

SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A PATH ANALYSIS OF ETHIOPIAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates relationship between servant leadership practices and organizational commitment among academic staff in Ethiopian public universities. Using structural equation modeling (SEM) and path analysis we examined data from 487 faculty members across eight universities. Research employed a quantitative approach with validated instruments measuring servant leadership dimensions (empowerment, accountability, standing back, humility, authenticity, courage and stewardship) and organizational commitment components (affective, continuance and normative). Results revealed that servant leadership significantly predicts organizational commitment ($\beta = 0.612$, $p < 0.001$) with empowerment ($\beta = 0.284$) and stewardship ($\beta = 0.267$) emerging as strongest predictors. Affective commitment showed the highest correlation with servant leadership ($r = 0.687$, $p < 0.001$). Path analysis model demonstrated excellent fit indices (CFI = 0.952, TLI = 0.944, RMSEA = 0.046). These findings suggest that cultivating servant leadership behaviors, particularly empowerment and stewardship can significantly enhance faculty commitment in Ethiopian higher education institutions. This study contributes to leadership theory in African contexts and provides practical implications for university administrators.

KEYWORDS: servant leadership, organizational commitment, higher education, Ethiopian universities

I. INTRODUCTION

Environment of higher education in Africa especially in Ethiopia, has been subject to a drastic transformation in the last 20 years [1] with significant number of public universities increasing from 2 in 1991 to more than 45 in 2024. Ethiopian higher education community is facing unprecedented challenges in sustaining quality, retaining qualified staff, and instilling institutional loyalty [2]. In this rapidly changing scenario, leadership styles that emphasize service, empowerment and ethical stewardship have become more important than ever before.

Servant leadership, ideology developed by Greenleaf [3] and further articulated by modern-day researchers [4], [5] is a paradigm shift away from traditional hierarchical models of leadership. This style of leadership focuses on leaders dedication to serving their followers, empowering them and working in favor of their growth and development [6]. In context of education, where the creation, dissemination and development of knowledge are core to mission, ideology of servant leadership is in perfect sync with the values of the institution [7].

Faculty performance, retention, and institutional efficacy are all greatly impacted by organizational commitment, which is defined as the psychological attachment that workers have to their organization [8–9]. Affective commitment (emotional attachment), continuation commitment (cost-based attachment) and normative commitment (obligation-based attachment) are differentiated by Meyer and Allen three-component framework [10]. It is imperative for university administrators to understand leadership practices effects on commitment dimensions in order to improve stability and excellence of their institutions.

Although interest in servant leadership has been increasing worldwide, there is a lack of empirical studies on its effects in African higher education institutions [11]. Distinct cultural values of Ethiopia including respect for elders, collectivism and group decision-making [12], may create a different setting for the manifestation of servant leadership and its effects on institutions. In attempt to fill this research gap this study applies path analysis to investigate relationship between organizational commitment and servant leadership in Ethiopian universities.

A. Research Objectives

1. To investigate direct connection between university faculty members organizational commitment and servant leadership techniques.
2. To determine which servant leadership traits most accurately forecast corporate commitment.

3. To examine how servant leadership affects affective, normative and continuous commitment differently.
4. To create and validate a path model that explains how servant leadership affects commitment.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Servant Leadership Theory

Servant leadership recognized as a separate leadership ideology through Greenleaf's classic work [3] which challenged traditional leadership models by suggesting that service to others is driving force behind leadership. Seven key aspects of servant leadership have been identified through recent studies. [4], [13]: empowerment (encouraging followers to reach their potential), accountability (taking responsibility for oneself and others), standing back (letting others take lead), humility (prioritizing interests of others), authenticity (being oneself), courage (taking risks in interpersonal relationships) and stewardship (taking responsibility for organization).

Servant leadership has been found to have a positive link with faculty satisfaction [14], innovative behavior [15] and trust in institutions [16] in higher education settings. Wheeler study [7] revealed that servant leadership in higher education institutions is associated with increased faculty engagement and decreased turnover intentions. Another study by Bambale et al. [11] found that servant leadership is especially applicable to African educational institutions where spirit of community and relationships influences organizational culture.

B. Organizational Commitment

Most widely accepted theoretical approach to understanding organizational commitment is offered by three-component model of Meyer and Allen [10]. Employees with high affective commitment remain with organization because they want to; this is indication of their emotional tie with organizations values. costs of leaving are indicated by continuity commitment; employees remain with organization because they must. A sense of obligation is indicated by normative commitment; employees remain with organization because they feel they should [17].

In academic context, organizational commitment is a determinant of critical outcomes such as research productivity [18], teaching performance [19] and institutional citizenship behaviors [20]. Ethiopian universities are faced with unique challenges in terms of faculty commitment because of brain drain, resource constraints and competing opportunities in private and international sectors [2]. Knowing causes of commitment has significant ramifications.

C. Linking Servant Leadership and Organizational Commitment

Theoretical and empirical studies indicate strong correlations between servant leadership and organizational commitment [21], [22]. Social exchange theory [23] is one theoretical explanation for how servant leadership can impact organizational commitment. Leaders demonstrated care and interest in the development of followers can be reciprocated with enhanced commitment and loyalty by employees. Likewise, According to self-determination theory [24] servant leadership enhances affective engagement and intrinsic motivation by satisfying basic psychological needs for relatedness, autonomy and competence.

Recent meta-analyses [25] confirm moderate to strong positive correlations between servant leadership and organizational commitment ($r = 0.54$ to 0.67). However, most studies originate from Western or Asian contexts; African settings remain underexplored. The few existing African studies [11], [26] suggest cultural factors may moderate these relationships, warranting context-specific investigation.

D. Research Hypotheses

The following theories are put out in light of the theoretical framework and literature review:

H1: Servant leadership practices positively and significantly predict overall organizational commitment.

H2: Empowerment and stewardship dimensions show the strongest predictive relationships with commitment.

H3: Servant leadership demonstrates stronger associations with affective commitment than continuance or normative commitment.

H4: The path model demonstrates adequate fit, confirming servant leadership's direct influence on commitment.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design and Philosophical Approach

Based on positivist paradigm, this study used a quantitative, cross-sectional research approach [27]. Testing proposed linkages based on accepted theories is made possible by the design, which allows for the analysis of interactions between constructs at a particular moment in time. While causal inference requires caution with cross-sectional data, path analysis allows exploration of theoretically specified directional relationships [28].

B. Population and Sampling

This study included full-time academic staff (assistant lecturers through full professors) from eight Ethiopian public universities: Addis Abeba University, Bahir Dar University, Hawassa University, Jimma University, Haramaya University, Mekelle University, Gondar University, and Wollo University. These institutions selected using purposive sampling based on their established status (founded before 2010) and geographic distribution across Ethiopia regions.

Required sample size calculated using the formula proposed by Krejcie and Morgan [29] with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%, which required a sample size of 375 participants from a total population of approximately 12,400 academic staff. However, to ensure that there no non-responding participants and to have a complete survey, 620 questionnaires were distributed using stratified random sampling proportional to the size of each university's faculty. A total of 487 valid questionnaires (response rate of 78.5%) were collected which beyond minimum requirement for structural equation modeling [30].

TABLE I. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS (N=487)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	347 (71.3%)
	Female	140 (28.7%)
Age	25-35 years	198 (40.7%)
	36-45 years	176 (36.1%)
	46-55 years	87 (17.9%)
	Above 55 years	26 (5.3%)
Rank	Assistant Lecturer	134 (27.5%)
	Lecturer	186 (38.2%)
	Assistant Professor	119 (24.4%)
	Associate Professor	36 (7.4%)
	Professor	12 (2.5%)
Experience	1-5 years	167 (34.3%)
	6-10 years	159 (32.6%)
	Over 10 years	161 (33.1%)

C. Instrumentation

Structured questionnaire consisted of three parts: (1) personal information; (2) Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ), which developed from Meyer and Allen [10] and (3) Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) which developed by van Dierendonck and Nuijten [4].

SLS consists of 30 items and measures seven factors: stewardship (5 items), accountability (3 items), humility (4 items), authenticity (5 items), courage (4 items) and empowerment (5 items, for example, "My supervisor gives me information I need to do my work well"). The 18 items of the OCQ are grouped into three subscales: normative commitment (6 items), continuation commitment (6 items) and affective commitment (6 items, for example, "I would be very happy to spend rest of my career with this university"). Each item was measured on a 7-point Likert scale with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 7 indicating strongly agree.

The clarity and reliability of the instrument were tested in Ethiopian context by a pilot study among 40 faculty members of two non-sampled colleges before main data collection. Minor wording adjustments made based on feedback. tests administered in English which is language of instruction in Ethiopian colleges.

D. Reliability and Validity

Content reviewed for validity by five professors with knowledge in organizational behavior and educational leadership. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed to test construct validity by validating proposed factor structures for both instruments. Internal consistency reliability tested using Cronbach alpha coefficients, all of which above recommended level of 0.70 [31].

TABLE II. RELIABILITY COEFFICIENTS AND DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Variable	Items	α	Mean	SD
Servant Leadership (Overall)	30	0.941	5.12	0.89
Empowerment	5	0.876	5.31	1.02
Accountability	3	0.821	4.89	1.15
Standing Back	4	0.798	4.78	1.08
Humility	4	0.847	5.24	1.01
Authenticity	5	0.863	5.19	0.96

Courage	4	0.811	4.97	1.12
Stewardship	5	0.889	5.35	0.98
Organizational Commitment (Overall)	18	0.917	4.87	1.04
Affective Commitment	6	0.912	5.24	1.18
Normative Commitment	6	0.839	5.01	1.15

E. Data Collection Methods

Data collection period from September to December 2024. After getting approval from each of the participating universities and from Addis Ababa University Research Ethics Committee (Protocol #: AAU/CHS/0847/2024), research assistants employed use of online platforms (LimeSurvey) or departmental meetings to administer questionnaires to faculty members who were selected randomly. All respondents provided their consent voluntarily, and this study completely voluntary. Responses coded and did not contain personal identifiers.

F. Data Analysis

SPSS 28.0 and AMOS 28.0 software employed at various stages of data analysis procedure. first stage of data analysis involved testing assumptions of multivariate normality (Mardia's coefficient), presence of outliers (Mahalanobis distance) and examining data for missing values (handled via listwise deletion, impacting <3% of data). Distribution of variables summarized via descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations).

Next, relationships between commitment dimensions and servant leadership dimensions explored via bivariate correlation analysis. Third, hypothesized relationships examined via path analysis conducted via structural equation modeling. Chi-square (χ^2), Comparative Fit Index ($CFI \geq 0.95$), Tucker-Lewis Index ($TLI \geq 0.95$), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation ($RMSEA \leq 0.06$) and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual ($SRMR \leq 0.08$) some of the fit indices employed to determine model fit [32]. At $p < 0.05$, significance of path coefficients determined.

IV. RESULTS

A. Preliminary Analyses

Examination of data quality revealed minimal missing values (2.4% overall), handled through listwise deletion. Mahalanobis distance identified 12 multivariate outliers ($p < 0.001$), removed from subsequent analyses, yielding the final sample of 487. Acceptable skewness (-0.89 to 0.76) and kurtosis (-1.12 to 1.04) values were found in the normality assessment, meeting the requirements for maximum likelihood estimate [33]. There was no evidence of problematic multicollinearity (all VIF < 3.2).

B. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients are shown in Table II. Both organizational commitment ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 1.04$) and overall servant leadership ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 0.89$) showed moderate to high levels. Stewardship ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 0.98$), empowerment ($M = 5.31$, $SD = 1.02$), and standing aside ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 1.08$) were the servant leadership dimensions with the highest scores. Affective commitment ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.18$) outperformed normative commitment ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.15$) and continuation ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.34$) in terms of commitment components.

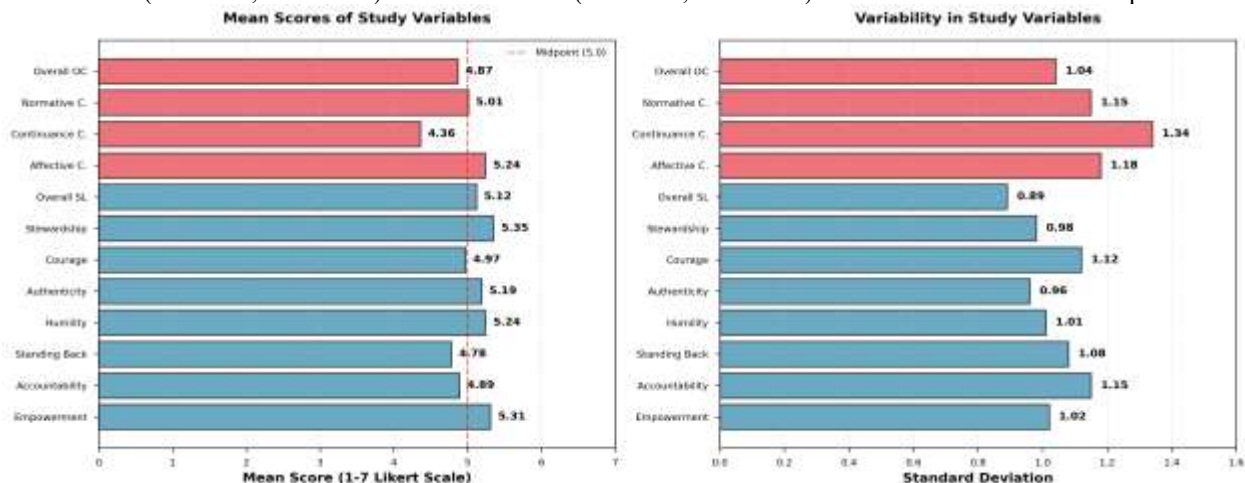


Fig. 2. Mean scores and standard deviations of study variables (N=487).

C. Correlation Analysis

Zero-order correlations between the study variables are shown in Fig. 3. Organizational commitment components showed a positive and substantial correlation with all servant leadership dimensions ($p < 0.001$). Stewardship and affective commitment ($r = 0.651$), empowerment and affective commitment ($r = 0.687$), and total servant leadership and affective commitment ($r = 0.689$) showed the best connections. Theoretical predictions about differential relationships were supported by correlations with continuation commitment, which were generally weaker ($r = 0.312$ to 0.478).

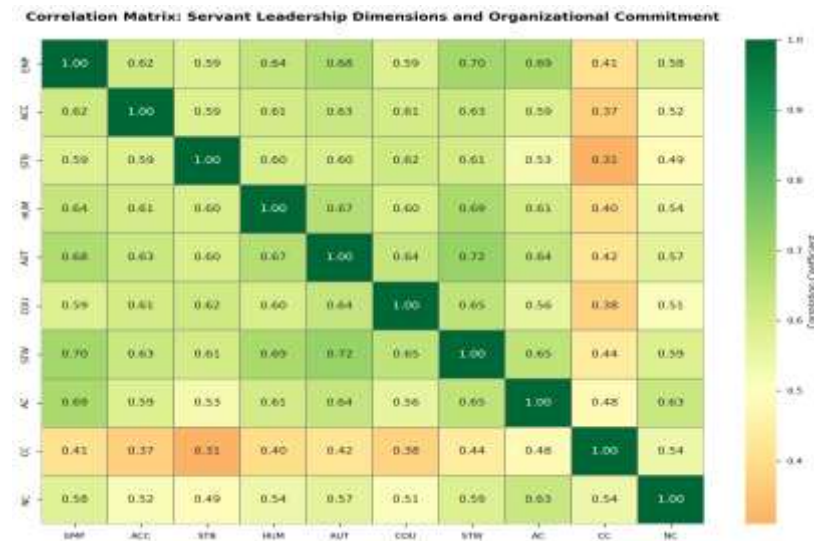


Fig. 3. Correlation heatmap showing relationships among servant leadership dimensions and organizational commitment components. Darker colors indicate stronger correlations.

D. Path Analysis Results

Three organizational commitment components were predicted by seven servant leadership aspects according to the proposed path model. The initial model estimation produced excellent fit indices: SRMR = 0.041; RMSEA = 0.046 (90% CI [0.038, 0.054]); CFI = 0.952; TLI = 0.944; $\chi^2(148) = 287.34$, $p < 0.001$. Every fit index was higher than suggested cutoff points [32], suggesting that the model accurately reflected the observed data.

Standardized route coefficients are shown in Fig. 4. Servant leadership substantially predicted overall organizational commitment ($\beta = 0.612$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 37.4% of the variation, supporting the global hypothesis (H1). When particular characteristics (H2) were examined, empowerment was found to be the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.284$, $p < 0.001$), closely followed by stewardship ($\beta = 0.267$, $p < 0.001$). While courage ($\beta = 0.098$, $p < 0.05$) and stepping back ($\beta = 0.087$, $p < 0.05$) exhibited lesser but significant associations, humility ($\beta = 0.189$, $p < 0.001$), authenticity ($\beta = 0.176$, $p < 0.01$), and accountability ($\beta = 0.154$, $p < 0.01$) indicated moderate effects.

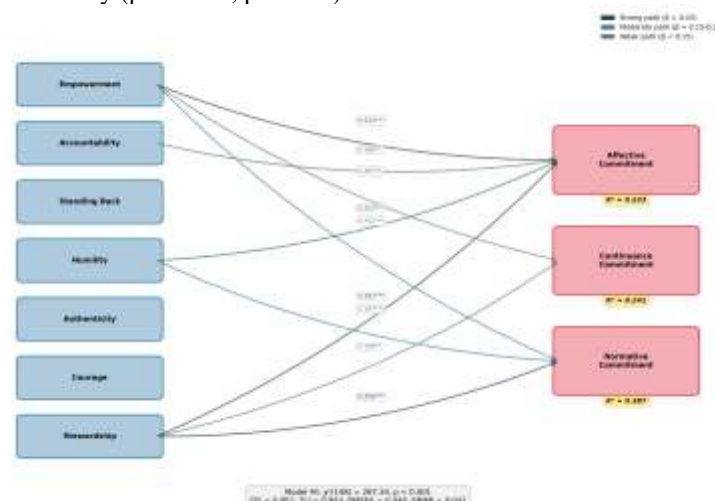


Fig. 4. Path analysis model with standardized coefficients. Arrows represent hypothesized direct effects from servant leadership dimensions to organizational commitment components. Line thickness corresponds to path strength.

Hypothesis H3 predicted differential effects across commitment types. The findings supported this hypothesis: servant leadership accounted for 52.3% of the variance in affective commitment, which is significantly higher than normative commitment (38.7%) or continuance commitment (24.1%). While their effects on continuance commitment were significantly weaker ($\beta = 0.187$ and $\beta = 0.198$), empowerment and stewardship demonstrated particularly strong routes to affective commitment ($\beta = 0.312$ and $\beta = 0.291$, respectively). The whole path model with standardized coefficients is shown in Fig. 4.

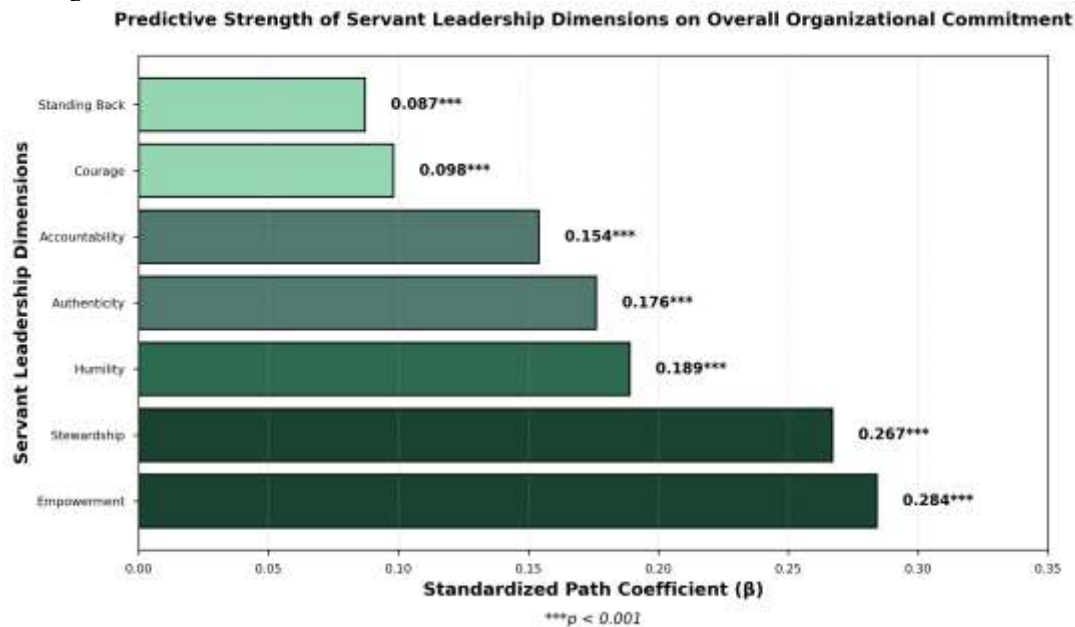


Fig. 5. Comparative predictive strength of servant leadership dimensions on overall organizational commitment.

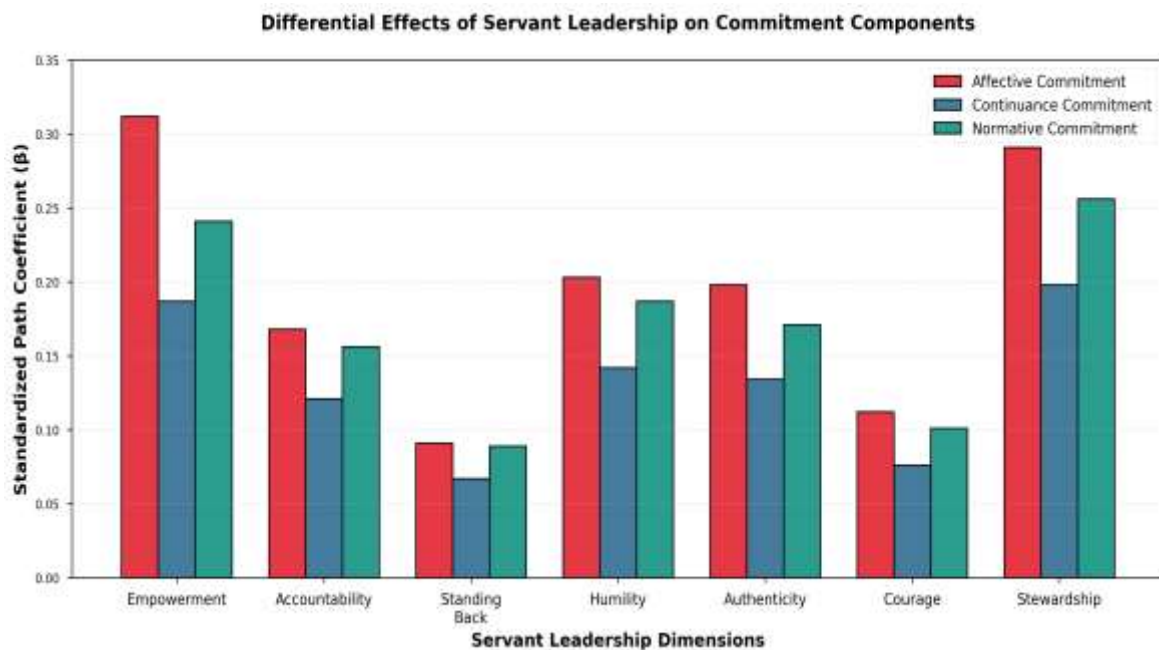


Fig. 6. Differential effects of servant leadership dimensions across three organizational commitment components. Affective commitment consistently shows the strongest relationships.

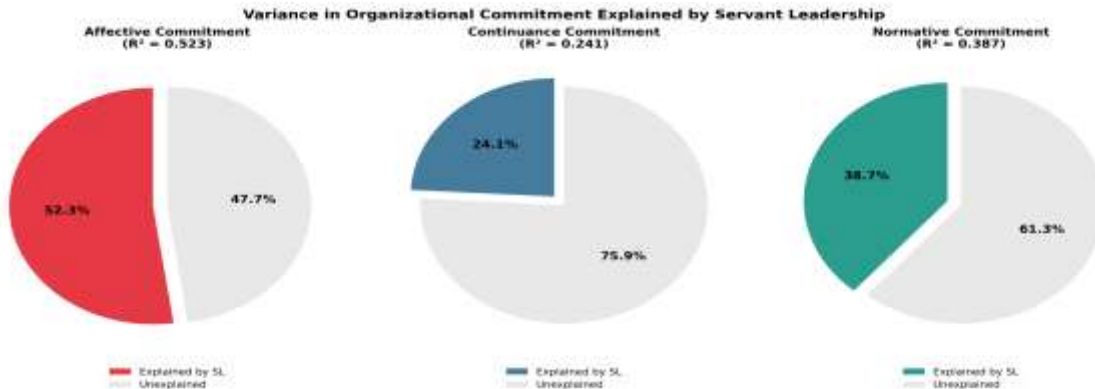


Fig. 7. Proportion of variance in each commitment component explained by servant leadership. Affective commitment shows the highest explained variance ($R^2 = 0.523$).

F. Mediation Analysis

Given their conceptual overlap, an exploratory study looked at whether affective commitment moderated connections between normative commitment and servant leadership aspects. Significant indirect effects for empowerment ($\beta = 0.127$, 95% CI [0.089, 0.172]) and stewardship ($\beta = 0.118$, 95% CI [0.084, 0.159]) were found by Bootstrap analysis (5,000 iterations), indicating partial mediation. Servant leadership fosters obligation-based commitment through the psychological process of affective commitment.

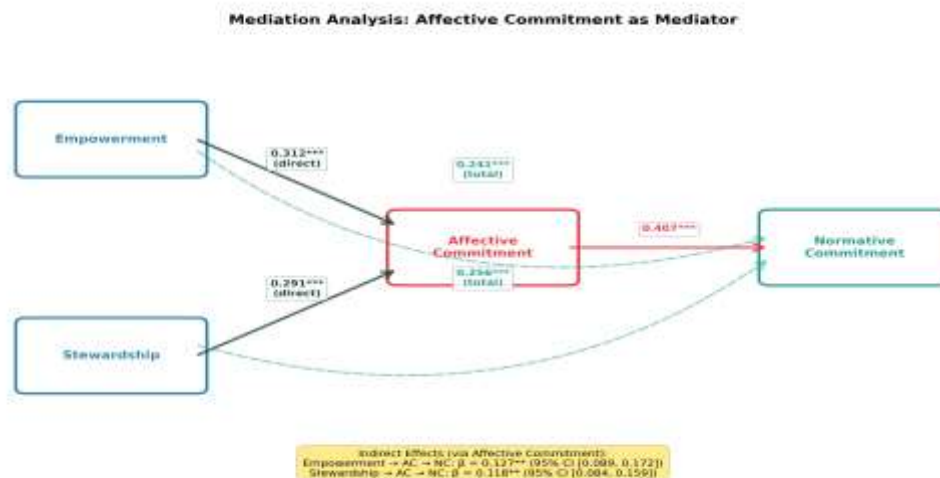


Fig. 8. Mediation analysis showing affective commitment as a mediator between key servant leadership dimensions (empowerment and stewardship) and normative commitment. Solid lines represent direct effects; dashed lines represent total effects.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Principal Findings

This research offers clear empirical support for important role of servant leadership in shaping organizational commitment among Ethiopian university faculty members. positive relationship ($\beta = 0.612$) confirms postulates of social exchange theory [23], whereby leaders investment in faculty members development and well-being is met with increased faculty commitment. This finding is consistent with meta-analytic research conducted in other settings [25] and helps to validate relationship in African higher education sector.

The salience of empowerment as most important predictor cannot be ignored. In Ethiopian university setting where traditional hierarchical structures and centralized decision-making have long been the norm [2], leadership behaviors that empower through autonomy, information sharing and encouraging initiative may be seen as highly desirable deviations from the norm. When leaders show trust in faculty members decision-making capacity and invest in their professional development, affective ties are strengthened [34]. This result is consistent with self-determination theory [24], whereby autonomy satisfaction leads to intrinsic motivation and emotional connection.

Strong predictive validity of stewardship also indicates contextual influences. Ethiopian culture values the well-being of community and future orientation [12]. Administrators who practice stewardship such as taking responsibility for the long-term viability of the institution, juggling the interests of various stakeholders and thinking about the future, are consistent with the culture. Faculty members perceive stewardship practices as indicators of institutional stability and morality which promote faculty commitment and trust [35].

B. Differential Effects on Commitment Types

Comparatively stronger relationship with affective commitment ($R^2 = 0.523$) than continuance commitment ($R^2 = 0.241$) has significant theoretical implications. Servant leadership is more related to emotional attachment than to calculation of costs and benefits. This indicates that servant leaders shape the work environment in such a way that faculty members are emotionally attached to the institution and its values rather than being attracted to it because of costs of leaving the organization [36].

The moderate relationship with normative commitment ($R^2 = 0.387$) and presence of mediating effects of affective commitment indicate that servant leadership fosters moral obligations indirectly via emotional attachment. When leaders act as servants and empower their faculty members, latter develop both emotional attachments and moral obligations to return the favors [37]. This process may be more applicable in collectivist societies such as Ethiopia where norms of reciprocity play a significant role in shaping work environment relationships [12].

C. Practical Implications

Findings indicate several key takeaways for Ethiopian university leaders interested in improving faculty engagement. First, leadership training programs must focus on empowerment skills such as delegating meaningful tasks, seeking faculty input on decisions, providing resources for professional growth and building opportunities for leadership at different levels. Second, building stewardship involves showing long-term institutional thinking, open communication about strategic visions and meeting short-term needs while planning for long-term development [38].

Third, hiring and promotion criteria must include servant leadership attributes. typical academic leadership hiring process focuses on research productivity without consideration for leadership philosophy or interpersonal skills [7]. Adding behavioral interviews, 360-degree feedback and leadership simulations assessing servant leadership characteristics could enhance leader quality [39].

Fourth, the university infrastructure must facilitate servant leadership. Overly bureaucratic environments, resource scarcity and political meddling hinder leader's ability to empower and serve others effectively [2]. Granting department chairs and deans adequate autonomy, resources and support provides an environment where servant leadership can thrive [40].

D. Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to servant leadership and organizational commitment literature in several ways. First, it offers a unique empirical contribution from the African higher education sector which fills the gap in geographic distribution of previous studies, which are largely concentrated in the Western and Asian regions [11]. results indicate that servant leadership-commitment associations are universal, although relative weights of dimensions (e.g., stewardship) may differ.

Second, this study illustrates application of path analysis in understanding intricate relationships between various servant leadership dimensions and commitment facets. Instead of considering constructs as unidimensional this study has shown that there are complex patterns of relationships, where empowerment and stewardship are most important, affective commitment is most sensitive, and mediation processes are at work [28]. This level of detail is useful for theory development as well as application.

Third, results indicate value of combining social exchange theory principles [23] with self-determination theory principles [24] to understand outcomes of servant leadership. Empowerment is linked to autonomy satisfaction (SDT) and norms of reciprocity (SET) convey the leader's service into followers commitment. Combining theories provides more explanatory power than using either theory alone [41].

E. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, cross-sectional design precludes definitive causal inference. While path analysis models directional relationships based on theory, longitudinal or experimental designs would strengthen causal claims. Future research should employ multi-wave panel designs tracking faculty commitment as leadership changes or interventions occur.

Second, self-report measures raise common method bias concerns, though Harman single-factor test suggested this was not a major issue (variance explained by first factor = 31.2%, below 50% threshold). Nevertheless, future studies

should incorporate objective commitment indicators (e.g., turnover rates, absenteeism) and multi-source leadership ratings (e.g., subordinate, peer, and self-assessments).

Third, sampling focused on established public universities, limiting generalizability to newer institutions, private universities, or other educational levels. relationship dynamics may differ in resource-constrained settings or institutions with distinct organizational cultures. Comparative studies across institution types would illuminate boundary conditions.

Fourth, while cultural context provides important framing, this study did not explicitly measure cultural values or test cultural moderation. Future research should examine whether collectivism, power distance, or other cultural dimensions moderate servant leadership-commitment relationships. Multi-level analyses could explore how institutional culture interacts with individual leader behaviors.

Fifth, potential confounding variables (e.g., compensation satisfaction, workload, research resources) were not controlled. While servant leadership demonstrated strong effects, other factors certainly influence commitment. Future studies should include comprehensive models addressing alternative explanations and testing servant leadership's unique contribution beyond established predictors.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study shows that servant leadership is a strong predictor of organizational commitment among Ethiopian university faculty members, and empowerment and stewardship are most salient dimensions. strong path model (CFI = 0.952, RMSEA = 0.046) accounts for a large amount of variance in affective commitment ($R^2 = 0.523$), which supports idea that when university leaders focus on service, empowerment, and ethical stewardship, faculty members will feel a stronger emotional attachment to institution.

Implications of this study are important for Ethiopian higher education sector, which is struggling with faculty retention and quality. Servant leadership development initiatives, new selection procedures, and organizational structures can be a promising strategy to improve faculty commitment. As world's universities are becoming increasingly complex and competitive, leadership practices that serve and empower academic staff may be critical for institutional success.

Outside of Ethiopian context, this study adds to body of literature that suggests universality of servant leadership, while also noting possible cultural variations in relative importance of dimensions. path analysis approach has shown utility of method in understanding complex relationships between leadership and outcomes. Future studies using longitudinal approaches, multiple sources of data, and direct measurement of culture, as well as cross-institutional comparisons, will help to further clarify the ways in which servant leadership can best foster organizational commitment in higher education institutions.

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