



FOSTERING EMPLOYEES' PROACTIVE BEHAVIOR BY SERVANT LEADERSHIP: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND MODERATING ROLE OF COLLECTIVISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Article History

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Psychological safety, Collectivism, Proactive behavior

Article History

Received on 27 April 2026

Accepted on 09 May 2026

Published on 22 May 2026

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Abstract

This research investigates the relationship between servant leadership and proactive behavior among employees, using psychological safety as a mediator and collectivism as a moderator. Based on social exchange theory and cultural value approaches, this research hypothesizes a mediated moderated model where servant leadership positively affects proactive behavior through psychological safety, and this positive effect is reinforced when collectivism is high. The data for this research were gathered from employees in higher education institutions, and the findings show that servant leadership is a significant predictor of proactive behavior. Psychological safety partially mediates the relationship between servant leadership and proactive behavior, implying that servant leaders create a safe interpersonal context that promotes initiative and change-oriented behavior. Additionally, collectivism positively moderates the relationship between psychological safety and proactive behavior, magnifying the impact in a collectivist setting. This research has important implications for leadership development and organizational culture in higher education institutions, underlining the need to cultivate supportive leadership and culturally congruent management practices to promote proactive work behavior.



1. Introduction

In recent years, academics have given servant leadership a lot of attention. According to Mostafa and El-Motalib (2019), servant leadership is typically seen as a leadership approach that emphasizes personal integrity and concentrates on advancing the interests of others. According to Greenleaf (1977), servant leaders are selfless individuals who put the needs and wants of others before their own. In the current era of growing complexity and change, servant leadership is a comprehensive style of leadership that can be successful. Since then, academics have focused more on it, particularly in the last several years (Newman et al. 2017). The crises surrounding managers' unethical actions in firms over the past ten years are among the factors that have sparked a greater interest in servant leadership (Hoch, Bommer, Dulebohm, & Wu, 2018). Additionally, the managers' need to adopt new mental models that would enable them to be stewards, teachers, enablers, and servants suggests that the ongoing emphasis on servant leadership is well-founded.

Previous research has demonstrated two different leadership philosophies: transformational and servant leadership. For many years, the educational setting has placed special emphasis on the special process of developing people-oriented leadership (Brohi et al., 2018). Bahari (2023) said in a study on organizational and college leadership that both approaches are dynamic and active for both parties. According to the study, the primary influence on employees is the department head or institution; identifying a dynamic leadership style is deemed essential.

The various aspects of servant leadership in professional and particularly educational contexts have been the subject of numerous research (Xu, Loi, & Chow, 2022). Results show that administrators who practice servant leadership have a significant positive impact on the positive atmosphere of their institutions and the confidence that instructors have in their ability to lead (Black, 2010). Despite these encouraging results, little is known about the impact of servant leadership on proactive behaviors in the education sector from the present body of research. The current study examines whether servant leadership is positively correlated with faculty members' proactive actions in higher education institutions in order to further the field of servant leadership research.

According to Chughtai (2019), proactive behavior is a higher-order category of motivated behaviors that describes self-initiated, future-focused action intended to enhance oneself or the situation. Proactive work behavior is anticipatory in nature and usually extends beyond an employee's primary task obligations. The organization has a very high chance of improving its performance if its human resources behave pro-actively. Increasing each

human resource's proactive conduct becomes crucial for organizations. Developing proactive behavior at work is a key component of raising each employee's performance (Varela, Bande, Del Rio, & Jaramillo, 2019).

Additionally, when it comes to the impact of leadership styles on proactive behavior, the researchers' attention gradually shifts to ideas like transformative, hilarious, authentic, and servant leadership as proposed by Jauhari, Singh, and Kumar (2017). According to Wu, Ye, Cheng, Kwan, and Lyu (2020), servant leadership is a leadership style that prioritizes the needs, desires, and advantages of others. It also continuously gains the trust of subordinates and likely influences proactive conduct from individuals. Based on the Fortune survey, which shows the universal value in the field of management, previous research showed that servant leadership has been applied and promoted in some of the top firms to work for in America (Bauer, Perrot, Liden et al., 2019). Proactive behavior, or self-initiated, anticipatory efforts by employees to impact change and enhance current work processes, is becoming more and more valued by employers in dynamic and competitive work environments (Panaccio, Henderson, Liden, Wayne, & Cao, 2015). Therefore, it is essential for long-term organizational effectiveness to comprehend the leadership factors that encourage proactive conduct. A recent study looked at how servant leaders affected the proactive actions of faculty members in Azad Kashmir's higher education institutions.

Psychological safety, the common conviction that interpersonal risk-taking is safe within a work group is one possible way that servant leadership may encourage proactive behavior among employees (Edmondson, 1999). According to Kim, Lee, and Connerton (2020), psychological safety creates an environment where workers may freely express their thoughts, ask questions, and try new things without worrying about the repercussions. According to earlier studies, servant leadership increases psychological safety by exhibiting empowerment, respect, and support, which in turn motivates staff members to take initiative (Khan, Zada & Estay, 2023). Psychological safety has been demonstrated to mediate a number of leadership outcome links, but its function in the servant leadership proactive behavior link is less clear.

Additionally, collectivism a cultural and personal value that emphasizes group harmony, cohesion, and collective goals may influence how psychological safety translates into proactive actions, meaning that its effects on proactive behavior may vary depending on the context (Zemojtel-Piotrowska & Piotrowski, 2023). collective goals and harmony are social priority in collectivistic societies or among people with a high collectivist orientation. This may increase the possibility that psychologically safe situations may encourage proactive activities that benefit the collective (Iqbal, Shagirbasha, & Madhan, 2024). On the other hand, individual priorities may

make it more difficult to translate safety into proactive behaviors in low-collectivism environments. Clarifying the boundary conditions of psychological safety's impact on proactive actions, especially in cross-cultural contexts, requires an understanding of collectivism's moderating role (Rakthin, Punnakitikashem, Otakanon, & Oo, 2022). In light of this, another goal of the research is to examine culture as a moderating element that protects faculty members' psychological safety and proactive conduct.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Servant Leadership and Employees' Proactive Behavior

Servant leadership is defined as the leader's emphasis on serving followers' needs, developing them, and empowering them (Greenleaf, 2013). Servant leaders display ethical stewardship, individualized consideration, and humility, which engender a work environment that is conducive to employee engagement and discretionary behavior. Empirical studies have found that servant leadership is positively associated with proactive service behavior, public service motivation, and organizational citizenship because it fosters intrinsic motivation and responsibility (Gil et al., 2024). More specifically, servant leadership fosters role modeling, resource provision, and psychological encouragement that stimulate employees to engage in proactive behavior actions taken to change and improve work situations (Bauer et al., 2019).

Although the direct relationship between servant leadership and proactive behavior among its servants has been explored in the literature, mostly in other fields such as service behavior and voice behavior (Newman et al., 2017), there are still some gaps in understanding the psychological processes underlying the relationship between servant leadership and proactive behavior. Research on other proactive behaviors indicates that positive leadership styles create a psychological climate that encourages employees to act as change agents, suggesting the role of mediating psychological processes (Ye et al., 2019). Therefore,

Hypothesis 1(H1). Servant leadership positively related with employee's proactive behavior.

2.2 Psychological Safety as a Mediator

Psychological safety is defined as the perception that interpersonal risk-taking, such as speaking up or challenging the status quo, is safe within the team (Edmondson, 1999). It has been identified as essential for creativity, innovation, learning, and proactive behavior (Lee, & Dahinten, 2021). Leaders who are empathetic, communicative, and supportive of their employees create conditions in which employees feel secure to behave proactively without fear of embarrassment or punishment (Elsaied, 2019). Empirical studies show that servant leadership increases psychological safety by

meeting followers' needs for respect and autonomy, which, in turn, leads to positive behavioral outcomes (Chen, Jiang, Zhang & Chu, 2019). These results imply that psychological safety acts as a mediator between servant leadership and employee behaviors, which go beyond their job descriptions. While there has been considerable research on psychological safety in the context of creativity and innovation (Kim, 2021), the role of psychological safety as a mediator between servant leadership and proactive outcomes has remained relatively unexplored.

In a similar vein, previous research on leadership styles, including authentic and transformational leadership, has also found that psychological safety is a mediator of proactive and extra-role behaviors (Singh, 2023). Thus, psychological safety is a valid and supported mediator for testing the underlying psychological processes of the impact of servant leadership on proactive behavior.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). Psychological safety mediates in the relationship between servant leaders and faculty members' proactive behavior.

2.3 Collectivism as a Moderator

Collectivism, a culture that values group-oriented goals, interdependence, and group harmony, is a fundamental dimension of cultural differences (Puente-Diaz, 2011). Collectivism affects the way employees perceive social cues, view group cohesion, and perform voluntary behaviors that are beneficial to the group instead of personal gain. Collectivism has been found to moderate different relationships in organizations, including the relationship between leadership and exchange quality and psychological safety (Kuo, Ye, Chen, & Chen, 2019), and the relationship between cultural values and employee engagement and affective experiences (Pian, Jin, & Li, 2019). In a high collectivist setting, people are more likely to demonstrate their behaviors in accordance with group goals, which could enhance the positive relationship between psychological safety and proactive behaviors for the benefit of the group or organization.

Although the literature on the moderating role of collectivism in the relationship between psychological safety and proactive behavior is still in its infancy, findings from cross-cultural leadership studies support the idea that cultural values influence the relationship between psychological safety and behavioral outcomes such as authentic leadership research that found a weakening of psychological safety effects under high collectivism (Lee, & Seo, 2024). Thus, the inclusion of collectivism as a moderator can add depth to our understanding of the boundary conditions under which psychological safety predicts proactive employee behavior, particularly in culturally diverse and group-oriented environments.

Hypothesis 3(H3). Collectivism moderates in the relationship between psychological safety and employee’s proactive behavior. High collectivist culture strengthen the relationship between psychological safety and

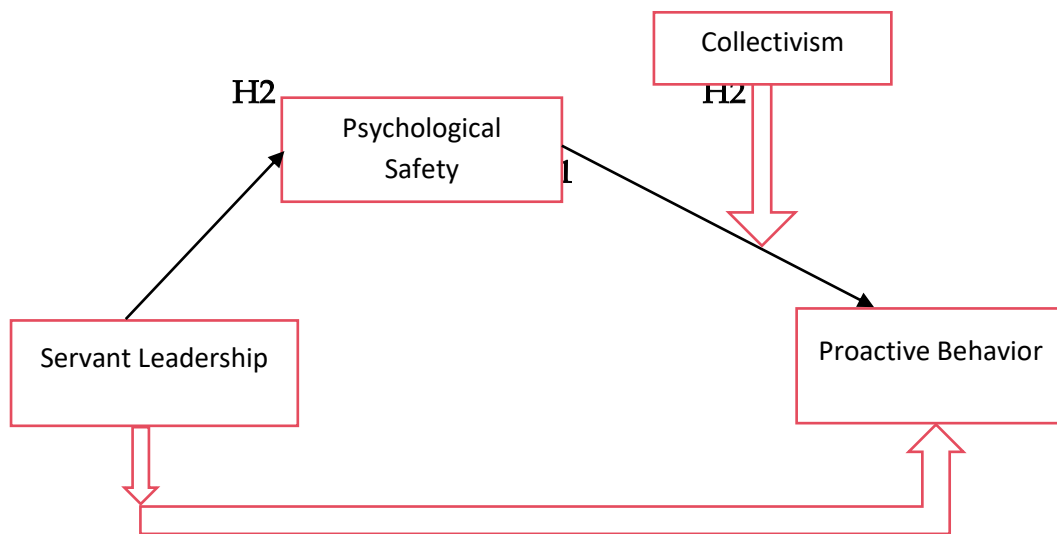


Figure1: Theoretical Model

professional proactive behavior.

4. Methods

4.1 Procedure and Participants

The present study used a questionnaire survey of 280 faculty members from Azad Kashmir's higher education institutions to test the hypothesis and theoretical model. Consent was obtained during the information collection process to ensure that the data would be kept completely private and used exclusively for academic purposes. To boost their enthusiasm and involvement, each participant received a modest present in the interim. Additionally, in addition to prior research, this study collected the sample data at four-week intervals to enhance data quality and prevent typical technique bias. A questionnaire survey with a two-time lag was used. Subordinates were asked to submit their demographic details and opinions on servant leadership in the first phase. This stage received responses from 300 participants in total. Subordinates were asked to fill out a questionnaire in the second stage about faculty proactive behavior, collectivism as a culture, and psychological safety. Approximately 290 completed questionnaires were received. The final sample size was 280 after the incomplete questionnaires were eliminated. Of these, 100 were women (40.4%) and 180 were men

(59.6%). The age distribution showed that just 125 (42.6%) of the population was 40 years of age or older, while 155 (55.4%) were young adults. Sixty (12.7%) have five to ten years of job experience, 116 (279.9%) have one year or less, and 104 (25.0%) have one to three to five years.

4.2 Measures

4.2.1 Servant Leadership: Servant Leadership scale adapted by Van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011), 30 items scale with a five-point Likert scale. Cronbach's alpha value of scale is 0.85.

4.2.2 Psychological Safety: Psychological safety 7 items scale adopted by Edmondson's (1999), with a five-point Likert scale, whose Cronbach's alpha value is over around 0.80.

4.2.3 Collectivism: In this study to gather information regarding culture as collectivism by Srite & Karahanna (2006), six items scale. Alpha reliability of scale was .88.

4.2.4 Proactive Behavior: The PB were identified and adapted by Parker & Collins, (2010). 13 items scale with Cronbach's alpha value was above 0.80.

5. Analysis strategy

The SPSS PROCESS macro program, Amos 22.0 software, and SPSS 22.0 software were utilized in this study to test the data. The particular procedure is as follows: First, the validity and reliability of core variables are tested using exploratory factor analyses, confirmatory factor analyses, and internal consistency tests. Second, to examine the links between the core variables in a preliminary manner, descriptive statistics and correlation analyses are calculated. In order to examine the direct impact of servant leadership on PB, the mediating role of psychological safety, and the moderating role of collectivism in the relationship between an individual's psychological safety and proactive behaviors, regression analyses are suggested.

5.1 Results and Analysis

5.1.1 Reliability and Factor Analysis

Prior to testing the hypothesis, the current study confirmed that every measurement scale was valid and dependable. Cronbach's alpha values for servant leadership, psychological safety, collectivism, and individual proactive behavior are 0.836, 0.874, 0.821, and 0.866, respectively, showing strong reliability. The results of this reliability analysis are displayed in Table 1. As a result, the internal consistency of the measurement items utilized in this study is comparatively good. Furthermore, this study used exploratory factor analysis with Promax rotation to confirm the validity among variables and principal axis factoring for factor extraction. Table 2 presents the results, showing that all items have factor loading values of at least 0.7 (0.713 ~ 0.886). The KMO value assessing the sufficiency of our final sample is 0.80, which is near to 1, and the Bartlett's test statistic for sphericity, which confirms if the



correlation between variables is zero, is 6257.264 (df = 276, p = 0.000). As a result, this study thinks that these four variables are easily differentiable and appropriate for factor analysis. In order to examine the factor structure and construct validity of our suggested model, this study also does confirmatory factor analyses. Table 3 displays the findings. A superior match to the data is shown by the four-factor measurement model, which includes servant leadership, PS, collectivism, and PB as independent factors ($\chi^2/df = 2.375$, TLI, CFI, and IFI = 0.919 > 0.9, RMSEA = 0.056).

Table 1: Reliability Analysis

Variables	Items	Cronbach Alpha
Servant Leadership	30	0.83
Psychological Safety	7	0.87
Collectivism	6	0.82
Proactive Behavior	13	0.86

Table 2: Exploratory Factor Analysis

Items	1	2	3	4
SL1			.824	
SL2			.798	
SL3			.699	
SL8			.771	
SL9			.875	
SL10			.858	
SL11			.674	
SL12			.731	
SL15			.610	
SL16			.634	
SL17			.875	
SL19			.874	
SL20			.831	
SL22			.699	
SL23			.776	
SL24			.875	
SL26			.858	
SL27			.847	
SL28			.812	



ISSN Online: 3006-2047

ISSN Print: 3006-2039



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SL29		.689
SL30		.622
PS1	.824	
PS2	.678	
PS3	.775	
PS4	.878	
PS5	.832	
PS6	.789	
COL1		.876
COL3		.775
COL4		.832
COL5		.648
COL6		.799
PB1	.831	
PB3	.611	
PB5	.745	
PB6	.654	
PB7	.875	
PB9	.823	
PB11	.723	
PB12	.699	

Table 3: Measurement Model Validation CFA

Model	Chi-square (x2)	Df	CMIN/df	RMSEA	IFI	TLI	CFI	P-Close
Revised Model	427.67	180	2.375	0.065	0.960	0.938	0.960	.001

6. Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis was used to examine the linear relationship between the research variables. The direction and intensity of these relationships were evaluated using Pearson's correlation coefficient (r). The results of the Pearson correlation analysis are shown in Table 4. Table 4 showed that psychological safety and servant leadership were significantly and favorably correlated (r=.552, p<.01). The findings demonstrated that servant leaders had a favorable and substantial relationship with both employee proactive behavior (r=.610, p<.01) and organizational culture (r=.476, p<.05). Psychological safety also had a positive correlation with individual proactive action (r=.584, p<.01) and collectivism (r=.542, p<.01). Finally, proactive conduct in higher education institutions is favorably and strongly correlated with collectivist culture (r=.448, p<.05).

Table 4: Correlation Analysis

Sr. No	Variables	1	2	3	4
	Servant Leadership	1			
	Psychological Safety	.552**	1		
	Collectivism	.476*	.542**	1	
	Proactive Behavior	.610**	.584**	.448*	1



Note: $p^* < .05$, $p^{**} < .01$

7. Hypotheses Testing

7.1 Direct Effect of Servant Leadership and Proactive behavior

The hypothesized relationships between leadership (the predictor variable), and proactive behavior (the outcome variable) was tested using regression analysis.

Table 5 : Direct Relationship

Sr.No	Relationship	β	R2	P-Value	Result
Hypothesis 1	SL \rightarrow PB	.269	.032	.015	Accepted

Hypothesis 1: Servant leadership is positively related with individual’s proactive behavior in higher education institutions.

To test hypothesis 1, simple linear regression was performed with inclusive leadership as predictor and professional quality of life as result. Results (Table 5) showed a positive correlation ($\beta = .169$, $p < .05$) in support of H1 receptor status. Regression coefficients, p-values, and R-squared values for the direct effects are displayed in Table 5. This suggests a positive relationship between higher levels of leaders and higher level of proactive behavior. For Hypothesis 1, servant leader explained a significant proportion of the variance in knowledge sharing behavior ($R^2 = .032$).

7.2 Mediation Analysis

Hypothesis 2: PS mediates the relationship between servant leader’s and proactive behavior of employees.

Table 6 : Mediation Analysis

Sr. No	Variables	β	SE	LLCI 95%	UPCI 95%	P-Value
H2	SL \rightarrow PS	.239	.065	.1245	.3876	.0003
	PS \rightarrow PB	.618	.046	.4360	.6186	.000
	Direct effect SL \rightarrow PB	.269	.055	.0543	.2341	.015
	Indirect Effect SL \rightarrow PS \rightarrow PB	.148	.049	.052	.243	.000



ISSN Online: 3006-2047

ISSN Print: 3006-2039

Volume. 5, Issue No. 2 (2026)

Total effect						
Direct Effect	.417	.067	.035	.302	.013	
Indirect Effect						

Note: SL refers to Servant Leadership, PS refers to Psychological Safety, PB refers to Proactive Behavior. Unstandardized regression coefficient. Bootstrap 5000, sample size 280. LL is for the lower limit; CI = the confidence interval; UL is for the upper limit. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Hypothesis 2 was tested using SPSS's PROCESS macro (Model 4). The results (Table 6) demonstrated that inclusive leadership significantly boosts psychological safety, which in turn motivates workers to impart their knowledge. The direct effect of leadership on proactive action, when accounting for psychological safety, is ($\beta = .269, p < .05$). This study's indirect effect is still significant ($\beta = .148, p < .05$). The aforementioned standards have demonstrated that psychological stability acts as the sole mediator in the relationship between proactive conduct and inclusive leadership. These findings support hypothesis 2.

7.3 Moderation Analysis

Furthermore, hypothesis 3, for the moderating effect of collectivism, the results showed that the interaction term has a significant positive effect on employee's proactive behavior.

Table 7: Moderation Analysis

Relationship	β	SE	P-value	LLCI	ULCI	Accepted/Rejected
H3 PS \rightarrow PB	.631	.112	.003	.9941	.3265	
Int_Term \rightarrow PB	.260	.036	.021	.6542	.5422	Accepted

Significant results between the interaction term and staff retention were shown in Table 7 ($\beta = .260, p < .05$). There is a moderating influence present because the lower and upper limits of the confidence interval (LLCI = .6542, ULCI = .5422) do not surpass zero. Additionally, the conditional impact values progressively increase from .4702 to .5221, indicating that those institutions had collectivist cultural beliefs at that period, which makes faculty members feel more psychologically secure and encourages their proactive behaviors. The theory and hypothesis were supported by the above outcome in Table 7.

8. Discussion

With psychological safety acting as a mediator and collectivism acting as a moderator in the relationship between psychological safety and proactive behavior, the current study looked at how servant leadership affected

workers' proactive behavior. The results showed that proactive conduct is significantly predicted by servant leadership, confirming earlier empirical findings that servant leaders encourage employee initiative, voice, and change-oriented behavior. Servant leaders place a high value on the development, empowerment, and moral leadership of their followers, which inspires workers to take responsibility for their work and exhibit positive, proactive behaviors (Eva et al., 2019; Liden et al., 2014). According to social exchange theory, when workers feel empowered, cared for, and supported by their leaders, they return the favor by making proactive contributions that advance the company.

The findings also demonstrated that the association between proactive conduct and servant leadership is mediated by psychological safety. This result is consistent with studies that show leaders who exhibit humility, genuineness, and care foster a secure workplace where staff members may share their thoughts and take chances without worrying about the repercussions (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2017). By encouraging open communication and lowering interpersonal risk, servant leadership traits like empathy, listening, and ethical stewardship improve psychological safety. According to Liang, Farh, and Farh (2012), psychological safety in turn empowers workers to question the status quo, make suggestions for enhancements, and start positive changes all of which are essential elements of proactive behavior.

Furthermore, the positive correlation between proactive conduct and psychological safety is reinforced by collectivism's moderating influence. People in collectivist environments place a high value on harmony within the group, common objectives, and the well-being of the group as a whole. Employees are more likely to translate their sense of safety into proactive efforts that benefit the group when psychological safety is high in these kinds of environments (Hofstede, 201). This suggests that collectivist values amplify the behavioral outcomes of psychological safety because proactive actions are perceived by employees as contributions to collective success rather than just individual initiatives. Thus, this study's conditional indirect effect emphasizes how culturally rooted employee behaviors and leadership processes are (Xu, Zeng, Wang, Qian, & Gu, 2022).

The results show that servant leadership encourages proactive conduct through psychological safety, and that this mechanism is greater under high collectivist attitudes. Overall, the findings experimentally validate a regulated mediation mechanism, extending the notion of servant leadership.

9. Implications for Higher Education Institutions



The following are some of the most significant implications of this research for higher education institutions (HEIs):

9.1 Leadership Development Programs

Higher education institutions should integrate the principles of servant leadership into leadership development programs for departmental heads, deans, and administrators. This can help establish psychologically safe learning environments that foster innovation and active engagement on the part of faculty members and administrators.

9.2 Psychological Safety in Academic Units

Higher education institutions should establish open communication environments where faculty members feel secure to discuss research ideas, teaching innovations, and constructive feedback without fear of reprisal.

9.3 Building on Collectivist Cultural Advantages

In collectivist societies like Pakistan and other South Asian countries, institutions can capitalize on the group-mindedness of these cultures to improve cooperative research, interdisciplinary projects, and collective governance structures. Building a stronger sense of group identity in departments could improve the positive impact of psychological safety on proactive academic behavior.

9.4 Fostering Innovation and Change-Driven Behavior

With the growing challenge of competition and global ranking, HEIs need proactive faculty members who can drive changes in the curriculum, research, and community outreach activities. Servant leadership approaches can be used as a change-enabling mechanism to trigger these behaviors.

10. Conclusion

The current research has several implications for the literature on leadership and organizational behavior. First, it shows that servant leadership positively impacts employees' proactive behavior as it is mediated by psychological safety. Moreover, it shows that collectivism positively moderates the relationship between psychological safety and proactive behavior, which is an important aspect of leadership and organizational behavior. The results of the study confirm that leadership is not only direct but also works through psychological processes that are culture-specific. In other words, by creating supportive and ethical leadership environments, organizations, especially higher education institutions, can encourage proactive behavior that leads to innovation and sustainability.

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