



Servant leadership and task performance: The chain mediating role of perceived insider status and responsible behavior

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Received: 08 January 2026; Accepted: 27 April 2026; Published: 30 June 2026

Abstract: This study investigated the role of perceived insider status and responsible behavior in the relationship between servant leadership and task performance in the manufacturing, retail, and service sectors. Self-reported survey data were collected from 667 employees across multiple Chinese organizations (females = 52.2%, predominantly aged 26–45 [72.0%]) and were analyzed using structural equation modeling. Results of testing a sequential mediation model showed that servant leadership is associated with higher task performance. Responsible behavior acts as a partial independent mediator, accounting for 57.24% of the total effect. Importantly, perceived insider status and responsible behavior were found to sequentially mediate this relationship for higher task performance, accounting for the remaining 42.76% of the effect. These findings support integrating social exchange and self-concept theory to explain the servant leadership and task performance relationship through a sequential process of relational identity formation and identity-congruent action. Specifically, the “identity-to-action” pathway with perceived insider status translates into responsible behavior that drives task performance. For practitioners, cultivating task performance requires not merely fostering perceived insider status, but ensuring it is channeled into responsible behavior—the proximal driver of performance.

Keywords: Servant leadership; task performance; perceived insider status; responsible behavior; sequential mediation

Introduction

Leadership style is a pivotal factor influencing employee motivation and a wide range of performance outcomes (Legood et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2022). Servant leadership, an other-oriented approach prioritizing follower needs and demonstrating authentic concern for the broader organization and community (Eva et al., 2019), is associated with increased thriving at work and improved workplace well-being (He & Guo, 2025; Iqbal et al., 2023; Jiang & Wei, 2024). However, personal factors of insider status and responsible conduct would be important to servant leadership and task performance in ways yet to be determined in the manufacturing and related industry sector contexts (Zada et al., 2022). We presume that employees’ self-concept within the organization, including their perceived insider status and relational identity (which motivates responsible behavior), acts as a powerful leadership tool and a proximal driver of task performance. Based on this presupposition, we posit that servant leadership cultivates task performance indirectly by first enhancing employees’ perceived insider status, which in turn fosters a heightened sense of responsible behavior, ultimately leading to improved task performance. Our study directly tests these presuppositions.

Servant leadership and task performance

Servant leadership refers to an other-oriented approach to leadership that is manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, and involves an outward reorienting of concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community (Eva et al., 2019). It has been robustly linked to a diverse range of positive organizational outcomes,

including enhanced task performance (Eva et al., 2019). For instance, Chiniara and Bentein (2016) found that servant leadership indirectly influences task performance by satisfying followers’ needs for autonomy and competence. Similarly, Zada et al. (2022) demonstrated that psychological empowerment mediates this link in virtual work environments during the COVID-19 crisis. However, as the studies above indicate, this relationship is often indirect, operating through psychological mechanisms rather than directly (Zada et al., 2022). This study argues that servant leadership’s primary influence on task performance is channeled through a sequential motivational chain involving the development of perceived insider status and the subsequent enactment of responsible behavior.

Perceived insider status mediation

Perceived insider status, defined as the degree to which employees perceive themselves as integral members of their organization (Stamper & Masterson, 2002). Servant leadership, with its inherent emphasis on emotional healing, putting followers first, and fostering community (Liden et al., 2008), is uniquely positioned to cultivate the perceived insider status sense of belonging and organizational inclusion. This effect likely works by demonstrating authentic concern, providing individualized support, and actively involving employees in decision-making processes which signals to followers that they are trusted, valued, and integral members of the organizational community (Liden et al., 2014a). With perceived insider status comes fulfillment of socio-emotional needs for respect and affiliation (Foa & Foa, 1974; Stamper & Masterson, 2002).

Meta-analytic evidence confirms that positive leadership styles, including servant leadership, are significantly



correlated with perceived insider status (Lin et al., 2025). In turn, this enhanced insider status positively influences employee performance. Research in the hospitality industry demonstrates that perceived insider status predicts job performance, as employees with a strong sense of belonging display greater commitment and effort in their role responsibilities (Raub, 2018). Thus, perceived insider status serves as a psychological mechanism through which servant leadership indirectly relates to task performance.

Responsible behavior mediation

Responsible behavior is by behavioral enactment of an internalized commitment to the organization's welfare. It reflects a proactive sense of duty and personal obligation to initiate improvements, ensure high-quality outcomes, and prevent problems (Fuller et al., 2006).

Servant leadership is theoretically positioned to foster such responsible behavior through multiple mechanisms. First, servant leaders serve as role models by consistently demonstrating ethical conduct, humility, and accountability. Second, servant leadership emphasizes empowering followers and entrusting them with meaningful responsibilities (Liden et al., 2008). This enhances followers' psychological empowerment and felt responsibility for constructive change, motivating them to take initiative and go beyond formal job requirements (Fuller et al., 2006; Newman et al., 2017). Third, the trust and socio-emotional support provided by servant leaders create a psychologically safe environment where employees feel confident engaging in proactive, responsible behaviors without fear of negative repercussions (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016). Such an environment encourages diligence, safeguarding of organizational resources, and proactive problem-solving. This pattern of proactive conduct directly creates the optimal conditions for higher task performance by encouraging the optimization of work methods, fostering a commitment to excellence, and ensuring reliable task completion (Fuller et al., 2006). Thus, responsible behavior acts as the proximal behavioral driver that effectively translates an internalized insider identity into concrete and effective task execution.

The chain mediating role of perceived insider status and responsible behavior

Integrating the preceding arguments, we propose a sequential mediation model wherein perceived insider status and responsible behavior transmit the influence of servant leadership to task performance. This model is grounded in social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and self-concept theory (Lord et al., 1999), which together provide a coherent explanation for the proposed sequence. While prior research has established that servant leadership influences outcomes through individual mediators such as leader-member exchange or psychological empowerment (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016; Newman et al., 2017), these models typically treat mediators as independent mechanisms operating simultaneously. Such approaches may obscure the temporal and psychological dependencies between constructs. In our framework, perceived insider status represents a relational identity that logically must be established before it can motivate behavioral enactment.

Responsible behavior, as the behavioral expression of that internalized identity, cannot emerge without the prior development of a sense of belonging. Thus, the sequence reflects a theoretically necessary order: identity precedes action, and internalized belonging must translate into proactive conduct before influencing task performance. Testing this sequence as a chain mediation captures the full psychological journey through which servant leadership operates, aligning with calls for more research on sequential processes in servant leadership outcomes (Eva et al., 2019; Langhof & Guldenberg, 2019).

Theoretical foundations

To provide a rigorous foundation for the proposed chain mediation, we draw on two complementary theories: social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and self-concept theory (Lord et al., 1999). Social exchange theory explains the initial relational mechanism by positing that human interactions are governed by norms of reciprocal obligation (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) suggests that favorable treatment from a leader creates an imbalance that employees are motivated to redress. Servant leadership, characterized by prioritizing follower development and empowerment (Liden et al., 2014b), represents a socio-emotional investment—such as trust, support, and ethical guidance (Liden et al., 2008)—that fulfills employees' psychological needs for esteem and belonging. This activates the norm of reciprocity, motivating employees to repay the organization with enhanced positive attitudes and behaviors (Gervasi et al., 2022; Gouldner, 1960). A critical psychological outcome of this reciprocal dynamic is perceived insider status—the extent to which employees feel genuinely accepted, trusted, and integral to the organization (Stamper & Masterson, 2002). The inclusive behaviors of servant leaders signal that employees are valued insiders, directly fostering this sense of belonging (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Yeh et al., 2022).

Self-concept theory (Lord et al., 1999) explains the motivational consequences of this elevated insider status. The theory posits that individuals are driven to act in ways that affirm and validate their self-view (Lord et al., 1999). When perceived insider status becomes integrated into the self-concept as a core component of being a “valued insider,” it motivates employees to engage in identity-congruent behavior. In the workplace, this manifests as responsible behavior—conscientious, proactive actions voluntarily undertaken for the collective good (Fuller et al., 2006). This identity-congruent behavior represents a powerful form of intrinsic motivation. Ultimately, sustained responsible conduct directly enhances task performance through greater diligence, quality focus, and initiative.

Integrating social exchange theory and self-concept theory yields a refined explanation of the sequential process: social exchange theory accounts for the initial relational exchange that generates perceived insider status, while self-concept theory explains how this internalized identity motivates responsible behavior, which in turn drives task performance. By bridging relational and identity-based perspectives, this integrated framework

offers a more comprehensive account of how servant leadership influences critical outcomes than parallel mediation models could provide (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022; Eva et al., 2019).

The manufacturing, retail, and service sectors context

Manufacturing, retail, and service sectors differ substantially in work processes, employee autonomy, and the nature of customer interaction. These conditions may shape how employees interpret and respond to leadership. Manufacturing environments typically emphasize standardized procedures, hierarchical coordination, and operational efficiency. In such settings, how employees go beyond formal requirements may be guided more by clear role expectations than by their sense of organizational belonging (Elorza et al., 2016). Retail settings involve direct customer engagement with moderate task routinization. Service organizations, in contrast, are characterized by frequent interpersonal encounters, a reliance on employee initiative, and the need to address unstructured problems as they arise (Leidner, 1999). These cross-sector differences may affect the mechanisms through which servant leadership relates to task performance. For instance, in service contexts where emotional labor and proactive engagement are more central to the role, the process linking a sense of insider status to responsible behavior, which we term the identity-to-action pathway, could be more pronounced. In contrast, within highly structured manufacturing settings, the translation of insider status into responsible conduct may rely more heavily on explicit role definitions and managerial guidance. A recent field experiment further supports the broader principle that leadership practices do not operate uniformly, as strategies that improve performance in formal, hierarchical environments may have limited effect where trust and relational norms already regulate behavior (Lyu & Yang, 2025). Because our sample spans all three sectors, the present study is well positioned to examine the proposed sequential mediation model across diverse operational contexts, thereby offering insights into the generalizability of our findings while acknowledging that sector-specific conditions may shape the strength of the observed relationships.

Goals of this Study

Guided by this integrated model, the present study aims to test the following specific hypotheses (see Figure 1 for conceptual model):

H1: Servant leadership is associated with higher task performance.

H2: Perceived insider status mediates the relationship between servant leadership and task performance for higher task performance.

H3: Responsible behavior mediates the relationship between servant leadership and task performance to be stronger.

H4: Perceived insider status and responsible behavior sequentially and positively mediate the relationship between servant leadership and task performance for higher task performance.

This study findings on the set of mediating mechanisms that explain servant leadership effects offers one potential model of influence, built on fostering deep-seated

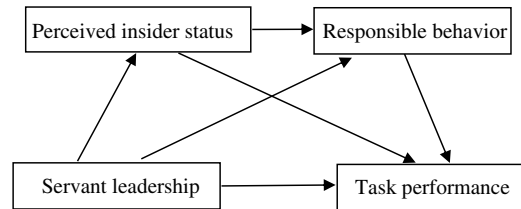


Figure 1. Hypothetical model

belonging and personal responsibility, which can operate alongside other mechanisms like empowerment or trust. Findings contribute to a more holistic understanding of leadership impact across diverse organizational contexts.

Method

Participants and setting

A total of 696 employees from 16 companies in Central China were recruited as participants. After screening and excluding invalid responses, such as those with excessively short completion times and responses in which all items were answered with the same option, 667 valid responses remained, yielding an effective response rate of 95.83%. These companies spanned multiple industries, including manufacturing (52.6%), trading and retail (29.3%), and service delivery (18.1%). Of the study sample, 348 were female (52.2%) and 319 were male (47.8%). The predominant age range was 26–45 (72.0%), and most participants held a bachelor's degree (55.5%). Regarding work experience, 214 participants (32.1%) had five years or less, 157 (23.5%) had six to ten years, 217 (32.5%) had eleven to twenty years, and 79 (11.8%) had more than twenty-one years. Regarding organizational size, 69 participants worked in firms with fewer than 300 employees, 175 worked in firms with 300–1000 employees, 163 in firms with 1000–2000 employees, and 260 in firms with more than 2000 employees.

Measures

All measures used a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree/very low, 5 = strongly agree/very high). We briefly describe each of these.

Servant leadership. Servant leadership was assessed using the 7-item short form (SL-7) developed by Liden et al. (2015). This scale selects the highest-loading item from each of the seven dimensions of the original multidimensional scale: conceptualizing, emotional healing, creating value for the community, helping subordinates grow and succeed, putting subordinates first, behaving ethically, and empowering (Liden et al., 2008). A sample item is, “My superior makes my career development a priority.” In this study, Cronbach's alpha for SL-7 scores was 0.88.

Perceived insider status. Perceived insider status (PIS) was measured using the six-item scale developed by Stamper and Masterson (2002). A sample PIS item is, “I feel very much a part of my work organization.” In this study, Cronbach's alpha for PIS scores was 0.87.

Responsible behavior. Responsible behavior was assessed using a four-item conscientiousness and duty-oriented organizational citizenship behavior scale

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis results

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
Five-factor: SL; PIS; RB; TP; CMV	642.35	145	4.43	0.901	0.924	0.072	0.051
Four-factor: SL; PIS; RB; TP	683.64	164	4.17	0.908	0.921	0.069	0.046
Three-factor: SL; PIS+RB; TP	972.34	167	5.82	0.860	0.877	0.085	0.059
Two-factor: SL+PIS+RB; TP	1396.70	169	8.26	0.790	0.813	0.104	0.069
Single-factor: SL+PIS+RB+TP	1766.60	170	10.39	0.728	0.757	0.119	0.081

Note. $N = 667$. SL = servant leadership; PIS = perceived insider status; RB = responsible behavior; TP = task performance; CMV = common method variance. +: Two variables were combined into one factor.

(CDOC, Farh et al., 2004). This scale captures the essence of responsible behavior as defined by Fuller et al. (2006), reflecting an employee's proactive sense of duty and willingness to go beyond minimal requirements to ensure task success. A sample item is, "I am willing to work overtime without extra pay to ensure task completion." In this study, Cronbach's alpha for CDOC scores was 0.79.

Task performance. Task performance (TP) was self-rated by employees using a three-item scale (Farh et al., 1991). Employees evaluated their own task performance across three dimensions: quality, efficiency, and goal achievement. In this study, Cronbach's alpha for TP scores was 0.80.

Control variables. To account for potential confounding influences, several demographic and contextual variables were included as controls: employees' gender, age, education level, organizational tenure, and the size of their employing organization. These variables have been shown to potentially relate to work outcomes and leadership perceptions (e.g., Lin et al., 2025).

Procedure

The Academic Ethics Committee of the Hunan University of Science and Technology approved the study (Approval No. D22443). All participants provided informed consent electronically before commencing the survey. They were explicitly assured of the complete confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Participants were also informed of their unequivocal right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty, making their participation entirely voluntary.

Data analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 23.0 and Mplus version 8.3. The analytical procedure followed several sequential steps. First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed in Mplus to evaluate potential common method bias following the procedures outlined by Podsakoff et al. (2003) and, more importantly, to assess the discriminant validity of the four key constructs in the study. The results indicated that the hypothesized four-factor measurement model provided an acceptable fit to the data ($\chi^2[164] = 683.64$, $\chi^2/df = 4.17$, CFI = 0.921, TLI = 0.908, RMSEA = 0.069, SRMR = 0.046). Furthermore, a five-factor model that included an additional common-method bias factor did not yield a statistically significant improvement in model fit, as detailed in Table 1.

While this statistical test suggests that common method bias is not a serious concern, its potential influence cannot be entirely ruled out due to the single-source design. The results suggest that the discriminant validity of the key constructs is adequate for proceeding with hypothesis testing. Second, descriptive statistics and Pearson's bivariate correlation analyses were conducted using SPSS to examine the preliminary relationships among variables. Finally, to test the hypothesized chain mediation model, we utilized structural equation modeling (SEM) in Mplus. The significance of the specific indirect effects and the serial mediation effect was rigorously assessed using the bias-corrected percentile bootstrap method with 5000 resamples, generating 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for each effect.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among all study variables. As shown, servant leadership was positively and significantly correlated with perceived insider status ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$), responsible behavior ($r = 0.60$, $p < 0.001$), and task performance ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$). Perceived insider status was also positively correlated with responsible behavior ($r = 0.59$, $p < 0.001$) and task performance ($r = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, responsible behavior showed a strong positive correlation with task performance ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$). Among the control variables, only organizational size showed a significant positive correlation with task performance ($r = 0.09$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that employees in larger organizations reported slightly higher task performance. These correlations provide preliminary support for the proposed relationships and are consistent with the theoretical model.

Hypotheses testing

To test the structural relationships, we employed a model comparison approach. We first tested a partially mediated model (Model 1), which included the direct path from servant leadership to task performance. The results indicated that this direct path, along with the path from perceived insider status to task performance, was not statistically significant. Consequently, to achieve a more parsimonious and theoretically coherent model, the non-significant SL \rightarrow TP path was removed, resulting in Model 2. The path from perceived insider status to task performance was also non-significant and was subsequently removed, resulting

Table 2. Mean, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Servant leadership	3.92	0.66	1			
2. Perceived insider status	3.87	0.65	0.63***	1		
3. Responsible behavior	3.87	0.65	0.60***	0.59***	1	
4. Task performance	4.07	0.56	0.47***	0.39***	0.48***	1

Note. $N = 667$. *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3. Fit indexes, path coefficients and indirect effects of the models

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	
Fit indexes	χ^2	886.331	893.328	896.666
	df	259	260	261
	TLI	0.895	0.894	0.894
	CFI	0.906	0.905	0.905
	RMSEA	0.060	0.060	0.060
	SRMR	0.063	0.064	0.065
Control variables	Gender	0.048	0.051	0.050
	Age	-0.032	-0.041	-0.038
	Education	0.027	0.018	0.016
	Organization size	0.083*	0.093*	0.093*
	Organizational tenure	0.000	-0.004	-0.015
Path coefficients	SL→PIS	0.741***	0.743***	0.741***
	SL→RB	0.394***	0.416***	0.415***
	SL→TP	0.200		
	PIS→RB	0.423***	0.406***	0.418***
	PIS→TP	0.037	0.129	
	RB→TP	0.423***	0.512***	0.620***
Indirect effects	SL→PIS→TP	0.028 [-0.110, 0.167]	0.096 [-0.022, 0.220]	
	SL→RB→TP	0.167** [0.087, 0.283]	0.213*** [0.105, 0.341]	0.257*** [0.154, 0.373]
	SL→PIS→RB→TP	0.133** [0.068, 0.225]	0.155*** [0.092, 0.248]	0.192*** [0.127, 0.273]
Total effect	SL→TP	0.527*** [0.421, 0.623]	0.463*** [0.378, 0.545]	0.449*** [0.359, 0.536]

Note. $N = 667$. SL = servant leadership; PIS = perceived insider status; RB = responsible behavior; TP = task performance; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Resampling times = 5000. Standardized coefficients are reported.

in the final, most parsimonious Model 3. This trimming process is justified on both statistical grounds and theoretical reasoning (Burnham & Anderson, 2002). Statistically, the non-significant direct paths in Models 1 and 2 provide empirical support for a fully mediated model. Theoretically, Model 3 aligns precisely with our core argument: an insider identity must be translated into proximal, responsible behaviors to enhance task performance, rather than influencing it directly. Table 3 summarizes the fit indices for these three competing models. Given that the fit differences among the models were not substantial and because Model 3 represents the most parsimonious solution, it was selected as the final model for interpretation.

Servant leadership and task performance with insider status and responsibility mediation. The analysis of the final model (Model 3) revealed that the total effect of servant leadership on task performance was significant ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$), thus providing support for Hypothesis 1. In other words, the total effect of servant leadership on task performance was significant ($\beta = 0.449$, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 1.

Regarding the simple mediation hypotheses, the indirect effect of servant leadership on task performance through perceived insider status alone (in Model 2) was 0.096 ($p > 0.05$), with a 95% bootstrap CI of [-0.022, 0.220] that included zero. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported. This finding is theoretically meaningful, suggesting that merely feeling like an insider is not sufficient to directly drive task performance without a subsequent behavioral translation.

Indirect and sequential effects. In contrast, the indirect effect of servant leadership on task performance through responsible behavior alone was significant ($\beta = 0.257$, $p < 0.001$), with a 95% CI of [0.154, 0.373] excluding zero, providing strong support for Hypothesis 3. Most importantly, the sequential indirect effect of servant leadership on task performance through perceived insider status and then responsible behavior was also significant ($\beta = 0.192$, $p < 0.001$), with a 95% CI of [0.127, 0.273] excluding zero. This result fully supports Hypothesis 4, confirming the proposed chain mediation pathway. The significant total effect, combined with the non-significant direct effect in the final model, indicates

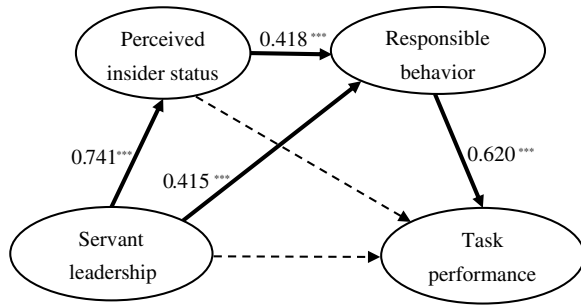


Figure 2. The path coefficients of mediation model. *Note.* *** $p < 0.001$. Standardized coefficients are reported.

that the relationship between servant leadership and task performance is fully mediated by the sequential psychological and behavioral process we proposed. The indirect effects were of moderate magnitude, underscoring their practical significance. Figure 2 provides a more intuitive visual representation of the final model results.

Discussion

This study provides strong empirical evidence that servant leadership enhances employee task performance. This finding aligns with the core theoretical tenet of servant leadership, which emphasizes the development of follower self-concept and intrinsic motivation over direct task control (Liden et al., 2014b). The sequential pathway identified—first cultivating perceived insider status (a relational self-concept) and then motivating responsible behavior (an intrinsically motivated action)—directly reflects this principle, supporting a fully mediated model in which servant leadership influences performance through psychological and behavioral mechanisms rather than direct supervision.

Perceived insider status alone was not a significant mediator of the servant leadership and task performance relationship. In other words the mere feeling of being an organizational insider may not be sufficient to directly translate into enhanced task performance. Rather, this valued identity appears to require translation into concrete, proactive behavioral expressions—embodied here by responsible behavior—to effectively influence performance outcomes (Strauss & Kelly, 2016). This finding aligns with self-concept theory's core tenets that identities motivate identity-congruent behavior; possessing an identity (“being an insider”) is not the endpoint, but its motivational force is realized through action (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). As action-identification theory further suggests, higher-level identifications must be translated into lower-level, concrete actions to directly affect performance (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). Furthermore, this finding extends the nomological network of perceived insider status, as highlighted in recent meta-analytic work (Lin et al., 2025), by demonstrating that its effect on performance is contingent on a subsequent behavioral mechanism.

Responsible behavior independently mediates the relationship between servant leadership and task performance. This finding establishes responsible behavior as a critical proximal mechanism through which servant leadership translates into enhanced task effectiveness.

Unlike more distal psychological mechanisms such as leader-member exchange, psychological empowerment, or basic psychological need satisfaction (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016; Newman et al., 2017), responsible behavior represents a direct, action-oriented pathway that immediately influences the quality, efficiency, and reliability of task execution (Fuller et al., 2006). In this sense, responsible behavior serves as the behavioral conduit through which the relational identity cultivated by servant leadership ultimately drives task performance, bridging the gap between “being valued” and “acting effectively” (Lemoine et al., 2023).

Implications for theory and practice

Theoretically, this study offers several insights to the servant leadership and organizational behavior literature. First, it uncovers a specific “identity-to-action” mediation pathway. We delineate the micro-level process through which servant leadership operates: it first cultivates a relational identity (perceived insider status), which then acts as a motivational catalyst for responsible behavior. While prior studies have identified discrete mediators such as leader-member exchange (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016) or psychological empowerment (Newman et al., 2017), our model reveals the sequential transformation whereby service-oriented leadership is internalized as a sense of belonging and subsequently expressed as proactive effort. This moves beyond identifying what mediates the relationship to demonstrating how the process unfolds, offering a more granular understanding of the psychological journey from leadership perception to performance outcome. In doing so, we respond directly to calls to “unpack the black box” of servant leadership by clarifying the sequential mechanisms behind its outcomes (Eva et al., 2019; Langhof & Guldenberg, 2019; Mcquade et al., 2021).

Second, study finding suggest how socio-emotional resources (e.g., trust, support) provided by the leader (social exchange theory) are converted into a potent identity resource, namely “insider” status (Stamper & Masterson, 2002). This identity, once integrated into the self-concept, motivates behavior that aligns with and affirms it (self-concept theory), thereby driving performance-relevant actions. This suggests a bridge between relational (macro) and psychological (micro) perspectives, offering one explanation of how leadership fosters psychological states that lead to tangible outcomes. By integrating Gouldner's (1960) norm of reciprocity with Lord et al. (1999)'s self-concept based motivation, we provide a more integrated perspective on why an employee moves from feeling obligated to reciprocate (social exchange theory) to feeling intrinsically driven to act responsibly (self-concept theory).

More specifically, the findings shed light on a specific pathway from servant leadership to core in-role task performance, a relationship that has been less direct compared to links with discretionary behaviors (Panaccio et al., 2015). By identifying responsible behavior as the proximal behavioral driver, we highlight a mechanism that directly enhances task effectiveness. Responsible behavior (Fuller et al., 2006) bridges motivation and execution, channeling

the energy derived from an insider identity into focused role performance. This suggests that servant leadership elevates core performance not through enforced compliance, but by cultivating an internalized sense of ownership. This insight helps distinguish the pathway to in-role performance from those leading to extra-role behaviors, offering a more precise theoretical model.

Practically, the findings yield actionable insights for key organizational stakeholders.

For corporate boards and senior leadership, the priority is championing leadership development that explicitly targets the servant leadership competencies identified in this study—namely, prioritizing follower needs and empowering responsibility. Specifically, Human Resources (HR) should implement programs that build servant leadership capabilities—such as workshops on reflective listening, empathy, and psychological safety. They can also redesign performance management systems to include metrics capturing both servant leader behaviors (e.g., prioritizing follower development) and employee outcomes (e.g., responsible behavior). HR can further institutionalize practices that translate servant leadership into perceived insider status and responsible behavior. For instance, a ‘leadership shadowing’ program, where high-potential employees are entrusted to lead a small project with full support from a servant leader, can simultaneously build insider status (through trust) and encourage responsible behavior (through ownership).

For employees, the findings highlight how experiencing servant leadership can motivate performance-enhancing actions. Employees are encouraged to recognize that their leader’s service-oriented behaviors—such as providing support, trust, and development opportunities—are invitations to reciprocate through responsible actions like taking initiative, safeguarding organizational resources, and proactively addressing challenges. By understanding that their proactive contributions are both valued and expected, employees can more intentionally translate their sense of being served into concrete actions that enhance task performance. Additionally, employees can reinforce servant leadership by providing feedback to leaders about which supportive behaviors are most meaningful to them.

Limitations and future directions

This study has limitations that suggest valuable future research directions. First, the cross-sectional design precludes definitive causal claims. While our theoretical model implies a specific sequence (SL→PIS→RB→TP), the data cannot empirically rule out alternative causal orders or reciprocal relationships. For instance, high performers might be granted more responsibility, leading to greater insider status and more positive perceptions of their leader. Future studies should employ longitudinal or experimental designs to robustly establish causality, as recommended in methodological critiques (Antonakis et al., 2010). The use of time-lagged designs or experience sampling methodologies would provide stronger evidence for the proposed temporal sequence (Cotrim & Gomes, 2024). Second, while key demographics were controlled, other contextual and individual factors could moderate the proposed relationships. Future research should explore

potential moderators such as organizational culture, job autonomy, or follower cultural values (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022; Langhof & Guldenberg, 2019). For example, an employee’s proactive personality might strengthen the link from perceived insider status to responsible behavior, or their level of traditionality could influence how they respond to servant leadership (Xu et al., 2024). Third, the exclusive use of a Chinese sample limits generalizability. Cultural factors may influence the salience of the constructs. Cross-cultural studies, particularly comparing Eastern and Western contexts (Mittal & Dorfman, 2012; Pekerti & Sendjaya, 2010), are needed to test the model’s boundary conditions. Encouragingly, meta-analytic evidence suggests that the effects of servant leadership on key outcomes are largely consistent across Chinese and Anglo-Saxon contexts (McCune Stein et al., 2020), but this does not preclude the need for direct cross-cultural comparisons of the specific sequential pathways identified here. Fourth, this study focused on a specific two-mediator chain. The use of self-reported performance data, while practical, is a significant limitation. Future research should incorporate supervisor-rated performance or objective performance indicators to mitigate concerns about common method bias and self-enhancement tendencies. Future research could also explore other parallel or complementary mediating pathways (e.g., psychological safety, work engagement) or multi-level boundary conditions to build a more comprehensive nomological network. Finally, while our sampling through HR managers provided access, it may have introduced social desirability bias. Future studies could employ diverse recruitment strategies to mitigate this.

Conclusion

This study tested a sequential mediation model linking servant leadership to task performance through perceived insider status and responsible behavior. Analyzing survey data from 667 employees across multiple Chinese organizations, we found that servant leadership relates to task performance indirectly through a sequential pathway: first enhancing perceived insider status, which then motivates responsible behavior, ultimately contributing to improved task performance. Notably, the simple mediation through perceived insider status alone was not supported, indicating that identity must be translated into action to relate to performance. By illuminating this “identity-to-action” pathway, the research provides a refined understanding of how servant leadership drives organizational outcomes. Theoretically, it advances the literature by integrating social exchange and self-concept theories to explain the sequential process through which servant leadership relates to performance. Practically, the study findings provide preliminary guidance for cultivating servant leadership competencies and designing systems that translate follower inclusion into responsible, high-quality performance—an increasingly critical capability in today’s dynamic workplace landscapes.

Acknowledgement: We would like to thank all employees who participated in our research.

Funding Statement: The authors received no specific funding for this study.

Author Contributions: Boqiang Zong designed the study, coordinated the data analysis, and drafted and revised the manuscript. Yungui Guo was responsible for data collection and participated in the research design and in drafting the manuscript. Ningwei Cai contributed to the data analysis and drafted and revised the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Availability of Data and Materials: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the Corresponding Author, [Yungui Guo], upon reasonable request.

Ethics Approval: The research received ethical approval from the Academic Ethics Committee at the Hunan University of Science and Technology (Approval No. D22443). All participants provided informed consent electronically before commencing the survey.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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