

# **Servant Leadership and Followers' Helping Behavior: A Qualitative Mediation Study in the Higher Educational Context in Palestine**

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## Abstract

*This study aimed to examine the actual concept of servant leadership as one of the relevant leadership styles nowadays. Building on the norms of social exchange theory (SET), the framework to examine the mediating role of perceived organizational support (POS) in the relationship between servant leadership and followers' helping behavior was developed. To achieve this aim, a qualitative method to identify the relationship between servant leadership and the level of helping behavior among the people of higher educational institutions in Palestine was used, based on the viewpoint of education experts. Interviews were conducted with selected members of the top management. The interviews' main goal was to examine the characteristics of servant leadership and the developmental practices as well as to realize the way the employee perceives it, to enhance helping behaviors among employees. By applying the qualitative analysis using Atlas.ti, the causal process was described. The findings revealed that behaviors of servant leadership have direct and positive relationships with followers' helping behaviors. Additionally, it was found that POS served as a mediator in the servant leadership - helping behavior link. Theoretical and managerial implications are suggested.*

**Keywords:** *Leadership, Servant leadership, Perceived Organizational Support, Helping behavior*

## القيادة الخادمة والسلوك المساعد للاتباع: دراسة نوعية للعلاقة السببية في سياق التعليم العالي في فلسطين

### ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى فحص المفهوم الفعلي للقيادة الخادمة كأحد أساليب القيادة ذات الصلة بالوقت الحاضر. استناداً إلى نظرية التبادل الاجتماعي (SET)، عمل الباحث على تطوير إطار الدراسة من أجل فحص الدور الوسيط للدعم التنظيمي المدرك (POS) في العلاقة بين القيادة الخادمة والسلوك المساعد لدى الموظفين. ومن أجل تحقيق هدف الدراسة، استخدم الباحث المنهج النوعي لتحديد العلاقة بين القيادة الخادمة ومستوى السلوك المساعد بين أفراد مؤسسات التعليم العالي في فلسطين. تم إجراء المقابلات مع أعضاء مختارين من الإدارة العليا في مؤسسات التعليم العالي، حيث هدفت هذه المقابلات إلى دراسة خصائص القيادة الخادمة والممارسات التطويرية تجاه موظفيهم، ومستوى إدراكها من قبل الموظفين، ومدى تأثيرها على مستوى السلوك المساعد بينهم. تم توظيف التحليل النوعي واستخدام برنامج *Atlas.ti*، لوصف وتحليل العلاقة السببية بين المتغيرات. وأظهرت النتائج النوعية أن سلوكيات القيادة الخادمة لها علاقات إيجابية ومباشرة مع السلوك المساعد لدى التابعين. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، وُجد أن الدعم التنظيمي المدرك يلعب دور الوسيط بين العلاقات بين القيادة الخادمة والسلوك المساعد لدى التابعين. وأخيراً، تم الخروج بعدد من التوصيات النظرية والعملية الهامة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** القيادة، القيادة الخادمة، الدعم التنظيمي المدرك، السلوك المساعد

## 1. Introduction

In the post-COVID-19 era, universities around the world have become more concerned about their future. Besides, the huge effect of the last pandemic, universities started to think seriously about how they can cope with certain challenges raised by the rapid changes in all aspects of life, such as the revolution in technologies, cultures and economic changes, high competition due to globalization, and continual financial crises, which require from universities to strive hard to improve their efficiency; work for continuous innovation, and create a culture of change; encourage collaboration among their people, and take care of their development and wellbeing; make the best use of the resources and reduce operational waste. Accordingly, leaders who are qualified, empathic, effective, and efficient in all aspects of their institutes became more demanded than ever.

Given that, leaders with appropriate leadership styles would significantly influence the entire organization, which in turn will have a remarkable effect on all of its processes and performance (Collie et al., 2011; Lindahl, 2010). However, Lu et al. (2017), noted that the existing leadership models of universities need to be reviewed as these models are unable to cope rapidly with the above-mentioned rapid changes in the world. For that reason, some universities' leaders have tried to adopt private sector management principles, but they fail to take the special culture, structure, and processes of universities into consideration (Afshar, 2020). Researchers have referred this to the unique shape of the administrations of universities especially in this time, as the COVID-19 era has forced many universities to make serious adjustments to the way they operate and cope with the changes, and take advantage of the new circumstances by looking at it as an opportunity for efficiency and growth (Anft, et al., 2020)

A study carried out to examine the effect of leadership on higher educational institutes by Whitaker, (2013) suggested that the administrations of universities consisting of the president, vice presidents, deans, department heads, and governing board are mostly dominated by academic staff tend to share many similarities, no matter the changing aspects and size of these institutions. On the other hand, in a recent study carried out by Afshar (2021) on implementing new models in the higher education sector from employees' perspectives on how best practices in terms of learning and communication should be in universities, over 2,200 respondents participated in a quantitative survey. 45% of them noted that their institutions already have started to implement new business models.

In the last two decades, several studies have indicated that both transformational and servant leadership can positively influence this kind of educational institute's environment, as they have unique methods for producing leaders suitable for university contexts (Greenleaf, 2002; Gregory *et al.*, 2004). However, Robert Greenleaf (1977) introduced the concept of servant leadership, which emphasizes serving others and serving first. Many researchers have examined

the diverse servant leadership characteristics in varied settings and some have especially focused on educational settings (Russell & Stone, 2002; Shaw & Newton, 2014). Results of these studies reveal a significant effect of managers who exerts characteristics of servant leadership on educational context, and the level of followers' trust in leaders (Black, 2010).

Examining such psychological and developmental processes is essential to realize how servant leaders affect the level of helping behavior among their followers. As literature largely focused on only measuring quantitative data such as testing the direct link between servant leadership and employees' attitudes and behaviors, and few have focused on describing the way they affect the outcomes of their organizations (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016), this study argues that managers who obtain a high level of servant leadership characteristics initially develop the psychological needs of staff, which in turn positively influences their positive attitudes and behavior, particularly the level of their helping behavior, as the bond between leaders and their followers is a complicated phenomenon which may be influenced by numerous personal and situational factors (Northouse, 2018). Intending to fill this research gap, this study builds the argument on POS theory.

For instance, meta-analytic studies by Hoch, et al., (2018) indicated that servant leadership showed a remarkable impact on employees' behaviors and attitudes, compared to different leadership styles. Hence, Hoch et al. (2018) highlighted the need for further studies on servant leadership as a unique leadership style that might be useful for researchers in the leadership field and practitioners to deeply understand several individual and organizational outcomes. Yet, little has been conducted on servant leadership in the university context. Thus, few findings describe the way by which servant leadership influences workplace outcomes.

Consequently, this paper raises a theoretical, methodological, and contextual research gap in the literature on servant leadership, theoretically, by conducting this study exploring the way servant leadership deal with the new circumstances in the era of post-COVID-19, methodologically, by employing qualitative methods, and contextually, by conducting it in an emerging state such as Palestine, which already experiences a variety of issues, particularly in higher education institutions. For instance, Abu Mukh and Salhab (2021) conducted research to identify the difficulties that Palestinian universities encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that these institutions lacked both a clear vision and a long-term strategic plan for how they would address the pandemic's effects. This was because the staff began the implementation process without taking several important factors into account. Long before COVID-19 was created, researchers had issued warnings about ineffective university leadership practices, as evidenced by, for instance, the findings of an analytical descriptive study El Talla and his team (2018) conducted to determine how the leadership standard was applied in practice in comparison to international criteria. The study found that Palestinian higher education institutions still need to make investments in their staff members' development, boost job security, involve them in decision-making, and enhance communication with stakeholders, and design academic programs

that foster an appropriate environment to meet worldwide standards in several criteria, including leadership. This is further reinforced by the findings of Alayoubi et al., (2020) and Haddad, and Al Shobaki, (2021), who stated that strategic leadership is moderately used in Palestine's higher education sector.

## Literature Reviews and Conceptual Frameworks

### 1.1. Servant leadership

Despite the findings of existing literature which declares the significant impact of servant leadership on the outcomes among their followers at the workplace, little attention has been paid by researchers to servant leadership style in the higher educational context. Most of the studies on leadership have been carried out as a response to attributing some senior leadership to unethical behavior, which led researchers to study the ethical leadership style, such as servant leadership (Hoch et al., 2018). Researchers have developed several measures of several characteristics, for example, Liden et al. (2008), have developed the most popular measure for servant leadership which contains seven characteristics (i.e., creating value for the community, empowering supervisees, having conceptual skills, putting followers first, helping followers grow and succeed, healing emotionally, and behaving ethically). Nevertheless, Liden et al. (2015), noted that the short version of SL-28 needs to be examined in different contexts and factors. Consequently, this study employed Liden and others' short-version servant leadership scale developed in 2015, to examine how managers' servant leadership affects lecturers' helping behaviors. Table 1 articulates these attributes.

**Table 1. Description of servant leadership characteristics developed by Spears (1998).**

#	Characteristic	Characteristic Description
1	Listening	Servant leaders are responsive to any problem by actively listening to others, which enables them to understand the perceptions and ideas of their followers and help clarify their point of view.
2	Empathy	Servant leaders seek to recognize and be aware of their followers' needs and demands, and never refuse to listen to them. However, that might make them unable to truly evaluate their performance as good enough.
3	Healing	Servant leaders most often recognize their followers as human beings of great stature, that they have the potential to make themselves and others "as an integrated whole".
4	Awareness	Servant leaders are empowered by overall awareness in addition to self-awareness, which allows them to holistically understand circumstances.

5	Persuasion	Servant leaders depend on discussing and convincing their followers rather than putting pressure on them.
6	Conceptualization	Servant leaders seek to develop their followers' capabilities to "dream big".
7	Foresight	Servant leaders naturally understand the current situations and make use of the lessons from the past, as well as, the probable consequence of a decision they make.
8	Stewardship	Servant leaders take it upon themselves to commit primarily to serving the needs of others.
9	Commitment to the growth of people	Servant leaders nurture their followers' personal, professional needs, besides understanding and satisfying their spiritual needs.
10	Building community	Servant leaders are aware of the importance of building communities and able to set means to create and promote a collective sense that leads to the community among their followers.

## Servant Leadership and Helping Behaviors

In the last three decades, besides the task performance of employees, researchers and practitioners have paid more attention to the level of employees' helping behaviors, as it refers to the behaviors that are voluntarily performed to assist other colleagues with work-related tasks (Podsakoff, et al., 1997). For instance, In the workplace, helping a colleague understand an unfamiliar computer application, fixing a machine with trouble, and helping coworkers solve problems are all examples of voluntary or spontaneous acts happening in the workplace that are usually taken for granted. However, these examples of helping behaviors are important for smooth action in the workplace and have been positively associated with different organizational outcomes. Helping behavior, also termed organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), is "an individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization" (Organ, 1988). In Particular, OCB-I references the interpersonal helping behavior which is directed toward coworkers. It is said to include assisting coworkers with work despite if it is not a part of formal job requirements, i.e task-focused OCB-I, in addition to praising coworkers when they perform well or lifting coworkers' spirits when they are low-spirit, i.e., person-focused OCB-I. While OCB-O refers to the helping behavior directed toward the organization where the employee works (Settoon & Mossholder, 2002).

As given in literature that leadership is a vital antecedent to different employee outcomes, especially, employee satisfaction which also leads to employee helping behaviors, the argument

of this study was built upon the findings of previous research and assumed that leaders who exert the characteristics of servant leadership would be able to increase the level of employee satisfaction and inspire them to be associated with their organization and colleagues (Shah, et al., 2018; Ahmed, et al., 2018). Moreover, leaders who are servants would be having a higher level of moral differentiation than any other leadership style in terms of sacrificing and being unselfish toward subordinates' needs and demands (Parolini, 2007). Literature in servant leadership proposed a varying set of characteristics. Van Dierendonck (2011), provides the key characteristics that consist of accountability, empowerment, humility, stewardship, and standing back. Using SET as a foundation, employees' exchange socio-emotional and economic motivations, which may be used to assess employee perceptions and behavior toward their organizations. Employees typically form broad opinions on how much their organizations acknowledge their efforts and are concerned about their well-being (Kottke and Sharafinski, 1988). And since supervisor serves as an agent of the organization, their behaviors would be seen as indicators of organizational support. Thus, the researchers proposed that helping behavior among employees toward their colleagues would be inspired by perceiving the behaviors of their leaders. Accordingly, leaders who show characteristics of servant leadership are more likely to inspire their subordinates to boost their performance and their helping behavior, as they tend to reciprocate the assistance they received from the organization and leader. Thus, the researcher proposes the following:

***Proposition 1: obtaining a high level of servant leadership characteristics would positively help employees exert a high level of helping behaviors.***

## **1.2. Servant Leadership and POS**

Glampetro and others (1998), state that previous literature related to servant leadership has found that servant leaders display a sustained and altruistic commitment to helping their followers grow. Furthermore, they involve subordinating their objectives to the benefit of the team and the organization to which they belong. Accordingly, servant leaders embody many of the team's desirable qualities, characteristics and elements, and are often the most successful leaders. Therefore, they are seen as prototypes representing the main elements of the team and the most desirable elements related to it. (Yoshida, 2013). Building on the idea that servant leadership philosophy, which emphasizes acting morally and engaging in followers' growth, would be more successful in assisting people in growing and succeeding and winning their trust. (Brohi, Jantan, Sobia, & Pathan, 2018), servant leaders undertake the personal and professional development of all individuals in their teams; they assess the training needs which contribute to an understanding of the developmental needs of the followers, so they will be able to effectively perform their jobs. In addition, servant leaders can define their vision and set plans that contribute to helping them attain this vision. Moreover, they seek to create a dynamic environment that fosters a high level of interaction among employees in the organization (Kashyap & Rangnekar, 2016).



According to Larry C. Spears (2010), there are 10 most important characteristics of servant leaders; they include listening, empathy, healing; commitment to the growth of people, building community conceptualization, self-awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, and stewardship. Leaders who effectively communicate and listen to their followers and seek to understand their idea and thoughts will serve them more effectively. Therefore, leaders must develop their listening skills to get their followers to pay full attention to what they say and to their body language; not to interrupt them before they deliver their message, and then provide them with appropriate feedback. Additionally, leaders are empathetic and tend to make sure to create a healthy workplace that leads people to be more satisfied and engaged with their organizations. Thus, servant leadership would increase followers' sense of confidence, which will help them build a favorable opinion of their managers' leadership style. Consequently, the researcher proposed that:

***Proposition 2: obtaining a high level of servant leadership characteristics would positively increase the level of POS.***

### **1.3. POS and Helping Behaviors**

Due to their perception as company representatives, when employees receive support for their personal and professional development from their managers or the organization as a whole, they are more likely to return the favor by producing favorable results. This shift in power from employer to employee is dependent on both SET and reciprocity theory (Dries, 2013). Employees who are satisfied, committed, devoted, and feel engaged and supported at the workplace are more likely to exhibit both task and contextual performance, which results in both helping behaviors among their coworkers in the organization as well as contributing to the overall organizational performance of the organization (Abuowda, 2015). In light of this, the researcher proposes the following proposition:

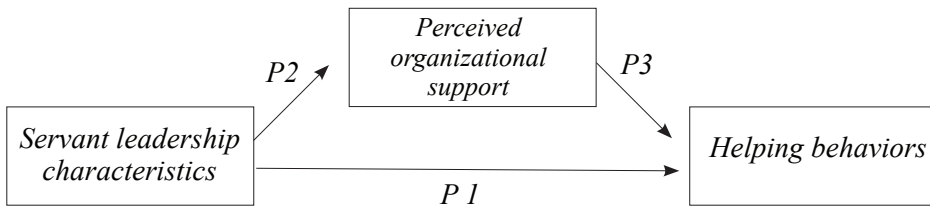
***Proposition 3: high level of POS would be positively associated with a high level of employee helping behaviors.***

### **1.4. The process by which servant leadership boost helping behaviors**

Based on the aforementioned argument, it makes sense to suggest that POS is a psychological intermediary via which the characteristics of servant leadership influence the helping behaviors among employees. Based on the principles of SET employees tend to display a high level of commitment and obligation, a high degree of trust in their leaders and organization, and strive to stay longer working with leaders and their organizations (Wang, *et al.*, & He, W. 2019),

additionally, according to the literature review paper of Parris and Peachey (2013) managers who exhibit servant leadership characteristics would be able to enhance their followers' POS by giving them authority, acting morally and constructively, and putting their followers first (Huning, T., Hurt, K., & Frieder, R.,2020). Therefore, followers will react favorably by participating in more activities, which in turn spur excellent performance and a rise in helping behaviors. Consequently, the researcher states the following proposition:

***Proposition 4: Servant leadership characteristics would affect the level of POS. This will affect the way the employees perform, especially their helping behaviors to each other and their organization.***



**Figure 1: Qualitative mediation model depicting the causal path between Servant leadership characteristics and employee helping behaviors.**

## Research Methods

### Participants

19 interviews in total were gathered between February 2022 and June 2020. Participants were chosen based on their positions in the universities. Interviews were conducted with the president, one vice president, six deans, two directors of scientific centers, five heads of academic departments, and five heads of administrative departments from Al Istiqlal, Al-Najah, Al-Azher, Gaza University, and Al-Quds Open University. Al-Quds Open University has a different strategy than other institutions, yet it largely operates in the same field. and including it in the population is appropriate as long as the respondents have a similar socioeconomic background. Thus, the chosen individuals were involved in academic and administrative interventions with universities and students and had substantial field experience.

### 1: Participants' Profile Table

#	University	# of participants
1	Al Istiqlal University	5
2	Al-Najah University	4
3	Al-Azher University	3
4	Al-Quds Open University	4
5	Gaza University	3
	Total	19

## Interviews

To produce thorough accounts of leaders' experiences, semi-structured interviews were utilized to meet the study's objectives. Questions and follow-up questions directly related to the study's goals were asked throughout the interviews. (Roulston, 2010). The interviews took place during the second semester of 2022, where the researcher was highly adaptable with the study sample, interviewing them in various methods to facilitate the interview process and get the required and necessary responses. The guide was designed to describe the servant leadership characteristic of participants (e.g., "How did they deal with their followers?"), and to learn about how they provide their followers with developmental and supportive actions and "how do they lead to achieving helping behavior among their followers? Upon completion of the interviews, the transcribed pages were coded accordingly.

## Analysis

The qualitative data analysis and research software ( Atlas. ti, version 22.0.5), was used to code and evaluate the respondents' responses. The information received from the participants concerning the three constructs was described using a group which reflect the constructs and a code for their dimensions. First, the interview data were labelled and categorized through coding the servant leadership's characteristics, as well as, the dimensions of helping behavior, and one code for POS. To properly portray the data, the group was then created by including each code. The final coding system comprised 17 areas related to servant leadership characteristics, POS, helping behaviors, and other pertinent issues that emerged throughout the semi-structured interviews. A construct could have anything from 3 to 12 codes. The researcher then discussed themes relating to how leaders interact with their followers and how they view the performance of their followers, particularly when it comes to taking on additional roles or being helpful.

The data were also used in a mediation process to identify a potential mediating function for POS in the relationship between servant leadership and helping behavior. The researcher used the Atlas.ti software to follow the relationships between the constructs to determine causal links.

Each segment of data within a link was examined for a direct or indirect causal process after some linkages were allocated. Since linkages reflected direct relationships with results and all other connections represented action processes, their use was especially helpful for distinguishing the conceptual and action processes. Finally, the servant leadership characteristics affect employee helping behaviors through perceptions of the support directed toward them from their leaders and organization, and the model facilitates discussion of how this causal relationship occurs. A qualitative mediation model, as shown in figure 2, has been created using Atlas.ti software to clarify the mechanism.

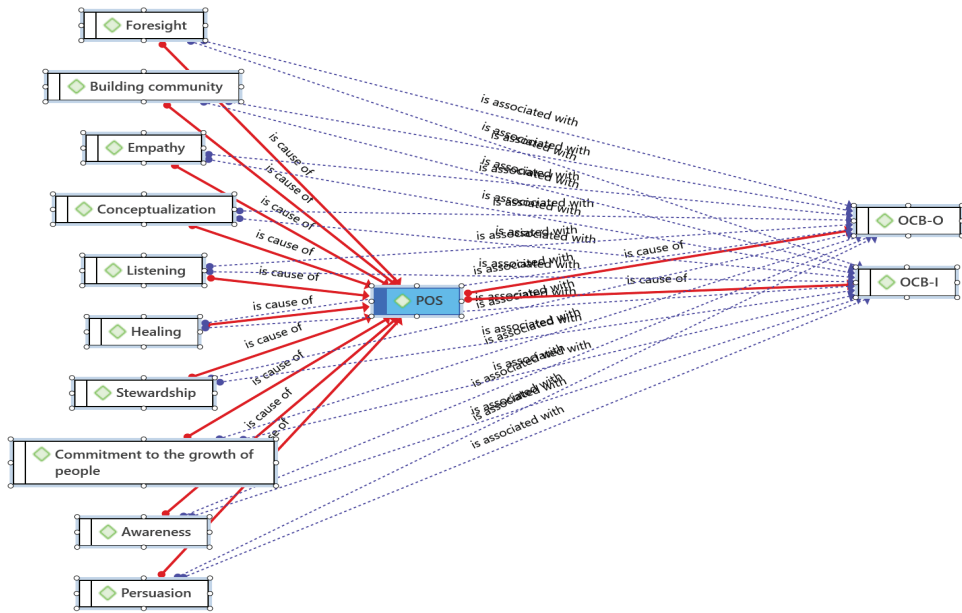
## Findings

**2: Code co-occurrence table Table**

Servant Leadership Characteristics			POS	OCB	
				OCB-I	OCB-O
			57	44	40
Awareness		29	8 (0.10)	6 (0.10)	1 (0.01)
Building community		40	20 (0.26)	10 (0.14)	10 (0.14)
Commitment to the growth of people		43	30 (0.43)	14 (0.19)	14 (0.20)
Conceptual ion		31	10 (0.13)	5 (0.07)	7 (0.11)
Empathy		18	10 (0.15)	5 (0.09)	4 (0.07)
Foresight		23	9 (0.13)	4 (0.06)	5 (0.09)
Healing		31	11 (0.14)	11 (0.17)	15 (0.27)
Listening		28	11 (0.15)	6 (0.09)	6 (0.10)
Persuasion		27	5 (0.06)	7 (0.11)	10 (0.18)
Stewardship		32	8 (0.10)	0.23))14	13 (0.22)

Table 2 code co-occurrence matrix displays the frequencies of correspondence for ten servant leadership characteristics, including awareness, community building, conceptual, empathy, foresight, healing, listening, and stewardship, for both POS and OCB. The table demonstrates that participants' dedication to the growth of people was most frequently followed by mentions of building community, while mentions of empathy were least common. OCB-I has the highest level of stewardship in terms of the frequencies of correspondence with other factors, whereas POS has the lowest. In terms of persuasion, OCB-O outperforms OCB-I and POS, with POS having the lowest levels. As for listening, POS has the highest levels, whereas OCB-I and OCB-O have the same lower level. The highest levels of healing have been attained by OCB-O, while OCB-I and POS have the lowest levels. Between OCB-I has the lowest amount of foresight, and POS, which has the highest level, there is a sizable gap. In comparison to the other two, POS empathy has attained the highest levels, while OCB-O has the lowest. POS, which has the greatest level,

and OCB-I and OCB-O, which both have the same lowest level, differ significantly in their dedication to the growth of people. Between OCB-I, OCB-O, and POS, community development appears to be extremely different; POS results were more than twice as good as those of OCB-I and OCB-O. In a similar vein, OCB-O awareness levels are the lowest and POS awareness levels are the highest.



**Figure 2: Atlas.ti's Qualitative network showing the causal links between the characteristics of servant leadership, POS and employee helping behaviors.**

The qualitative mediation model was examined in two different stages, as shown in figure 2. Firstly, when examining the direct correlation between servant leadership characteristics and employee helping behavior, the findings revealed that the degree to which employees practised these characteristics were correlated with the degree of their helping behaviors. This finding supports Proposition 1, which states that having a high level of servant leadership characteristics would benefit employees in encouraging them to exert a high degree of helping behavior. Secondly, to determine the causal relationship, two further direct relationships between servant leadership and POS and servant leadership and helping behavior were studied. The results supported propositions two and three, according to which a high level of servant leadership characteristics would raise POS and a high level of POS would be positively correlated with a high level of employee helping behavior. Finally, proposition four was looked at based on the

approval of both propositions two and three, and the mediation model was accepted, according to which servant leadership characteristics would influence the level of POS. This will have an impact on how the employees behave, particularly how they treat one another and the company.

Two distinct phases of the qualitative mediation model's analysis were conducted. The direct relationship between servant leadership and employees' helping behavior was first investigated by the researcher. The findings revealed that servant leadership's characteristics enhance the levels of helping behaviors of the employees, which in turn supports the acceptance of proposition one, which states that *"obtaining a high level of servant leadership characteristics contributes to enhancing employees and helping them positively to exert a high level of helping behaviors"*. To pinpoint the mechanism process, two additional direct connections between servant leadership and POS as well as between servant leadership and helping behavior were examined. Finally, proposition four, which states that *"Servant leadership characteristics would affect the level of POS. This will affect the way the employees perform, especially their helping behaviors to each other and their organization"*, was examined based on the acceptance and the approval of both proposition 2, *"obtaining a high level of servant leadership characteristics would positively increase the level of POS"*, and proposition 3, *"high levels of POS would be positively associated with high levels of an employee helping behaviors"*

## Discussion

The results showed that both characteristics were dominant and mentioned by the majority of participants, which seems to be the most indicators of the importance of servant leadership roles that lead to POS and OCB. These findings relate to the abilities of leaders to work on the growth of their followers and strive to build a healthy community. These findings are consistent with the findings of Alayoubi *et al.*, (2020) which show that (73.15%) of respondents think that universities in Palestine practice high levels of strategic leadership, while it is at a moderate level with regards to strategic direction and investing in the capabilities and talents of employees.

Furthermore, listening is a skill that leaders commonly use to communicate with and understand their followers. A lower level of practising listening, as suggested by servant leadership characteristics, is also indicated by the majority of participants' observation that they frequently hold formal meetings, such as the board of deans and committees, to interact with the issues faced by their staff. They also rarely mentioned different mechanisms for identifying the staff's point of view at lower levels. And this result is aligned with the result of research conducted by Salameh and alsofy (2021) who investigated the link between transformational behavior and organizational silence in universities in Gaza. They recommended that university leaders adopt an appropriate leadership style to reduce the phenomenon of organizational silence among people of universities.

Participants claim that they regularly work with their followers as a community in terms of healing characteristics, but empathy was the characteristic that received the least attention among others. This may be because participants tended to associate empathy with the followers' individual needs rather than taking the time to evaluate their followers' performance and try to comprehend their developmental needs and demands. And one of the important findings of this study is that higher education leaders are keen to know and be aware of all circumstances through various methods, stating that they practice a high level of communication and discussion with people in charge to achieve the right decision. In addition, they tend to express their vision and convince others to perform well. However, participants did not clearly explain how they inspired others and contributed to expanding their expectations, which may indicate that this characteristic is not systematically practised. This finding might be supported by the results of Dahaiz and Gali (2018) study which examined the link between servant leadership and organizational commitment among employees in universities in Palestine, and found that the degree of practising servant leadership was moderate.

Participants also stated that they naturally benefit from previous lessons and information provided on the current process, and take them into account when making decisions. However, participants have not explained how they use this information or how they analyze and manage it, as this could indicate that there are no clear common standers and tools used to do so, which might be supported by El-Talla and his colleagues' research (2018) who studied the reality of applying leadership standard in universities in Palestinian with accordance to the international quality models, and recommended that leaders of universities have to raise their awareness of international quality standards to cope with the certain issues may they face. Concerning the characteristics of stewardship, some participants stated that they tended to go beyond their interests in the interests of others. Participants also emphasized that they tend to articulate vision and values with their followers to lead by example towards their colleagues, students, and the university.

To sum up, when leaders show appropriate characteristics, they would be positively valued by their followers for their dedication to supporting themselves and their organization, particularly when coping with unusual circumstances. Employees willing to play an additional role would contribute to organizational success. When considering factors increasing the level of helping behavior among employees and not related to the leader characteristics, the employee considers the action taken towards their personal development in evaluating their leaders, since the leaders are seen as agents of the organization itself.

## Research Implications

From a practical viewpoint, this study has several important implications. In Palestine, universities must enhance the process of decisions making through empowering the collective bodies which are mostly dominated by members who were appointed due to their academic titles and scholarly efforts by people-oriented leadership who are eligible and able to make the right decisions and carry out the responsibilities. As leaders may adopt more leadership characteristics which may lead to better individual outcomes, thus the overall organizational performance, and that through building trust, effectively communicating with people, and building strong relations to enhance the loyalty of people. They also have to empower, and support their followers and encourage them by fostering good behaviors that help in developing their followers, and facilitate achievements of the tasks assigned to them.

As servant leadership characteristics consist of both learned behavior and innate traits, universities are recommended to carry out different activities such as training workshops, meetings and seminars that might be useful for all aspects and levels of management to enhance their abilities to empower and develop their subordinates and peers, besides, adopting effective communication strategies, especially to deal with a complex situation that might result in some crises like what happened during the covid-19 pandemic. Along with meeting their professional needs, employees expect to receive equal treatment.

Nevertheless, other factors might also weaken the link between servant leadership and helping behavior among employees. There might be an unclear definition of tasks assigned to the followers, which primarily do not enforce power. These aspects were discussed with the participants in this study and were also increased by distance work that the universities were forced to practice during the covid-19 pandemic, which is attributed to long working hours including the time to learn and adapt to working from home, which in turn create more pressure, and thus, more stress. Therefore, universities in Palestine are also recommended to set a clear and realistic plan to enhance a better work-life balance and reduce pressure by providing employees with their demand and needs of the necessary support to develop their capabilities and skills thus their readiness to meet different kinds of circumstances and consequences.

## Limitations of and Directions for Research

As the participants in the interview of this research were from the top management and they were asked to evaluate themselves, they may have felt somehow pressured to do so. However, research bias in the interviews was managed by asking semi-structured open-ended questions. And then, the data collected via interviews were revised to achieve better results. Furthermore, the aim of this study was not to generalize the findings of a quantitative study, but rather to gain an in-depth understanding of how servant leadership boosts helping behavior among employees.



Future research employing a quantitative method may conform to the result of this study and provide empirical evidence that contributes to generalizing these findings to the higher education sector and other sectors. Moreover, as organizations continue to adopt the characteristics of servant leadership, this research may advise future researchers to study the link between servant leadership and other follower's outcomes in different contexts, using comparative to handle some of the study limitations and provide a better understanding when and how servant leaders influence the outcomes of their followers and organizations.

## Conclusion

A qualitative study was conducted to explore the developmental mechanism, such as POS integrated with servant leadership characteristics, which could inspire employees to show more helping behavior to others. Servant leadership theory and SET were used to achieve the aims of this study. Findings, which revealed the relationship between characteristics of servant leadership and employee helping behavior, were mediated by POS. To sum up, the study determined that servant leadership was moderately practised by top management, and that the universities' administration overall emerged to be significant "servant". In addition, the results revealed that employee helping behavior is impacted by servant leadership due to several characteristics. Employees practice more helping behaviors when leaders pay more attention to their opinions, empower them by enhancing their responsibility and autonomy, recognize their good performance by acknowledging and appreciating their contributions, and encourage best practices. Furthermore, seeking immediate feedback from their followers contributes to better performance. Finally, the results of this study provide essential insight that servant leadership characteristics might be an effective leadership style in boosting wanted employees' outcomes, persuading a high level of helping behaviors among people of higher educational context.

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