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Servant leadership and work engagement: Exploring the mediation role of affective commitment and job satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES: As organizations seek effective ways to lead in a dynamic world, servant leadership will likely remain relevant. Servant leaders focus on serving others and nurturing the growth of employees to create positive work environments. However, there still exists a gap in the literature on the link between servant leadership and work engagement. Thus, this study aims to investigate the relation between servant leadership and work engagement by exploring the mediating role of affective commitment and job satisfaction.

METHODS: Using a purposive sampling process, self-administered questionnaires are distributed to 154 employees working in Central Java – Indonesia public health institution from March to June 2023. Partial least squares-structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 3.0 software is utilized to analyze the data.

FINDINGS: The results indicate that servant leadership has a significant direct effect on affective commitment (β=0.321, t-statistic = 3.226, p<0.05) and job satisfaction (β=0.429, t-statistic = 5.556, p<0.05). Furthermore, it is found that affective commitment (β=0.527, t-statistic = 8.518, p<0.05) and job satisfaction (β=0.306, t-statistic = 4.275, p<0.05) significantly affect work engagement. This study, upon further investigation, reveals that affective commitment (β=0.170, t-statistic = 3.079, p<0.05) and job satisfaction (β=0.131, t-statistic = 3.179, p<0.05) significantly mediate the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement.

CONCLUSION: The results from PLS-SEM analysis reveal no direct relationship between servant leadership and work engagement. Additionally, the roles of affective commitment and job satisfaction are found to mediate the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement of employees in public health institution. When employees are satisfied and feel emotionally connected to their leader and organization, they are more likely to find their work meaningful and enjoyable, leading to higher levels of work engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of leadership in modern organizations is a dynamic and multifaceted process in response to changing business environments, technological advancements, and shifts in organizational structures. Successful leaders can navigate the complexities of the modern business landscape (Hayes, 2020) while prioritizing and empowering their employees to achieve individual and collective success (Udin, 2023b). Effective leadership is crucial for public health organizations to successfully navigate challenges (Apornak, 2021; Velthuis *et al.,* 2018) and protect the well-being of the communities they serve (Mousavi *et al.,* 2021). When leaders provide a clear vision for the organizations, it can lead to clarity among employees and hinder progress. Also, leaders who are slow to adapt (Kozlowski *et al.,* 2008; Udin, 2023a) can hinder the institution's ability to respond effectively to emerging health threats. Therefore, to address these issues, public health institutions should focus on developing leaders with strong leadership skills and fostering a culture of open communication for maintaining standards and driving continuous improvement. Indonesia's public health institutions play a vital role in addressing the complex health challenges facing the nation. While progress has been made, there is still much work to be done to ensure equitable access to healthcare and promote overall well-being. By seizing opportunities and addressing these challenges, Indonesia can continue to improve the quality of life and health of its people in the years to come. Thus, applying servant leadership principles (i.e., serving and empowering others) can be highly beneficial for addressing complex health challenges and improving the overall effectiveness of these institutions. Servant leaders, in essence, emphasize a strong sense of empowering and supporting their employees to reach their full potential (Karatepe *et al.,* 2020), which in turn contributes to the overall success of the organization. However, since there has been significant research on the topic of servant leadership and its positive impact on various organizational outcomes, there still exists a gap in the literature when it comes to fully understanding the link between Servant Leadership (SL) and Work Engagement (WE). Numerous empirical studies have emerged regarding the contradictory findings of SL on employee WE. SL, in one side, has a direct positive impact on WE (Rabiul *et al.,* 2023; Rahal and Farmanesh, 2022; Sims *et al.,* 2021). SL places a strong emphasis on the growth and development of employees. When employees are offered opportunities for skill enhancement and career progression, they are more likely to be engaged in their work. However, on another side, Christianto (2021), Shim *et al.* (2021), Srimulyani (2021) found that SL has no direct effect on WE. To navigate these contradictory findings, based on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, this study proposes the mediator variables (i.e., Affective Commitment (AC) and Job Satisfaction (JS) to link SL and employee WE. Higher AC (Kobayashi *et al.,* 2020) and JS (Aboramadan *et al.,* 2021) provide insights into how SL practices contribute to the greater WE.

Literature review and hypotheses development
Job demands-resources theory

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory serves as a conceptual framework employed in the field of organizational behavior for elucidating the interplay between job characteristics, employee well-being, and work-related outcomes (Bakker *et al.,* 2014). The JD-R model was first introduced by Demerouti *et al.* (2001) and has gained widespread recognition in research and practice to create healthier work environments. Within the JD-R model, there are two broad categories of factors in the workplace: job demands and job resources. These factors exert substantial influence on shaping employee JS, engagement, and overall performance (De Carlo *et al.,* 2016). Job demands refer to the physical, psychological, and social aspects of a job that require sustained physical and psychological effort. Job demands include time pressure, role ambiguity, and interpersonal conflicts. High job demands can lead to stress, burnout, and decreased well-being. On the contrary, job resources encompass the spanning physical, psychological, and social elements of a job, that can assist employees in attaining their work objectives and fostering their overall well-being. Job resources include supervisor support, coworker relationships, job autonomy, skill variety, and opportunities for growth and development. When employees have access to sufficient job resources, they are more likely to experience positive emotions, higher WE, and a sense of accomplishment to improve JS and higher performance (Bakker and

Demerouti, 2008).

Work engagement

Work Engagement (WE) refers to a positive and energetic state of mind (Bakker and Albrecht, 2018) that employees experience when they are fully immersed in their work activities. Engaged employees are not only committed to their job roles (Singh, 2022) but are also focused and motivated to beyond in their efforts. WE is characterized by high levels of dedication, energy, and absorption in one's work, leading to increased productivity, JS (Yandi and Havidz, 2022), and overall well-being. Key components of WE, according to Schaufeli and Bakker (2010), include (a) vigor (i.e., a high level of energy and enthusiasm an employee brings to their work to effectively accomplish their tasks); (b) dedication (i.e., being strongly committed to one's work and finding meaning in it); (c) absorption (i.e., being fully engrossed in one's tasks and losing track of time while working). Engaged employees often have a high level of autonomy and encounter a sense of flow, wherein the challenges of their tasks are balanced by their skills, leading to a rewarding experience.

Servant leadership

Servant Leadership (SL) is a leadership style that underscores and emphasizes the leader's primary role as a servant to their employees and organization. SL is popularized by Greenleaf (1970) in his essay "*The Servant as Leader*". Rather than focusing solely on their authority and control, servant leaders prioritize the well-being and growth of their team members, helping them achieve their full potential and contributing to the overall success of the organization. The key dimensions of SL according to Greenleaf (1970) include (a) stewardship (i.e., leaders view themselves as stewards of their organizations and the well-being of their employees); (b) listening (i.e., leaders become a good listener to the needs and concerns of their employees); (c) empathy (i.e., leaders are able to understand the feelings and perspectives of their employees, and demonstrate genuine care for their well-being); (d) healing (i.e., leaders promote emotional and spiritual healing among their employees to creating a nurturing environment for recovering challenges); (e) awareness (i.e., leaders

possess a high level of self-awareness to understand their own strengths and weaknesses); (f) persuasion (i.e., leaders use persuasion to guide and convince their employees of the right course of action based on shared values); (g) conceptualization (i.e., leaders are capable of thinking beyond day-to-day tasks to conceptualize the bigger picture and considering long-term consequences); (h) foresight (i.e., leaders have the ability to anticipate potential outcomes for navigating challenges); (i) commitment to the growth of others (i.e., leaders are committed to the personal and professional growth of their employees); (j) building community (i.e., leaders strive to create a sense of community to promote a culture of mutual respect). SL aims to create an environment where employees feel valued, motivated, and empowered to reach their fullest potential (Canavesi and Minelli, 2022). Servant leaders foster trust within their employees through approachable communication to encourage open discussions, idea-sharing, and collaboration. Servant leaders emphasize and focus on serving others and promoting their personal and professional growth. Thus, numerous studies on SL have shown a range of positive impacts on individuals, teams, and organizations. SL is related to WE (Khan *et al.,* 2021; Ozturk *et al.,* 2021; Zeeshan *et al.,* 2021; Zhou *et al.,* 2022), JS (Al-Asadi *et al.,* 2019; Ozturk *et al.,* 2021; Zargar *et al.,* 2019), and AC (Bai *et al.,* 2023; Clarence *et al.,* 2021; Ghasemy and Frömbling, 2022; Ng, 2022) of employees. Employees under servant leaders often demonstrate greater emotional attachment to the organization. When leaders exhibit care and support, employees are more likely to identify with the organization's values and goals. Within the JD-R model, SL serves as a critical job resource that enhances employees' engagement (Bao *et al.,* 2018), ultimately leading to higher levels of AC. By providing the necessary support and opportunities for growth, servant leaders create an environment that nurtures employees' emotional attachment to the organization. Therefore,

H1: SL has a significant positive effect on WE
H2: SL has a significant positive effect on JS
H3: SL has a significant positive effect on AC

Affective commitment

Affective Commitment (AC) refers to an employee's identification and emotional attachment

(Evanschitzky *et al.,* 2006) with their organization. Employees with high AC have a genuine emotional attachment towards their organization, where they experience a sense of pride, satisfaction, and happiness in being associated with the organization. AC is one of the three organizational commitment components (Meyer and Allen, 1991), and the other two being continuance commitment (based on perceived costs of leaving) and normative commitment (based on a sense of obligation). AC is considered particularly important because it reflects a genuine desire to stay with the organization due to positive feelings with its values and goals. By fostering AC (Mercurio, 2015), organizations can create a productive workplace that benefits everyone involved. AC in JD-R model acts as a job resource that positively influences WE. By fostering positive emotions and a sense of resilience, AC contributes to an engaged workforce, ultimately benefiting both employees and the organization. Employees with AC tend to be more dedicated to their jobs. Ly (2023), Jia-Jun and Hua-Ming (2022) found that AC positively and significantly improves WE. When employees are emotionally invested in the organization, they are more likely to be engaged in their work, contribute innovative ideas, and put in discretionary effort to achieve the organization's goals. Thus,

H4: AC has a significant positive effect on WE

AC encourages employees to build strong relationships with their colleagues, leaders and overall organization. This can lead to improved teamwork collaboration, resulting in higher productivity and better outcomes (Semedo *et al.,* 2016; Udin *et al.,* 2022). AC significantly mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and WE (Ly, 2023). Leaders who demonstrate respect and support for their employees can foster emotional attachment among employees to contribute positively to the organization's success. By showing empathy and fostering a positive work environment, servant leaders cultivate AC. When employees have a high level of emotional ties to the organization, they are more likely to be engaged in their work, contribute innovative ideas, and go beyond their basic job requirements. Therefore,

H5: AC significantly mediates the relationship between SL and WE

Job satisfaction

Job Satisfaction (JS) refers to an individual's overall cognitive and emotional evaluation of their job (Zhu, 2013). JS reflects how content, fulfilled, and pleased an employee is with their job (Batura *et al.,* 2016) and various aspects related to it. Employees who experience JS often report feelings of happiness, fulfillment, and contentment in their roles (Djastuti *et al.,* 2019). This emotional state is influenced by factors such as the nature of the work, opportunities for personal growth, and relationships with peers, colleagues and supervisors (Maryati *et al.,* 2019). Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory is often referenced in this context. According to this theory, JS is closely tied to the fulfillment of basic needs (like security, belongingness, and esteem) and higher-level needs (such as growth and self-actualization) through the job itself (Kian *et al.,* 2014). Jobs that offer opportunities for skill development and flexibility are more likely to contribute to higher level of employee satisfaction. JS in JD-R model functions as a crucial job resource that positively impacts WE (Wirawan *et al.,* 2020). The positive emotions and psychological resources associated with JS contribute to employees' willingness to invest themselves fully in their work, leading to enhanced overall well-being. JS serves as a foundational element that significantly nurtures WE (Garg *et al.,* 2018; Park and Johnson, 2019; Nemțeanu *et al.,* 2022; Zang and Feng, 2023). When employees feel satisfied with their jobs, they approach their work with a positive attitude to promote a conducive environment for WE. Also, when employees find their work enjoyable, they are naturally inclined to immerse themselves in their tasks, leading to higher levels of WE. Thus,

H6: JS has a significant positive effect on WE

JS often arises when employees perceive that their values, goals, and interests align with the organization. SL, therefore, can contribute to JS by providing employees with a sense of belonging and recognition (Al-Asadi *et al.,* 2019). When employees perceive that their leaders genuinely care about their well-being, it fosters a positive emotional connection to their job wholeheartedly (Farrington and Lillah, 2019). Also, employees who perceive their leaders as servant leaders are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs, which, in turn, leads to

increased WE (Aboramadan *et al.,* 2021). Thus,

H7: JS significantly mediates the link between SL and WE

According to previous studies, there still exists a gap in the literature on the link between SE and WE. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the relation between SE and WE by exploring the mediating role of AC and JS. Employees who experience SL are more likely to feel valued and appreciated, which in turn, leads to higher AC and JS because they become emotionally attached to a leader who genuinely cares about their well-being. When employees are happy and emotionally attached with their job, they are more likely to put in discretionary effort and be fully absorbed in their tasks. This current study was conducted in Central Java – Indonesia from March to June 2023.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
Sampling and data collection
This study employs a quantitative approach. Using a purposive sampling process, self-administered questionnaires were distributed to 255 employees working in public health institution in Central Java – Indonesia from March to June 2023, and 154 usable questionnaires were returned (with a response rate of 60.4%). The findings indicate that among the total sample, 106 respondents (68.8%) are women, while 48 (31.2%) are men. The data also suggests a higher participation of women in various activities compared to men. Additionally, the distribution of work experience reveals that individuals with 1-3 years of experience constituted 46 respondents (29.9%), whereas those with 4-6 years and over 7 years of experience accounted for 57 (37%) and 51 (33.1%) respondents, respectively.

Measures
The proposed model consists of four constructs, namely SL, AC, JS and WE. SL is measured by the 13-item scale adapted from Ehrhart (2004), Jaramillo *et al.* (2009), Choudhary *et al.* (2013). An example item is "I feel a sense of 'ownership' for my supervisor". AC is assessed using 5 items adapted from Vandenberghe *et al.* (2004), Astuty and Udin (2020). An example item is "I am proud to be valuable part of the organization". JS is measured by the six-item scale, which is adapted from Torlak

and Kuzey (2019), Yu et al. (2020). An example item is "I am very satisfied with my job". WE is assessed using 6 items adapted from Schaufeli *et al.* (2008), Fletcher (2016), Udin *et al.* (2022). An example item is "I feel strong and vigorous at my job". The survey comprises 33 question items sourced from existing research, and respondents provide ratings using a 5-point Likert scale. The scale ranges from 1, representing "strongly disagree," to 5, indicating "strongly agree."

Technique for data analysis
Partial least squares-structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 3.0 software is utilized to analyze the data in this study. The SmartPLS software is acknowledged as a fitting choice for implementing PLS-SEM, as outlined by Sarstedt *et al.* (2014). PLS-SEM is commonly endorsed within the realm of business management research (Hair *et al.,* 2019) to investigate and validate intricate interconnections.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The evaluation of the structural model in this study is carried out using the SmartPLS 3.0 software. The results indicate that due to low loadings of less than 0.5 as shown in Table 1, three items of SL (i.e., SL2, SL3, SL10) and two items of WE (i.e., WE4, WE7) are excluded from the model. The factor loadings falling within the range of 0.40 to 0.70 may be considered for elimination if their removal contributes to model enhancement (Hair *et al.,* 2019).

As shown in Table 1, the values of Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability and AVE (average variance extracted) for SL in the current study are 0.799, 0.846, and 0.356, respectively; for AC are 0.724, 0.820, and 0.479; for JS are 0.760, 0.833, and 0.456; for WE are 0.741, 0.818, and 0.392, respectively. These results confirm internal consistency reliability and convergent validity of the scale items.

The assessment of discriminant validity in this study is confirmed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and heterotrait–monotrait criterion (HTMT). The Fornell-Larcker criterion results in Table 2 indicate that the square root of AVE surpasses the correlation value between the construct and all other constructs. Also, the HTMT values for SL, AC,

Table 1: Measurement model

Variables	Items	Outer Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Servant Leadership	SL1	0.588			
	SL4	0.574			
	SL5	0.574			
	SL6	0.643			
	SL7	0.546	0.799	0.846	0.356
	SL8	0.634			
	SL9	0.618			
	SL11	0.521			
	SL12	0.693			
	SL13	0.559			
Affective Commitment	AC1	0.593			
	AC2	0.717			
	AC3	0.796	0.724	0.820	0.479
	AC4	0.720			
	AC5	0.615			
Job Satisfaction	JS1	0.601			
	JS2	0.572			
	JS3	0.728	0.760	0.833	0.456
	JS4	0.722			
	JS5	0.664			
	JS6	0.744			
Work Engagement	WE1	0.596			
	WE2	0.691			
	WE3	0.615			
	WE5	0.626	0.741	0.818	0.392
	WE6	0.587			
	WE8	0.607			
	WE9	0.654			

Table 2: Discriminant validity

Variables	Affective Commitment	Job Satisfaction	Servant Leadership	Work Engagement
Fornell-Larcker Criterion				
Affective Commitment	0.692			
Job Satisfaction	0.378	0.675		
Servant Leadership	0.321	0.429	0.597	
Work Engagement	0.653	0.518	0.330	0.626
Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)				
Job Satisfaction	0.501			
Servant Leadership	0.422	0.512		
Work Engagement	0.883	0.663	0.439	

JS, and WE do not exceed the value of 0.90 (Gold *et al.,* 2001), confirming the discriminant validity of the measurement model.

The results from PLS-SEM analysis in Fig. 1 and Table 3 reveal that no direct relationship between SL and WE ($\beta = 0.029$, SD = 0.091, t-statistic = 0.323, $p > 0.05$). Thus, H1 has to be rejected. Furthermore,

the results indicate that SL has a significant direct effect on JS ($\beta = 0.429$, SD = 0.077, t-statistic = 5.556, $p < 0.05$) and AC ($\beta = 0.321$, SD = 0.100, t-statistic = 3.226, $p < 0.05$). Hence, H2 and H3 are confirmed and supported by the data. Additionally, it is found that AC ($\beta = 0.527$, SD = 0.062, t-statistic = 8.518, $p < 0.05$) and JS ($\beta = 0.306$, SD = 0.072,
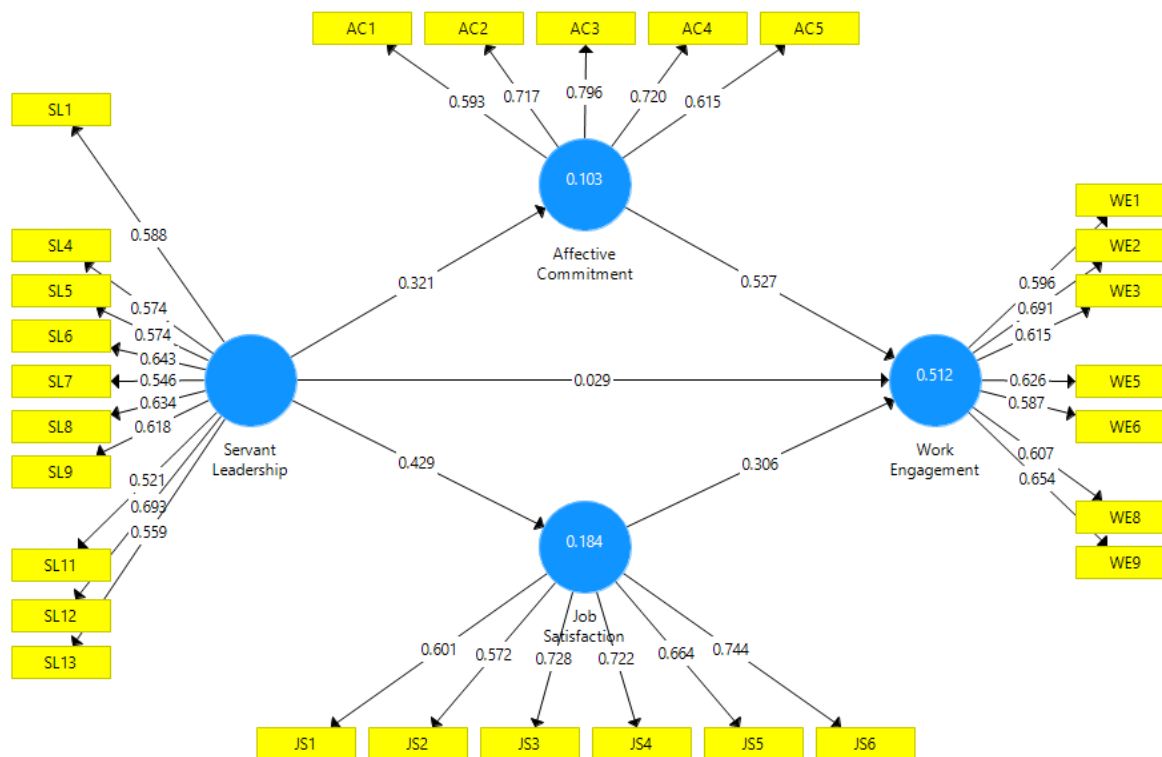
Fig. 1: Research framework

Table 3: Path coefficients

Relationship	Original Sample (β)	Standard Deviation (SD)	T Statistics	P Values	Decision
Direct effect					
Servant Leadership → Work Engagement	0.029	0.091	0.323	0.747	Rejected
Servant Leadership → Job Satisfaction	0.429	0.077	5.556	0.000	Supported
Servant Leadership → Affective Commitment	0.321	0.100	3.226	0.001	Supported
Affective Commitment → Work Engagement	0.527	0.062	8.518	0.000	Supported
Job Satisfaction → Work Engagement	0.306	0.072	4.275	0.000	Supported
Indirect effect					
Servant Leadership → Affective Commitment → Work Engagement	0.170	0.055	3.079	0.002	Supported
Servant Leadership → Job Satisfaction → Work Engagement	0.131	0.041	3.179	0.002	Supported

t-statistic = 4.275, p < 0.05) significantly affect WE. Hence, H4 and H6 are confirmed and supported by the data. This study, upon further investigation, reveals that AC (β = 0.170, SD = 0.055, t-statistic = 3.079, p < 0.05) and JS (β = 0.131, SD = 0.041, t-statistic = 3.179, p < 0.05) significantly mediates the relationship between SL and WE. Hence, H5 and H7 are confirmed and supported by the data.

The results of this study show that SL has no direct effect on WE. This finding confirms the previous studies, such as Christianto (2021), Shim *et al.* (2021), Srimulyani (2021) that SL has no significant effect on WE. Based on this finding, it is important to note that SL focuses on the leader's commitment to serving the needs of their employees and facilitating their personal and professional growth.

Nevertheless, the way SL is practiced can vary across different circumstances. If a servant leader does not effectively embody its principles, the impact on WE might be limited. Also, employees' personal characteristics and values can influence how they respond to SL. Some employees might thrive under SL, while others might prefer a more directive approach. PLS-SEM analyses reveal that SL significantly and directly affects JS and AC. Within the JD-R model, SL prioritizes the well-being and growth of employees, and this approach tends to foster positive relationships and supportive work environment to increased JS among employees (Isabel *et al.,* 2021; Vallina and Guerrero, 2018). Also, servant leaders build trust by showing respect for their employees' opinions, ideas, and contributions. This trust contributes to a positive work atmosphere and increased JS. Furthermore, servant leaders demonstrate empathy and understanding toward their employees' needs and concerns. This creates a positive emotional bond and a feeling of being cared for, which strengthens AC. The results also reveal that AC and JS have a significant direct effect on WE. In JD-R model, when employees are satisfied with their jobs and feel that their expectations are being met, they are more likely to experience higher levels of WE (Guglielmi *et al.,* 2016; Wirawan *et al.,* 2020). JS contributes to positive attitudes towards the organization and the work itself. Employees who feel positively about their jobs are more likely to engage with their tasks and the overall work environment. Additionally, employees with a high level of AC have a strong emotional bond with their organization. This emotional investment often translates into a greater sense of enthusiasm and energy towards their work, contributing to higher levels of WE.

The results further indicate that SL significantly impact WE through AC and JS as the mediator variables. When employees see their leaders actively demonstrating SL behaviors, it sets a positive example for the entire organization (Kiker *et al.,* 2019). This modeling of empathy and humility to others can inspire employees to reciprocate by becoming more engaged and committed to their work (Eva *et al.,* 2019). Furthermore, SL emphasis on creating a positive work environment, supporting employee growth, and prioritizing their well-being

leads to higher JS, which in turn positively influences WE.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that SL is found to significantly influence JS and AC. However, the direct path of SL to WE is not significant. Additionally, it is found that AC and JS significantly affect WE. This study, upon further investigation, reveals that AC and JS significantly mediates the relationship between SL and WE.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework of SL aligns well with the positive outcomes associated with AC, JS and WE. SL behaviors, such as active listening, coaching, and providing resources, enhance employees' motivation and productivity. When employees feel their contributions are recognized and supported, they are more likely to invest greater effort into their work tasks. From a practical standpoint, adopting a SL approach leads to a more satisfied, commited, and engaged workforce, ultimately benefiting both employees and the organization as a whole. Similar to most field investigations, the present study exhibits a set of limitations that open avenues for further research endeavors. Firstly, it is crucial to exercise caution when attempting to generalize the findings of this research since it was conducted within a specific organizational and cultural context, specifically the public health institution in in Central Java – Indonesia. Secondly, the utilization of cross-sectional data restricts the ability to draw definitive causal inferences. Nonetheless, forthcoming studies could consider employing longitudinal approaches to furnish more robust substantiation of the causal relationships identified herein. Lastly, the reliance on self-reported data for the study variables introduces the potential for common method bias concerns. Therefore, future research might expand on these findings by incorporating managerial input regarding their employees. Also, future research is needed to be systematically and fully explored to gain significant practical interpreting of effective leadership styles and their relationships with other variables.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

U. Udin performed the literature review, data collection, and research findings. G. Rakasiwi

screened and analyzed the collected data. R. Dananjoyo helped in the review, conclusion, completing all sections.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest regarding the publication of this work. In addition, the ethical issues including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and, or falsification, double publication and, or submission, and redundancy have been completely witnessed by the authors.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AC	Affective commitment
AVE	Average variance extracted
JD-R	Job Demands-Resources
JS	Job satisfaction
HTMT	Heterotrait–monotrait criterion
PLS-SEM	Partial least squares-structural equation modeling
SL	Servant leadership
WE	Work engagement

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