The Relationship between Servant Leadership and Organizational Commitment: The Malaysian Perspectives

Aznarahayu Ramli

School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 USM, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia Email: aznarahayu@gmail.com

Nasina Mat Desa

School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 USM, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between servant leadership and employees' organizational commitment in a Malaysian situation and adding trust in leader as the mediator. The first objective of the study is to explore the relationship between servant leadership and organizational commitment of working adults in Malaysia. Second objective is to determine whether trust in leader mediate the relationship between servant leadership and organizational commitment among these working adults. There are 200 set of questionnaires were randomly distributed to the employees working with various organizations throughout Malaysia. Out of them, 143 were usable yielded a response rate of 71.5%. Data collected were analysed through correlational analysis and multiple regression analysis using SPSS version 20. The result of the study revealed that servant leadership has significant relationship with employees' organizational commitment. In addition, trusts in leader do mediate the relationship between servant leadership and organizational commitment among working adults in Malaysia. This research therefore, highlighted the importance of having the right leadership in fostering employees' positive job behaviour. The limitation and direction for future research also discussed.
Key words: Servant leadership, organizational commitment, trust, Malaysia

1. Introduction

Servant leadership was coined by Greenleaf (1977). This type of leader focuses on others rather than their own self. He also stressed that the primary intention of the servant leader is meeting the need of the followers (Greenleaf, 1969; 1977). In the era of globalization, servant leadership should be considered by the leaders of today's organizations (DePree, 1995; Senge, 1997; Blanchard, 2002; Covey, 2002) as servant leadership can fulfil the organizations' need for an ethical and caring type of

leadership to meet the demand for more ethical and people-centered management (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Many companies discovered that the principles and practices of servant leadership can bring a renewed sense of community and focus to organizations (Brownell, 2010). This due to the fact that the leader who serve the needs of the staff will develop their desires to bring out the best in them and a sense of community as well as a sense of belonging to their organization (Ambali et al., 2011). The servant leaders also provide vision, gaining credibility and trust as well as influencing their followers towards improving the organizational performance (Farling et al., 1999), increase organizational satisfaction (Laub, 1999) and organizational effectiveness (Nyhan, 2000; Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000) including job satisfaction, organizational commitment and turnover intentions. There are also claims that servant leadership is known to be a highly effective style of leadership for empowering followers, opposing injustices and inequalities as well as maintaining strong values which can lead to greater motivation, inspiration, commitment to vision and job satisfaction; all of which can affect to organizational commitment levels (Greenleaf 1977; Russell, 2001) . In addition, Van Dierendonck (2011) suggested that trust and fairness are expected to be the most important mediator to enhance self-actualization, positive job attitudes, performance, and organizational outcomes in the servant leadership environment. This study therefore looks into the relationship between servant leadership, trust and organizational commitment, particularly affective commitment.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Servant Leadership

Servant leadership should be considered by the leaders of today's organizations (DePree, 1995; Senge, 1997; Blanchard, 2002; Covey, 2002) as servant leadership can fulfil the organizations' need for an ethical and caring type of leadership to meet the demand for more ethical and people-centered management (Van Dierendonck, 2011).

Van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011) describes servant leadership in term of eight dimensions which are empowerment, humility, standing back, authenticity, forgiveness, courage, accountability and stewardship. Empowerment is a motivational concept that aiming at enabling people and encouraging personal development through fostering a pro-active, self-confident attitude among followers as well as giving them a sense of personal power. Humility refers to the leader who is understand of one's strong and weak points as well as daring to admit that one is not reliable and does make mistakes. Standing back is about the extent to which a leader gives priority to the interest of others first and gives them the necessary support and credits. For example, the leader always retreats into the background when a task has successfully accomplished. Authenticity associated with the expressing one's true self that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings whether privately or publicly. Forgiveness is about being able to forgive when confronted with offenses, arguments, and mistakes that may lead to an atmosphere of trust where people feel accepted, are free to make mistakes and know that they will not being rejected. Courage is associated with the action of dare to take risks and to try out new approaches in problem solving and decision-making. Accountability refers to giving out responsibilities and holding people accountable for performance and outcomes to show confidence in them. Stewardship is relates to social responsibility, loyalty and team work that represent a feeling of identification with and sense of obligation to a common good.

This study utilizes all the eight dimensions of Van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011).

2.2. Organizational commitment

Organizational commitment is the psychological relationship between the employees and their organization which lead their decision to continue their membership and less likely to leave the organization (Allen & Meyer, 1996). Commitment exists when an employee is satisfied to remain in the organization, to attend work on a regular basis and share the goals of the organization (Whyte, 1956). Employees with organizational commitment will have a strong belief and agree with the goals and values of the organization, willing to work hard and have a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization (Mowday et al., 1982).

Meyer and Allen (1991) developed an organizational commitment model consist of three types of commitment namely continuance commitment, normative commitment and affective commitment. Continuance commitment refers to the employee's recognition of the costs associated if he or she leaves the organization. This concept refers to the employees' decision of "need to" remain in an organization (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Normative commitment reflects the level of obligation that the employee feels to continue within the organization. This concept refers to the employees' decision of "feel they should" remain in an organization (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Affective commitment refers to the employees' identification with, involvement in, and emotional attachment to the organization. This concept refers to the employees' decision of "want to" remain in an organization (Meyer & Allen, 1997). However, the focus of this study is affective organizational commitment.

Affective commitment is one's desire to belong to the organization (Bergman, 2006). In addition, according to Wasti (2002), affective commitment develops mainly from positive work experiences, such as job satisfaction and organizational fairness, and is associated with desirable outcomes, such as higher levels of organizational citizenship behaviours, and lower levels of withdrawal behaviours like absenteeism and tardiness. Besides, affective commitment has received the most research attention compared to other two types of commitment (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer et al., 2002).

2.3. Trust

Nyhan & Marlowe (1997) defined trust in leader as the situation whereby one individual has a confidence that the supervisor is competence to act in a fair, ethical and predictable manner. Trust is always based on predictability whereby for an individual to trust other, he or she must believe that the other person will act in an expected way (Trivers, 2009). Besides, Mishra (1996) defined trust as the willingness of vulnerability to others based on what others expect and believe in trust, openness and concern. In addition, trust also can be defined as the group tendency for being vulnerable to other group actions, based on this expectation that group would perform a specific action which is important to the confiding without considering group control or supervision ability (Meyer et al., 2004). Trust is important for sustaining individual and organizational effectiveness (McAllister, 1995). Besides, it is valuable in influencing the relationship and the behaviour of each party toward the others (Robinson, 1996). Trust is therefore, important in the leader-follower relationship. When employees trust their leader, they are willing to be exposed to the leader's actions because they believed that their interests will not be abused (Mayer et al., 1995). However, if the trust is broken, it can lead to undesirable effects (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002).

2.4. Servant leadership and organizational commitment

Several servant leadership scholars (Ehrhart, 2004; Joseph & Winston, 2005; Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006) confirmed that servant leadership was significantly related to organizational commitment. The principles and practices of servant leadership can bring a renewed sense of community and focus to organizations (Brownell, 2010). The leader who serve the needs of the staff will develop their desires to bring out the best in them and a sense of community as well as a sense of belonging to their organization (Ambali et al., 2011). In addition, the practice of servant leadership in an organization will help the organization improve its effectiveness (Nyhan, 2000; Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000) including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover intentions, belief in information provided by the leader and commitment to decisions. Furthermore, Cerit (2010) revealed that servant leadership practice of the school principal has significant and positive relationship with commitment of the primary school teachers in Turkey. Moreover, Hoveida, Salari and Asemi (2011) found the significant relationship between manager's servant leadership and the staff's commitment in the University of Isfahan. Based on the literature, the following hypothesis was developed:-

H₁: Servant leadership is significantly related to affective commitment.
H₁ₐ: Empowerment is significantly related to affective commitment.
H₁ᵦ: Standing back is significantly related to affective commitment.
H₁𝒸: Accountability is significantly related to affective commitment.
H₁𝒹: Forgiveness is significantly related to affective commitment.
H₁ₑ: Courage is significantly related to affective commitment.

H₁f: Authenticity is significantly related to affective commitment.
H₁g: Humility is significantly related to affective commitment.
H₁h: Stewardship is significantly related to affective commitment.

2.5.   Servant Leadership and Trust

Previous studies founded the significant relationship between servant leadership and trust. One of the studies is conducted by Joseph and Winston (2005) who revealed that there is positive correlation between employee perceptions of servant leadership and leader and organizational trust. Besides, Dannhauser and Boshoff (2006) in their study among salesperson in an automobile retail firm in the South Africa found that servant leadership, trust and team commitment are related with each other. A study conducted by Sendjaya and Pekerti (2010) among teaching faculty and administration staff of two educational institutions in Indonesia found that servant leadership is a significant predictor of trust. Chatbury, Beaty and Kriek (2011) in their study in South Africa found the significant relationship between servant leadership and trust. In addition, Rezaei et al. (2012) conducted a study among employees from Tax Affairs in Guilan Province and reveal several results which are (1) There is a significant relationship between servant leadership and organizational trust; (2) There is a significant relationship between servant leadership and organizational trust due attention to leader trust; (3) There is a significant relationship between servant leadership and organizational trust due attention to organizational communication. Thus, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H₂: Servant leadership is significantly related to trust.
H₂a: Empowerment is significantly related to trust.
H₂b: Standing back is significantly related to trust.
H₂c: Accountability is significantly related to trust.
H₂d: Forgiveness is significantly related to trust.
H₂e: Courage is significantly related to trust.
H₂f: Authenticity is significantly related to trust.
H₂g: Humility is significantly related to trust.
H₂h: Stewardship is significantly related to trust.

2.6.   Trust and Organizational Commitment

Previous studies found trust relate to organizational commitment. For example, Yeh (2009) revealed that organizational trust and organizational commitment among the Volunteers in 300 major foundations in Taiwan are correlated positively and significantly. Besides, Laka-Mathebula (2004) in her study among 246 employees from 11 South African higher education institutions has proved that trust is correlated with organizational commitment in the higher institution environment. Thus, this study proposes hypothesis as below:-

H₃: Trust is significantly related to affective commitment.

2.7.   Trust mediate the Relationship between Servant Leadership and Organizational Commitment

The study conducted by Goodwin et al. (2011) found trust as a mediator in the relationship between leadership and various outcome variables such as organizational citizenship behaviour, performance and organizational commitment. Besides, the study conducted by Chiang and Wang (2012) among full time employees in 41 hotels in Taiwan revealed that trust mediated the relationship between leadership and organizational commitment. Both studies support Avolio's (1999) argument that impact of the leadership on the followers is not direct but it must mediate through other variable such as trust. Thus, this study proposes H4 as below:-

H₄: **Trust mediates the relationship between servant leadership and affective commitment.**
H₄a: Trust mediates the relationship between empowerment and affective commitment.
H₄b: Trust mediates the relationship between standing back and affective commitment.
H₄c: Trust mediates the relationship between accountability and affective commitment.

H_{4d}: Trust mediates the relationship between forgiveness and affective commitment.
H_{4e}: Trust mediates the relationship between courage and affective commitment.
H_{4f}: Trust mediates the relationship between authenticity and affective commitment.
H_{4g}: Trust mediates the relationship between humility and affective commitment.
H_{4h}: Trust mediates the relationship between stewardship and affective commitment.

2.8. Theoretical Framework

Based on the literature, this current study applies the following framework:-

Figure-1. Theoretical Framework
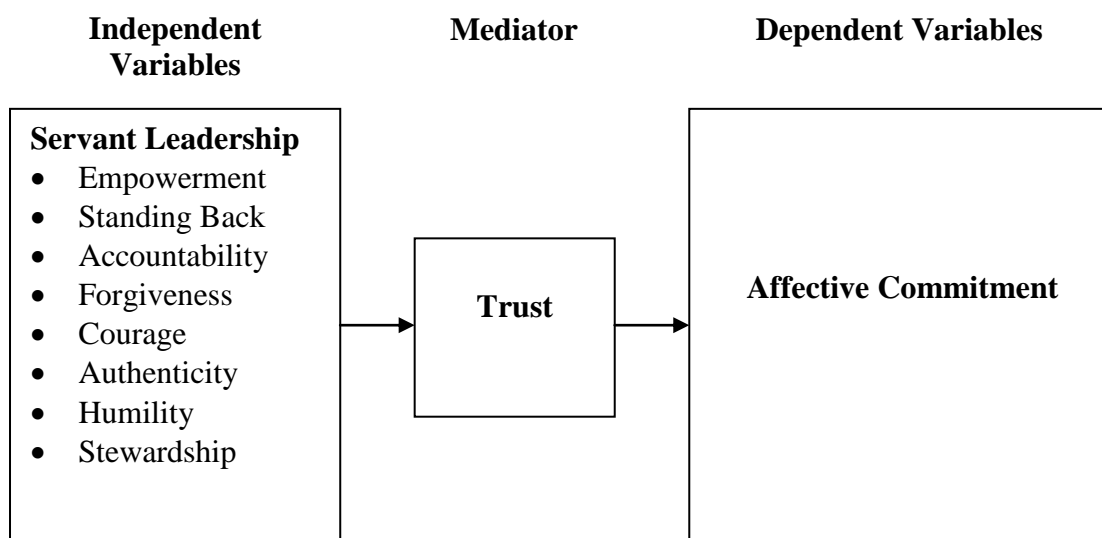
3. Methodology

The sample of this research is the employees working in the public organizations in Malaysia. The questionnaires were distributed. Out of 200 questionnaires, only 143 were returned that makes the response rate of 71.5%. The questionnaires for independent and dependent variables used in this research were adopted from previous studies. The scales used in this study are presented in Table 1.

Table-1. The Scales

Variables	No. of Questions	Sources
Servant Leadership	**30**	**Van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011)**
- Empowerment	7	Van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011)
- Standing back	3	Van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011)
- Accountability	3	Van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011)
- Forgiveness	3	Van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011)
- Courage	2	Van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011)
- Authenticity	4	Van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011)
- Humility	5	Van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011)
- Stewardship	3	Van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011)
Trust	**8**	**Nyhan and Marlowe (1997)**
Affective Commitment	**8**	**Allen & Meyer (1990)**

4. Results And Discussion

The data were gathered and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) programme, version 20.0.

4.1. Reliability Analysis

To test the instrument's reliability, Cronbach's coefficient alpha was used to test the sample of 143 respondents (Cronbach, 1990). The constructs for both independent and dependent variable show an acceptable level of reliability. The results are as per Table 2.

Table-2. Reliability Analysis

Variables	Cronbach Alpha Value
Servant Leadership	
- Empowerment	0.876
- Standing back	0.685
- Accountability	0.787
- Forgiveness	0.702
- Courage	0.780
- Authenticity	0.652
- Humility	0.918
- Stewardship	0.864
Trust	0.948
Affective Commitment	0.891

4.2. Profile of the Respondent

The profile of the respondent participated in this study is presented in Table 3.

Table-3. Profile of the Respondent

Items	Frequencies	Percentage (%)
Age		
· 20 years and below	1	0.7
· 21 - 30 years	94	65.7
· 31 - 40 years	41	28.7
· 41 - 50 years	7	4.9
Gender		
· Male	41	28.7
· Female	102	71.3
Marital Status		
· Single	63	44.1
· Married	78	54.5
· Single Parent	2	1.4
Ethnic group		
· Malay	132	92.3
· Chinese	1	0.7
· Indian	3	2.1
· Others	7	4.9
Highest academic qualification		
· SPM/MCE	23	16.1
· Certificate	13	9.1
· Diploma	90	62.9
· Advanced Diploma	14	9.8

Items	Frequencies	Percentage (%)
· Bachelor Degree	3	2.1
Length of service with current organization		
· 1 year and below	7	4.9
· 2 - 5 years	86	60.1
· 6 - 9 years	30	21.0
· 10 years and above	20	14.0
Location of workplace		
· West Cost Peninsular Malaysia (Perlis, Kedah, Penang, Perak, Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Johor)	121	84.6
· East Cost Peninsular Malaysia (Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang)	11	7.7
· East Malaysia (Sabah, Sarawak, Labuan)	11	7.7

4.3. The relationship Servant Leadership and Affective Commitment

The relationship between servant leadership and affective commitment were retrieved from the linear regression analysis. The results of the analysis are present in Table 4.

Table-4. Servant Leadership and Affective Commitment

Model	Standardised Coefficients Beta (β)	t	Sig.
(Constant)		1.821	.071
Empowerment	.003	.028	.978
Standing back	.030	.308	.758
Accountability	.048	.434	.665
Forgiveness	.080	.977	.330
Courage	-.006	-.074	.941
Authenticity	.198	2.168	.032*
Humility	.238	1.949	.053*
Stewardship	.135	1.197	.234
R	.512		
R^2	.262		
Adjusted R^2	.219		
F	6.033		
Sig.	.000		

At 0.01 significant level, the combination effect of various dimensions of servant leadership has a significant impact on affective commitment as the significant value is 0.00. The Multiple R for the relationship between the various dimensions of servant leadership and normative commitment is 0.262, which would be characterized as weak. Interestingly, for individual predictor, only authenticity (β = .198, p < .05) and humility (β = .238, p < .05) were found to have a significant and positive relationship with an affective commitment. Based on the analysis, only H_{1f} and H_{1g} were supported. The summary of the hypotheses results are shown in Table 5.

Table-5. Summary of the Hypotheses

	Hypotheses	Results
H₁	**Servant leadership is significantly related to affective commitment**	**Partially supported**
H_{1a}	Empowerment is significantly related to affective commitment.	Not supported
H_{1b}	Standing back is significantly related to affective commitment.	Not supported
H_{1c}	Accountability is significantly related to affective commitment.	Not supported

H_{1d}	Forgiveness is significantly related to affective commitment.	Not supported
H_{1e}	Courage is significantly related to affective commitment.	Not supported
H_{1f}	Authenticity is significantly related to affective commitment.	**Supported**
H_{1g}	Humility is significantly related to affective commitment.	**Supported**
H_{1h}	Stewardship is significantly related to affective commitment.	Not supported

4.4.　The relationship between servant leadership and trust in leader

The relationship between servant leadership and trust were retrieved from the linear regression analysis. The results of the analysis are present in Table 6.

Table-6. Servant Leadership and Trust in Leader

Model	Standardised Coefficients Beta (β)	t	Sig.
(Constant)		1.789	.076
Empowerment	.114	1.464	.145
Standing back	.076	1.152	.251
Accountability	.132	1.766	.080
Forgiveness	-.079	-1.419	.158
Courage	.037	.669	.505
Authenticity	.006	.102	.919
Humility	.299	3.607	.000*
Stewardship	.317	4.110	.000*
R	.811		
R^2	.658		
Adjusted R^2	.638		
F	32.711		
Sig.	.000		

At 0.01 significant level, the combination effect of various dimensions of servant leadership has a significant impact on trust in leader as the significant value is 0.00. The Multiple R for the relationship between the various dimensions of servant leadership and trust in leader is 0.658, which would be characterized as strong. Interestingly, for individual predictor, only humility (β = .299, $p <$ .05) and stewardship (β = .317, $p <$ .05) were found to have a significant and positive relationship with trust in leader. Based on the analysis, only H_{2g} and H_{2h} were supported. The summary of the hypotheses results are shown in Table 7.

Table-7. Summary of the Hypotheses

	Hypotheses	Results
H_2	**Servant leadership is significantly related to trust.**	**Partially supported**
H_{2a}	Empowerment is significantly related to trust.	Not supported
H_{2b}	Standing back is significantly related to trust.	Not supported
H_{2c}	Accountability is significantly related to trust.	Not supported
H_{2d}	Forgiveness is significantly related to trust.	Not supported
H_{2e}	Courage is significantly related to trust.	Not supported
H_{2f}	Authenticity is significantly related to trust.	Not supported
H_{2g}	Humility is significantly related to trust.	**Supported**
H_{2h}	Stewardship is significantly related to trust.	**Supported**

4.5.　The relationship between trust in leader and affective commitment

The relationship between trust in leader and affective commitment retrieved from linear regression analysis. The results of the analysis are present in Table 8.

Table-8. Trust in Leader and Affective Commitment

Model	Standardised Coefficients Beta (β)	t	Sig.
(Constant)		4.452	.000
Trust in leader	.540	7.669	.000
R	.540		
R^2	.291		
Adjusted R^2	.286		
F	58.809		
Sig.	.000		

At 0.01 significant level, trust in leader has a significant impact on affective commitment as the significant value is 0.00. The Multiple R for the relationship between trust in leader and affective commitment is 0.291, which would be characterized as weak. Based on the analysis, the H_3 is supported.

4.6. The mediation of Trust in Leader in the relationship between Servant Leadership and Affective Commitment

To examine the mediating roles of trust in leader in the Servant Leadership and Affective Commitment relationship, the procedures as suggested by scholars (Kenny, 2003; Baron & Kenny, 1986) were followed. Baron and Kenny (1986) established a four-step criteria model to determine the existence of mediation which is the followings:

i) The independent variable is significantly related to the dependent variable in the absence of the mediator;
ii) The independent variable is significantly related to the mediator;
iii) The mediator is significantly related to the dependent variables; and
iv) The effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable becomes insignificant upon the addition of the mediator into the equation.

According to Baron and Kenny (1986), in step 1 to 3, if one or more of these relationships are not significant, researchers usually conclude that mediation is not possible or likely. In the Step 4 model, some form of mediation is supported if the effect of mediator remains significant after controlling for independent variable. If independent variable is no longer significant when mediator is controlled, the finding supports full mediation. If independent variable is still significant (i.e., both independent variable and mediator significantly predict dependent variable), the finding supports partial mediation.

In step 1, the combination effect of various dimensions of servant leadership has a significant impact on affective commitment. However, for individual predictor, only authenticity and humility founded to have significant relationship with affective commitment.

In step 2, the combination effect of various dimensions of servant leadership has a significant impact on trust in leader. However, for individual predictor, only humility and stewardship founded to have significant relationship with trust in leader.

In step 3, trust in leader founded to has significant relationship with affective commitment.

In step 4, the result from multiple regression analysis revealed that both servant leadership and trust in leader found to have a significant relationship with affective commitment. Hence, confirmed the partial mediation of trust in leader on the servant leadership and affective commitment relationship. However, for individual servant leadership predictor, only humility were analysed for mediation effect because only humility fulfil all the three-step criteria. The result from multiple regression analysis revealed that after controlling for trust in leader, humility is no longer significant. Hence, the finding can be concluded that trust in leader is fully mediating the relationship between servant leadership (humility) and affective commitment. Based on the findings, only H_{4g} was supported. The summary of the hypotheses results are presented in Table 9.

Table-9. Summary of the Hypotheses

	Hypotheses	Results
H₄	**Trust mediates the relationship between servant leadership and affective commitment.**	**Partially supported**
H₄ₐ	Trust mediates the relationship between empowerment and affective commitment.	Not supported
H₄ᵦ	Trust mediates the relationship between standing back and affective commitment.	Not supported
H₄c	Trust mediates the relationship between accountability and affective commitment.	Not supported
H₄d	Trust mediates the relationship between forgiveness and affective commitment.	Not supported
H₄e	Trust mediates the relationship between courage and affective commitment.	Not supported
H₄f	Trust mediates the relationship between authenticity and affective commitment.	Not supported
H₄g	Trust mediates the relationship between humility and affective commitment.	**Supported**
H₄h	Trust mediates the relationship between stewardship and affective commitment.	Not supported

5. Conclusion

In summary, the purposes of this research were (1) to explore the relationship between servant leadership and affective commitment and (2) to determine whether trust in leader mediate the relationship between servant leadership and affective commitment. The results of this study revealed that the combination effects of servant leadership dimensions were positively significant with affective commitment. However, the individual analysis found that only authenticity and humility having positive significant relationship with affective commitment. In addition, generally, trust in leader was partially mediated the relationship between servant leadership and affective commitment. However, specifically, trust in leader was fully mediated the relationship between humility and affective commitment.

This study hoped to provide a better understanding of the right leadership in fostering the employees' commitment especially in the Malaysian context. The results of this study also hope to improve the leader-follower relationship and allow more leaders to realize the benefits of using servant leadership in increasing their relationship with their subordinates, influencing the subordinates' positive job behaviour as well as increasing their subordinates' satisfaction and commitment with their job, department and organization. Furthermore, this study also aims in assisting the responsible bodies or agencies who are responsible for leadership training to conduct proper leadership training to their participants. For example, this would open up a new idea for them to apply servant leadership training to improve the leadership skills among leaders that may lead to rising up individuals' organizational commitment. In addition, due to the little empirical research on servant leadership in developing countries especially in Malaysia, it is hoped that the findings of this study are able to open ways for future research to be conducted in a related or similar area.

5.1. Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study was conducted among working adults working in various organization throughout Malaysia. Thus, the results of the study cannot be generalized to a specific population. Hence, future research may replicate this study in more specific type of job or organization.

The results of this study showed that the combination effects of servant leadership contributed 26.2% to affective commitment. Based on the correlation rules of thumb, this value demonstrated a weak relationship between overall servant leadership and affective commitment. This showed that there are other variables that not been explored in this study. Hence, it is suggested that future study may test other types of leadership such as transformational leadership, transactional leadership and

authentic leadership or by combination of various leadership styles in the relationship with organizational commitment.

In respect to mediating variable, further research may use other variables to the relationship between servant leadership and affective commitment such as job satisfaction, organizational support and motivation.

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