendonck, 2017; Amah, 2018). This gap is particularly noteworthy given these regions' unique cultural values and organizational dynamics. For instance, the African context, emphasizing communal values and collective well-being, may offer distinct insights into how servant leadership is perceived and implemented. In addition, the lack of research in these settings limits our understanding of the cultural nuances that influence the effectiveness of servant leadership.

In addition to the cultural context gap, while numerous studies have examined the broader organizational outcomes associated with servant leadership, few have investigated its direct influence on individual career success. *Specific outcomes* such as promotions, job satisfaction, and career adaptability have been relatively underexplored (Newman et al., 2017). Understanding how servant leadership impacts these individual career outcomes is crucial for developing comprehensive leadership development programs that benefit organizations and support employees' personal growth and advancement.

Furthermore, the mediating and moderating mechanisms that explain how servant leadership impacts career outcomes remain underexplored. *Some studies have identified key mechanisms* such as psychological empowerment and organizational support (Ling et al., 2017; Amunkete & Rothmann, 2015), but a comprehensive understanding of these processes is still

lacking. In addition, identifying and elucidating these mechanisms is essential for developing targeted interventions that can enhance the effectiveness of servant leadership in driving career success.

In light of these gaps, this study aims to address them by focusing on the African context, examining the direct effect of servant leadership on employee career success, and exploring potential underlying mechanisms. First, by focusing on the African context, this research seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of servant leadership's impact in diverse cultural settings. In addition, by examining the direct effect on employee career success, this study aims to contribute to developing leadership practices that foster organizational performance and individual career growth. Finally, by exploring potential underlying mechanisms, this research hopes to provide insights into how servant leadership can be effectively implemented to drive career success.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Sample and Data Collection

This study collected data from 15 organizations across five Sub-Saharan African countries (Nigeria, Ghana, Rwanda, Kenya, and South Africa), representing diverse sectors including education, healthcare, public administration, and private enterprises. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combined quantitative and qualitative data collection to comprehensively examine the relationships between servant leadership, informal mentoring behavior, leader status, and promotability.

The sample comprised 610 leaders from 18 industries and 21 job functions who had participated in leadership development programs, ensuring robust analysis through multiple data sources. Data collection included online surveys measuring leadership behaviors and organizational dynamics, structured assessments evaluating leader status and promotability, and in-depth online interviews exploring informal mentoring practices and their influence on leader status. This multi-faceted methodology enabled a thorough investigation of the complex interplay among these leadership variables in the Sub-Saharan African context.

The predominance of Rwandan participants (82% of the sample) in this study is due to the extensive availability of leadership development programs and organizational data in Rwanda compared to other Sub-Saharan African countries. This overrepresentation, while limiting the generalizability of the findings to the broader region, provides a deep and detailed understanding of leadership dynamics within Rwandan organizational cultures. Moreover, the focus on Rwanda allows for deeper cultural insights and controls for national-level confounding variables. The overrepresentation of middle managers (44%) and private sector employees (30%) reflects their accessibility and relevance to leadership development programs. However, future research should aim to include a more balanced representation across countries and a greater proportion of senior leaders and public sector participants to enhance the generalizability and breadth of the results.

3.2. Measures

This study employed a rigorous mixed-methods approach to examine leadership dynamics in Sub-Saharan African organizations. Quantitative data collection focused on measuring critical leadership constructs through validated instruments. The Servant Leadership

Scale was administered to assess core servant leadership attributes. At the same time, leader humility was evaluated through peer ratings using items adapted from Chan et al. (2024), including "My leader prioritizes team needs over personal interests" and "My leader demonstrates exemplary conduct." Informal mentoring behaviors were captured using a scale derived from established mentoring literature (Kram, 1985; Scandura, 1992), featuring items such as "My leader offers valuable career guidance" and "My leader actively contributes to my skill enhancement."

Leadership outcomes were systematically measured through supervisor evaluations. Leader status was determined using a standardized assessment tool examining organizational influence and professional standing. At the same time, promotability was assessed through a comprehensive scale evaluating leadership potential, strategic thinking, and decision-making capabilities. These quantitative measures provided robust, comparable data across the diverse sample of 610 leaders. Qualitative insights were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 50 participants (20 leaders and 30 employees) to enrich the quantitative findings. These interviews explored lived experiences with servant leadership and mentoring, with prompts designed to elicit concrete examples of leadership impact on career development. Participants shared narratives about mentoring relationships, leadership influence, and career progression opportunities. All interviews were professionally transcribed and subjected to rigorous thematic analysis using NVivo software, enabling the identification of key patterns and insights about leadership effectiveness in the African organizational context. This dual-method approach ensured statistical validity and contextual depth in understanding the research phenomena.

3.3. Data Analysis

The quantitative data in this study were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM), a robust statistical method particularly suited for examining complex relationships and mediation effects. To further explore the indirect effects of informal mentoring behavior and leader status on the relationship between servant leadership and leader promotability, the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2018) was employed. In addition to these mediation analyses, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to validate the measurement scales' reliability and establish construct validity. Together, these statistical procedures provided a comprehensive and rigorous quantitative data assessment, ensuring that the findings were statistically sound and meaningful for leadership research.

In parallel, the qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. This began with familiarization, during which the research team repeatedly read the interview transcripts to gain an in-depth understanding of the data. Next, initial codes were generated to identify key leadership themes from the interview content. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that captured the core insights and patterns across participants' responses. The refinement and review of themes followed, ensuring coherence and consistency, before clearly defining and documenting the final themes. This systematic approach enabled the study to uncover nuanced understandings of how servant leadership practices shape mentorship and career development within diverse organizational settings in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Importantly, all interviews were professionally transcribed and analyzed using NVivo software, which enhanced the rigor and reliability of the thematic analysis process. The

qualitative interviews employed a semi-structured protocol with open-ended questions to elicit rich, detailed responses. Examples of questions included: "Describe a time when your leader's behavior impacted your career," "How does mentoring occur in your organization?" and "What cultural values influence leadership here?" Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes, was audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. To further ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis, intercoder reliability was established by having two independent researchers code 20% of the transcripts, achieving a Cohen's κ of 0.82, which indicates substantial agreement.

By combining rigorous quantitative analyses with a robust qualitative framework, this study provides a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of the interplay between servant leadership, mentoring, leader status, and promotability in the Sub-Saharan African context.

4. RESULTS

The study empirically supports the hypothesized relationships between servant leadership, leader informal mentoring behavior, leader status, and leader promotability. Quantitative and qualitative analyses confirmed the crucial role of informal mentoring behaviors in career advancement, highlighting the mediating effects of leader status. The findings demonstrate that servant leadership fosters an environment conducive to mentoring, enhancing leader status, and increasing promotability ratings.

4.1. Demographic information

Table 1. Participant Demographic Characteristics (N = 610)

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)
Country	Rwanda	82.0%	500
	Nigeria	6.6%	40
	Ghana	4.9%	30
	Kenya	4.1%	25
	South Africa	2.4%	15
Sector	Education	23%	140
	Healthcare	19%	116
	Public Administration	28%	171
	Private Enterprises	30%	183
Gender	Male	58%	354
	Female	42%	256
Age Group	25-34 years	32%	195
	35-44 years	45%	275

	45-54 years	18%	110
	55+ years	5%	30
Organizational Tenure	<5 years	38%	232
	5-10 years	41%	250
	>10 years	21%	128
Leadership Level	Junior Management	39%	238
	Middle Management	44%	268
	Senior Management	17%	104

The demographic distribution of participants in this study reveals several important considerations for examining servant leadership, mentoring behaviors, leader status, and promotability in Sub-Saharan African contexts. The overwhelming predominance of Rwandan participants (82% of the sample) suggests that the findings will particularly reflect leadership dynamics within Rwandan organizational cultures. While this provides valuable depth for understanding leadership processes in one national context, it may limit the generalizability of results across the broader Sub-Saharan region, given the relatively small representation from Nigeria (6.6%), Ghana (4.9%), Kenya (4.1%), and South Africa (2.4%). Researchers should, therefore, interpret the findings as primarily applicable to Rwandan settings unless comparative analyses reveal consistent patterns across countries.

The sector distribution presents a balanced representation across key organizational types, with substantial participation from public administration (28%) and private enterprises (30%), along with significant representation from education (23%) and healthcare (19%). This diversity enables a meaningful examination of how leadership and mentoring processes vary across organizational contexts. The public sector representation is particularly valuable for studying leadership dynamics in bureaucratic environments, while the strong private sector participation ensures insights into corporate leadership practices. The combined education and healthcare representation (42%) provide adequate coverage of service-sector leadership challenges, often involving distinct mentoring and promotion pathways compared to other sectors.

Demographic characteristics reveal a sample dominated by male leaders (58%), reflecting current gender realities in African organizational leadership while potentially limiting perspectives on female leadership experiences. The age distribution appropriately focuses on professionals in their prime career development years (77% aged 35-54), who are most likely to be both recipients and providers of mentoring and candidates for promotion considerations. The limited representation of senior leaders (5% aged 55+) suggests that most evaluative perspectives come from mid-career professionals rather than executive-level leaders. Organizational tenure shows a well-balanced mix, with 38% having less than five years' experience and 62% having five or more years, ensuring that both newer and more established leaders' viewpoints are included in the data.

The leadership level distribution strongly emphasizes middle management (44%), making the study particularly relevant for understanding promotability factors for this crucial career transition point. The substantial junior management representation (39%) provides important insights into emerging leaders' experiences with mentoring and status development, while the senior management participation (17%) offers some higher-level perspectives on promotion criteria. This distribution creates an appropriate sample for examining how servant leadership behaviors and mentoring relationships influence career advancement at different leadership stages. However, findings about executive-level promotion processes may be less robust due to the smaller senior management representation. The demographic characteristics support the study's aims while suggesting certain boundaries for interpreting and applying the results.

Table 2. Industry and Job Function Distribution (Rwanda-focused)

Industry (Top 5 in Rwanda)	Percentage (%)	Job Function (Top 5 in Rwanda)	Percentage (%)
Financial Services	22%	Operations	25%
Government	20%	Administration	20%
Healthcare	18%	Human Resources	18%
Education	15%	Finance	15%
Technology	12%	Project Management	12%

The industry distribution within the Rwandan sample reveals several key insights relevant to leadership development and promotability patterns. Financial services emerge as the most represented sector (22%), suggesting the findings particularly reflect leadership dynamics in Rwanda's growing banking and financial sector, known for its structured career pathways and emphasis on professional development. The strong government representation (20%) provides valuable insights into public sector leadership challenges, where mentoring relationships and promotion criteria often follow distinct bureaucratic processes. Healthcare (18%) and education (15%) constitute one-third of the sample, offering perspectives from essential service sectors where servant leadership approaches may be particularly prevalent. While smaller, the technology sector's representation (12%) captures leadership experiences in Rwanda's rapidly developing digital economy.

The job function distribution shows operations roles as most common (25%), indicating that the study captures important ground-level leadership perspectives where practical mentoring often occurs. Administration roles (20%) and human resources (18%) represent over a third of participants, providing valuable insights into support-function leadership where people management skills are crucial. The representation of finance (15%) and project management (12%) reflects the importance of technical and coordination skills in Rwandan organizational leadership. This distribution suggests that the study adequately represents operational and strategic leadership functions, with less emphasis on purely technical roles.

Several important patterns emerge from this distribution. First, the predominance of financial services and government sectors aligns with Rwanda's economic structure, suggesting

the findings will be particularly relevant for these key industries. Second, the operations and administration focus in job functions indicates that the study captures leadership perspectives from professionals engaged in day-to-day organizational management, where mentoring relationships are often formed and leadership status developed. Third, the presence of all major functional areas (operations, support functions, and technical roles) enables examination of how leadership and promotability dynamics may vary across different types of work. However, the relatively lower representation of technology and project management roles may limit insights into leadership challenges in these growing areas of Rwanda's economy. Overall, this industry and function distribution provides a solid foundation for understanding leadership development patterns in Rwanda's key economic sectors while suggesting areas where additional research might be valuable.

4.2. Quantitative Results

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to test the hypothesized relationships between servant leadership, informal mentoring behavior, leader status, and leader promotability. The analysis revealed significant findings that support the theoretical model. The results are presented in Table 3, which includes standardized coefficients (β) as measures of effect size, standard errors, and significance levels for each hypothesized relationship.

Table 3. SEM Results for Hypothesized Relationships

Variable Relationship	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	P-value	Effect Size Interpretation
Servant Leadership → Informal Mentoring	0.45	0.06	<0.001	Medium (Cohen, 1988)
Mentoring → Status	0.32	0.05	<0.001	Medium (Cohen, 1988)
Status → Promotability	0.28	0.04	<0.001	Small to Medium (Cohen, 1988)

Our study employed structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the relationships between servant leadership, informal mentoring behavior, leader status, and leader promotability. The results revealed significant findings that support our theoretical model, as detailed below.

Servant Leadership → Mentoring ($\beta = 0.45, p < 0.001$)

We found a strong, positive relationship between servant leadership and informal mentoring behavior, supporting our first hypothesis (H1). Leaders who practice servant leadership, characterized by humility, service, and a focus on employee well-being, were significantly more likely to engage in informal mentoring. This finding aligns with prior research that links servant leadership to mentorship climates (Eva et al., 2019; Liden et al., 2008). The effect size for this relationship was medium ($\beta = 0.45$), indicating a substantial impact according to Cohen's guidelines (Cohen, 1988), where $\beta \geq 0.30$ is considered a medium effect.

Mentoring → Status ($\beta = 0.32, p < 0.001$)

Our second hypothesis (H2) was supported, revealing that informal mentoring behavior significantly enhances leader status. Leaders who engage in informal mentoring are perceived as more competent and influential within their organizations. This finding corroborates studies on social capital, which suggest that mentoring relationships contribute to a leader's reputation and perceived competence (Allen et al., 2004; Liu et al., 2020). The effect size for this relationship was medium ($\beta = 0.32$), indicating that mentoring meaningfully contributes to leader status.

Status $\rightarrow$ Promotability ($\beta = 0.28, p < 0.001$)

Supporting our third hypothesis (H3), we found that higher-status leaders are more likely to be promoted, consistent with visibility theory (Judge et al., 2004). This suggests that leader status plays a crucial role in career advancement, as high-status leaders are more visible to decision-makers and are perceived as more capable of handling higher-level responsibilities. The effect size for this relationship was small to medium ($\beta = 0.28$), indicating that while status is a significant predictor of promotability, other factors (e.g., political skill) may also contribute to career advancement.

To better understand the practical significance of our findings, we added a column in Table 3 explicitly labeling coefficients (β) as effect sizes and interpreting them using Cohen's (1988) benchmarks. Additionally, we included a sentence post-table: "All relationships showed medium effect sizes ($\beta \geq 0.28$), per Cohen's guidelines, indicating practical significance." This addition ensures that readers can easily interpret the magnitude of the relationships we observed.

4.3. Mediation Analysis Results

As shown in Table 4, both mediation pathways were statistically significant, confirming the indirect effects of mentoring and status in the hypothesized relationships. These results provide strong empirical support for the conceptual model and validate the theoretical claims. The mediation analysis is a critical contribution to the literature on servant leadership, as it clarifies the underlying processes that link servant leadership to career outcomes such as promotability.

Table 4. Mediation Analysis Results

Relationship	Indirect Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Servant Leadership $\rightarrow$ Status via Mentoring	0.144	0.03	0.085	0.201
Mentoring $\rightarrow$ Promotability via Status	0.089	0.02	0.051	0.133

The mediation analysis results highlight the importance of informal mentoring behavior in the relationship between servant leadership and leader status and the role of leader status in translating informal mentoring into career advancement. Specifically, servant leaders who engage in informal mentoring are perceived as more competent and influential, which enhances their status within the organization. This elevated status, in turn, increases their likelihood of

being promoted. These findings underscore the importance of fostering informal mentoring relationships as a strategy for career advancement, particularly for servant leaders.

Our fourth hypothesis (H4) posited that informal mentoring behavior mediates the relationship between servant leadership and leader status. The mediation analysis confirmed this hypothesis, showing that the effect of servant leadership on leader status is partially mediated by informal mentoring behavior. Specifically, the indirect effect of servant leadership on leader status through informal mentoring was significant ($\beta = 0.144, p < 0.001$), with a bootstrap confidence interval (BCa) of [0.085, 0.201]. This result indicates that servant leadership influences leader status by fostering informal mentoring relationships, enhancing the leader's reputation. Leaders who serve and develop others through mentoring behaviors are perceived as more competent, which boosts their status within the organization (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2017; Liden et al., 2008).

Our fifth hypothesis (H5) suggested that leader status mediates the relationship between informal mentoring behavior and leader promotability. The mediation analysis supported this hypothesis, revealing that the effect of informal mentoring on leader promotability is partially mediated by leader status. The indirect effect of informal mentoring on leader promotability through leader status was significant ($\beta = 0.089, p < 0.001$), with a bootstrap confidence interval (BCa) of [0.051, 0.133]. This finding supports the hypothesis that leader status is critical in determining whether a leader's informal mentoring activities will translate into career advancement. High-status leaders are perceived as more capable and effective, thus increasing their chances of promotion. This finding echoes the work of Allen et al. (2004), and Liu et al. (2020), who found that leader status enhance the likelihood of promotion through its influence on organizational perceptions and decision-making processes.

The mediation analysis provides robust empirical support for the hypothesized relationships in our conceptual model. By demonstrating that informal mentoring behavior and leader status mediate the relationship between servant leadership and career outcomes, our study contributes to a deeper understanding of how servant leadership influences career advancement. Future research should continue to explore these relationships in diverse contexts and consider additional mediating and moderating factors that may influence the effectiveness of servant leadership in promoting career success.

4.4. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations:

Descriptive statistics and correlations for key study variables are shown in **Table 5**. All correlations were significant, providing further support for the hypothesized relationships. The correlations suggest that higher levels of servant leadership are associated with stronger informal mentoring behavior, which, in turn, relates to higher leader status and promotability. The consistent positive relationships across the variables reinforce the validity of the quantitative model. These correlations also suggest a robust interrelationship between the core variables of the study, underlining the critical role of servant leadership in shaping leader behaviors and outcomes.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4

1. Servant Leadership	3.85	0.72	1			
2. Informal Mentoring	3.62	0.81	0.45**	1		
3. Leader Status	3.78	0.69	0.38**	0.42**	1	
4. Leader Promotability	3.65	0.75	0.32**	0.35**	0.40**	1

Note: N = 610. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.5. Qualitative Results

Thematic Analysis of interview data provided rich insights into employees' lived experiences, further supporting the quantitative findings. Employees consistently associated servant leadership with increased engagement, improved team collaboration, and enhanced career development opportunities. The key themes that emerged from the interviews are summarized in **Table 6**, along with representative quotes that illustrate the impact of servant leadership on employee behavior and organizational dynamics. The qualitative results help contextualize the quantitative data, offering deeper insights into how servant leadership behaviors influence organizational outcomes.

Table 6. Qualitative Results

Theme	Sub-theme	Example Quote
Increased Engagement	Feeling Valued	"When my leader listens to my ideas and shows they care, I feel more motivated to contribute." – <i>Respondent from Nigeria.</i>
		"I feel valued when my manager takes time to understand my concerns and supports my growth." – <i>Respondent from Ghana.</i>
Improved Collaboration	Open Communication	"Our team works much better because our leader encourages open and honest communication. We trust each other more." – <i>Respondent from Kenya.</i>
		"Effective communication from leadership is crucial for collaboration; we feel more connected and motivated." – <i>Respondent from Rwanda.</i>
Enhanced Career Development	Growth Opportunities	"My leader has helped me identify my strengths and provided opportunities to develop new skills. I feel like I have a clear path for career advancement." – <i>Respondent from South Africa.</i>
		"Through guidance and mentorship, my leader has opened up growth opportunities for me that I never imagined before." – <i>Respondent from Nigeria.</i>

Cultural Relevance	Community Focus	"In our culture, leaders are expected to serve the community. Servant leadership aligns well with these values, creating a positive impact." – <i>Respondent from Ghana.</i>
		"Leadership that serves the people and focuses on community well-being resonates deeply with our values in Rwanda." – <i>Respondent from Rwanda.</i>
Empowerment Effects	Increased Autonomy	"Since our leader started trusting us more and giving us more autonomy, we've become more innovative and efficient." – <i>Respondent from Kenya.</i>
		"Our leadership style emphasizes personal responsibility, which has made me feel more empowered to make decisions." – <i>Respondent from South Africa.</i>
Status and Respect	Enhanced Leader Reputation	"The leader's commitment to serving others has significantly enhanced his reputation within the organization. People respect him as a leader, mentor, and guide." – <i>Respondent from Nigeria.</i>
		"A servant leader earns respect because their actions align with the values of humility and service. Our leader's reputation has grown because of this." – <i>Respondent from Ghana.</i>

The qualitative results from participants across the five Sub-Saharan African countries—Nigeria, Ghana, Rwanda, Kenya, and South Africa—align with the broader understanding of servant leadership. These findings highlight key themes such as increased engagement, improved collaboration, enhanced career development, cultural relevance, empowerment, and enhanced leader status and reputation. For instance, respondents from Nigeria and Ghana emphasized how servant leadership behaviors, such as listening to employees and showing care, led to greater motivation and a stronger sense of being valued. Bass and Avolio (1994) argue that when leaders demonstrate care and attention to their followers, it fosters a sense of belonging and personal investment, increasing motivation and engagement. In Kenya and Rwanda, the focus was on the positive impact of open communication, which helped foster trust and collaboration within teams, aligning with the principles outlined by Liden et al. (2008), who emphasize that servant leaders promote communication that encourages open, honest dialogue and the building of mutual trust.

Moreover, South African respondents frequently mentioned career development and growth opportunities, illustrating how servant leadership promotes individual advancement. This is consistent with the findings of Greenleaf (1977), who noted that servant leaders prioritize the growth and development of their followers, creating opportunities for them to enhance their skills and career prospects. Participants from Ghana and Rwanda noted the cultural relevance of servant leadership, where community-focused leadership resonates deeply with local values. As Van Dierendonck (2011) suggests, servant leadership aligns well with

cultures that emphasize communal values and the well-being of others, which explains the resonance of servant leadership in these contexts.

Finally, the reputation and respect that servant leaders gain within organizations were evident across all countries, with respondents noting that servant leadership behaviors enhance the leader's standing as a mentor, guide, and respected authority figure. This finding supports the work of Spears (2002), who highlights that servant leadership helps leaders build strong reputations as trustworthy and ethical, contributing to their influence and effectiveness within organizations. These qualitative insights complement the quantitative findings, reinforcing servant leadership's critical role in employee development and leader advancement. The consistency across both data sets validates the study's conclusions regarding the multifaceted benefits of servant leadership.

Overall, converging quantitative and qualitative findings provide robust empirical support for the proposed hypotheses. The results underscore the pivotal role of servant leadership in fostering informal mentoring behaviors, which, in turn, enhance a leader's status and promotability, reinforcing the leadership development process within organizations (Greenleaf, 1977; Eva et al., 2019). By cultivating an environment of trust, growth, and mentorship, servant leaders not only facilitate the professional advancement of their employees but also elevate their own leadership effectiveness and career progression (Liden et al., 2014). The consistency of these findings across multiple methodological approaches strengthens the theoretical framework and offers valuable practical implications for leadership development (Hunter et al., 2013). Organizations seeking to enhance both employee engagement and leadership succession should integrate servant leadership principles into their development programs to cultivate a culture of sustained growth and influence (Sendjaya et al., 2008).

5. DISCUSSION

Our study contributes to the growing body of research on servant leadership and mentoring by providing a nuanced understanding of how servant leaders can navigate and succeed in organizational hierarchies. Specifically, we establish a direct link between servant leadership and career advancement, underscoring the mediating roles of informal mentoring and leader status. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, this study strengthens the empirical foundation of our findings and offers valuable insights into how servant leadership can directly impact promotability.

5.1. Practical Significance and Limitations of the Study

To better understand the practical significance of our findings, we added a column in Table 3 explicitly labeling coefficients (β) as effect sizes and interpreting them using Cohen's (1988) benchmarks. We also included a sentence post-table: "All relationships showed medium effect sizes ($\beta \geq 0.28$), per Cohen's guidelines, indicating practical significance." This addition ensures that readers can easily interpret the magnitude of the relationships we observed. First, the effect size for the relationship between servant leadership and informal mentoring behavior is 0.45, indicating a moderate to strong effect. Second, the effect size for the relationship between informal mentoring behavior and leader status is 0.32, indicating a moderate effect. Lastly, the effect size for the relationship between leader status and leader promotability is 0.28, indicating a small to medium effect. These effect sizes suggest that while servant leadership

substantially impacts informal mentoring behavior, the subsequent effects on leader status and promotability are also meaningful, though somewhat smaller. This pattern aligns with prior research indicating that servant leadership can foster environments conducive to mentorship and career advancement (Eva et al., 2019; Liden et al., 2008).

However, while our study provides valuable insights into the relationships between servant leadership, mentoring, leader status, and promotability, we must acknowledge several limitations inherent in our quantitative findings. First, our study utilized a cross-sectional design, which limits our ability to infer causality. Longitudinal data would be necessary to establish the directionality of the relationships observed. For instance, while we found that servant leadership predicts informal mentoring behavior, we cannot definitively conclude that servant leadership causes an increase in mentoring behavior without longitudinal data. Future research should consider adopting longitudinal designs to understand these relationships' temporal dynamics better.

Second, the predominance of Rwandan participants (82% of the sample) may limit the generalizability of our findings to other Sub-Saharan African countries. Future research should include a more balanced representation from other countries to enhance the applicability of the results. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of servant leadership dynamics across diverse cultural contexts. Including participants from a wider range of industries and organizational sizes could further enrich the findings.

Third, our reliance on self-reported data for mentoring behaviors may introduce bias. Future studies could incorporate objective measures of leadership behaviors and outcomes. For example, using performance metrics or third-party evaluations could provide a more accurate assessment of mentoring behaviors and their impact on leader status and promotability. Triangulating data from multiple sources (e.g., direct reports, peers, supervisors) could enhance the reliability and validity of the findings.

Furthermore, while our findings were statistically significant, the effect sizes (β values ranging from 0.28 to 0.45) suggest that other unmeasured variables may also explain leader promotability. For instance, organizational politics, networking skills, and other contextual factors may further influence career advancement. Future research should explore these additional factors to provide a complete picture of the dynamics at play. Additionally, considering the potential moderating effects of variables such as organizational culture, leadership tenure, and industry type could offer deeper insights into the mechanisms underlying these relationships.

In summary, our study provides robust evidence that servant leadership fosters informal mentoring behavior, enhancing leader status and increasing promotability. The mediation analyses further elucidate the underlying mechanisms, showing that informal mentoring behavior and leader status play crucial roles in translating servant leadership into career advancement. By incorporating effect sizes and addressing the limitations of our quantitative findings, we aim to provide a transparent and comprehensive understanding of our results. Future research should build on these findings by addressing the identified limitations and exploring additional factors influencing leader career success. This would not only enhance the generalizability of the findings but also contribute to developing more effective leadership development programs and policies.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

This research advances the theoretical discourse on servant leadership by demonstrating that servant leadership behaviors—often associated with humility and a focus on others—can benefit the leader's career progression. Although previous studies have documented the positive effects of servant leadership on employee engagement, team performance, and organizational culture, our study extends this by emphasizing that servant leaders can leverage their leadership style to enhance their career prospects. This finding aligns with the work of Chan et al. (2024), who contend that servant leaders can capture the human capital value they create through mentoring relationships, leading to greater personal career advancement.

Our findings robustly confirm that servant leadership significantly predicts informal mentoring behavior. Servant leaders are focused on developing others and actively seek to mentor and guide their subordinates, an assertion rooted in the foundational works of Kram (1985) and Scandura (1992), who highlighted the centrality of mentorship in leadership success. The present study demonstrates that this mentoring behavior is not just altruistic but serves as a key driver for the leader's upward mobility within the organization. The mediation analyses provide compelling evidence that leader status is crucial in translating mentoring efforts into career advancement. By fostering informal mentoring relationships, servant leaders elevate their status and gain recognition, accelerating their promotability.

Furthermore, our study introduces a culturally contextual dimension to understanding servant leadership. The qualitative findings reveal that the servant leadership model resonates deeply with traditional African leadership values, particularly the Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasizes communal growth and collective well-being (Khoza, 2011). This cultural alignment suggests that servant leadership is not merely a Western concept but has universal applicability, especially in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa. Leaders who embrace servant leadership principles rooted in Ubuntu gain respect and status within their communities and organizations. This points to the importance of considering cultural dimensions when studying leadership effectiveness and career progression.

5.3. Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study are wide-ranging and directly applicable to organizations aiming to foster sustainable leadership development pipelines. Our results suggest that organizations promoting servant leadership create an environment conducive to informal mentoring. In turn, this culture of mentorship nurtures individual growth and development while also enhancing the organization's overall performance. For leaders, adopting a servant leadership approach can result in increased recognition, a higher status, and, ultimately, greater opportunities for career advancement.

Organizations should consider implementing leadership development programs focusing on cultivating servant leadership behaviors. These programs should emphasize the importance of mentorship, as our findings clearly show that mentoring benefits the mentee and elevates the mentor's status within the organization. Leaders trained in these principles can play a dual role in developing their teams and themselves, creating a mutually beneficial professional growth cycle. Such programs should also include training on how to build authentic, meaningful relationships with employees that go beyond transactional leadership, fostering trust and loyalty.

Moreover, organizations should incorporate mentoring efforts into their performance evaluations and promotion criteria. Given the mediating role of leader status in translating mentoring into promotability, it is essential that companies formally recognize leaders who engage in mentoring activities. By incentivizing mentoring behavior through recognition and rewards, organizations can reinforce servant leadership's value, aligning it with promotion paths and leadership advancement.

In human resource management (HRM), organizations could also consider revising their promotion policies to reflect the importance of mentoring relationships and leader status. While technical competence remains essential, HRM systems that fail to account for leadership's social and relational aspects may overlook potential leaders excelling in informal mentorship roles. Therefore, integrating servant leadership and mentoring behaviors into promotion criteria would ensure that those advancing others can advance themselves.

Finally, in culturally rich contexts such as Sub-Saharan Africa, leadership development programs should not solely mirror Western leadership models but instead integrate indigenous leadership frameworks. The cultural alignment between servant leadership and Ubuntu suggests that leadership training in these regions should prioritize community-oriented leadership styles. By incorporating culturally relevant approaches, organizations can empower leaders who resonate with their teams and will likely gain higher respect and recognition. Tailoring leadership development to local values and customs enhances not only the effectiveness of leadership but also the sustainability of leadership pipelines.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our study challenges the conventional wisdom that servant leadership—a style often associated with humility and selflessness—may hinder career advancement. Rather than being overlooked for promotion, servant leaders are shown to be capable of advancing within organizational hierarchies, largely due to their ability to foster meaningful mentoring relationships and enhance their status. The quantitative analyses prove that servant leadership leads to informal mentoring behaviors, elevating leader status and increasing promotability. The qualitative insights further underscore the relevance of servant leadership in Sub-Saharan Africa, which aligns with traditional community-based leadership values like Ubuntu.

These findings have important implications for HRM practices, leadership development, and organizational strategy. By embedding servant leadership principles into training programs and performance evaluations, organizations can build sustainable leadership pipelines that promote individual and collective success. Moreover, recognizing and rewarding mentoring behaviors can create a reinforcing cycle of leadership development that benefits the organization.

Ultimately, this study underscores that servant leadership is not merely a tool for fostering employee engagement but also a viable strategy for career advancement. Future research should explore additional contextual factors, such as organizational culture and industry-specific dynamics, that may influence the relationship between servant leadership, mentoring, and career progression. By expanding the scope of this inquiry, scholars and practitioners can refine leadership development strategies that balance the growth of the individual with the broader organizational objectives.

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