
Socially Responsible Leadership's Impact on Stakeholder Management, Staff Job Satisfaction and Work Engagement

Submitted 27/10/21, 1st revision 18/11/21, 2nd revision 30/11/21, accepted 15/12/21

Tomasz Gigol¹, Katarzyna Kreczmańska-Gigol², Renata Pajewska-Kwaśny³

Abstract:

Purpose: The article investigates how executive managers handle stakeholder management in the challenging pandemic context. How executive managers' moral identity affects their attitudes and decisions when faced with crisis. Insight into the influence of socially responsible servant leadership on followers' job satisfaction and work engagement.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Qualitative research on stakeholder management in the pandemic crisis and leaders' moral identity as the basis of their activities. Quantitative research focusing on the influence of socially responsible leadership on public sector's employees.

Findings: The ongoing COVID-19 crisis strengthens socially responsible leadership. The company leaders participating in the research, whose companies were partly state-owned but also operated on the capital market, were aware of the broad context of stakeholder management and recognized the need to not focus only on shareholders. We observed an influence of moral identity on their decisions. It can be concluded that the respondents' attitudes represented socially responsible leadership and servant leadership. A positive impact of leadership attitude was discovered on job satisfaction, organization identification, and work engagement.

Practical Implications: The practical implications of the research indicate that servant leadership is a theory that should be developed and taught in universities and business schools.

Originality/value: We analyze how socially responsible leaders manage stakeholders during crisis, how moral identity shapes socially responsible leaders and affects their attitudes and decisions when their enterprise faces a crisis and contribute to the discussion on servant leadership as a leadership style that supports socially responsible leadership by investigating its influence on staff well-being. Finally, we study an Eastern European context to provide pioneering research on servant leadership.

Keywords: Socially responsible leadership, stakeholder management, job satisfaction, work engagement, organization identification, servant leadership.

JEL classification: M12, M14.

Paper Type: Research article.

¹PhD, Assistant Professor, Institute of Management, Warsaw School of Economics, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7018-4552>, tgigol@sgh.waw.pl;

²PhD, Associate Professor, Institute of Finance, Warsaw School of Economics, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8483-9740>, kgigol@sgh.waw.pl;

³PhD, Senior Lecturer, Institute of Risk and Financial Markets, Warsaw School of Economics, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0080-3906>, rpajew@sgh.waw.pl;

1. Introduction

In response to contemporary challenges of sustainable development and corporate social responsibility (CSR) needs, a concept of responsible leadership has been proposed as “*the art of building and sustaining good relationships with all relevant stakeholders*” (Maak and Pless, 2006). Defined in this way, responsible leadership should be rooted in a leader’s personal values, such as humbleness, courage, integrity and happiness. Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) proposed the concept of organization-centric sustainable leadership, which involves environmentally friendly and socially responsible leadership with a long-term perspective in making business decisions that leads to the development of innovative products and an expanded customer base. Di Fabio and Peiró (2018) took a different perspective with a focus on associates. They proposed the concept of human capital sustainability leadership, which emphasizes staff development and well-being. Waldman and Siegel (2008) published a discussion on the concept of socially responsible leadership from two perspectives.

On the one hand, Siegel promoted an organizational, purely strategic market approach to CSR, which contributes to an increase in the company’s profits. On the other hand, Waldman postulated the inclusion of the leader’s moral identity in the socially responsible leadership concept (Waldman and Siegel, 2008). The latter approach has been adopted by many other authors (James and Priyadarshini, 2021; Maak and Pless, 2006).

Socially responsible leadership is described as “*an orientation or mind-set taken by people in executive-level positions toward meeting the needs of a firm’s stakeholder(s). As such, it deals with defining those stakeholder(s), assessing the legitimacy of their claims, and determining how those needs, expectations, or interests can and should best be served*” (Waldman *et al.*, 2020). To reconcile the two approaches to CSR presented above, socially responsible leaders have been divided into strategists who are interested only in pivotal stakeholders and integrators who focus on all stakeholders affected by the company (Waldman *et al.*, 2020).

Many authors claim that from a long-term perspective, both approaches render the same results but also contribute to an increase in enterprise value (Javed *et al.*, 2020a, 2020b; Ye *et al.*, 2021), while a focus on stakeholders provides a permanent strategic firm advantage (Harrison *et al.*, 2010). The socially responsible leadership described above mainly applies to executive managers because their decisions are strategic. Furthermore, in this article, we focus on the integrator’s orientation in socially responsible leadership. An integrator not only feels responsible for all stakeholders (rather than exclusively for the most important ones) but also maintains a long-term perspective on CSR and goes beyond short-term cost and benefit analyses. Moreover, an integrator is personally involved in CSR activities and serves as an example for other employees (Waldman *et al.*, 2020).

It is particularly significant in a company crisis when leaders face stakeholders' contradictory needs and encounter a dilemma regarding how much they should care for shareholders and take other stakeholders into account (Waldman and Bowen, 2016; Waldman *et al.*, 2020).

Caring for stakeholders and influencing others by serving as an example to be followed are characteristic of servant leadership (Liden *et al.*, 2014; Newman *et al.*, 2017). Although socially responsible leadership is an orientation and mindset, servant leadership is measurable from the perspective of behavioral theory (Eva *et al.*, 2019; van Dierendonck, 2010; Waldman *et al.*, 2020). The servant leadership concept is universal and can be well used in the context of various organizations, on different management levels and in different cultures (Eva *et al.*, 2019; Roberts, 2018; Van Dierendonck *et al.*, 2017; Waldman *et al.*, 2020). The results of many studies have revealed that leadership affects organizations' CSR (Turker, 2018).

Although not every socially responsible leader is a leader-servant, every leader-servant is a socially responsible leader. It can be concluded that servant leadership practically expresses an organization's socially responsible leadership orientation and serves as a tool for implementing a CSR-focused approach (Hunter *et al.*, 2013). A few Polish studies have re-vealed the significant correlations in CSR between servant leadership and ethical and philanthropic dimensions (Zaleśna, 2020).

Servant leadership is a concept that is strictly related to CSR. Its core focuses on satisfying stakeholders' needs (Christensen *et al.*, 2014; Lemoine *et al.*, 2019). A leader-servant acknowledges his or her moral responsibility for the organization's success as well as for their subordinates, clients, and other stakeholders (Ehrhart, 2004). A servant-leader focuses on sustainable results from a long-term perspective rather than a short-term perspective (Eva *et al.*, 2019). Stakeholders' management through their followers can begin to dominate an organization (Hunter *et al.*, 2013). Servant leadership exerts a powerful influence on stakeholders such as employees (Eva *et al.*, 2019; van Dierendonck, 2010). An influence of servant leadership has been observed on immediate subordinates in relation to phenomena that facilitate employees' well-being including, but not limited to, job satisfaction and work engagement. Such phenomena are the components of a sustainable approach to cultivating employees who build healthy organizations (Di Fabio, 2017; Di Fabio and Peiró, 2018).

Socially responsible leadership, including servant leadership, plays a substantial role during a crisis. The COVID-19 crisis unprecedentedly affected the global economy and enterprises' situations (Baldwin and di Mauro, 2020). The World Bank's data analysis indicated the pandemic's negative impact on company results in nearly all analyzed countries, but the most substantial influence was reported for companies in developing countries, especially in the service sector. The main contributors included a sales drop and a decrease in financial liquidity (Olczyk and Kuc-Czarnecka, 2021).

In addition, the crisis put companies to the test in terms of their engagement in ethical business practices and CSR. Some might argue that both short- and long-term financial difficulties caused by the pandemic might force companies to pursue short-term profits and to sometimes resort to cheating and misconduct, thereby limiting their long-term investments in CSR due to increasing pressure to survive (He and Harris, 2020).

Leaders face dilemmas under pandemic conditions; for example, deciding between a focus on business and production versus consideration of employees' wellbeing. A broader conflict phenomenon constitutes another dilemma: care for the managed enterprise versus care for all its stakeholders (Fox *et al.*, 2020). In the face of the crises caused by the COVID pandemic, Sheth (2020) proposed that businesses should care more about stakeholders rather than increasing the enterprise's value for shareholders. Many enterprises resisted nonethical business practices during the crisis and were actively engaged in various CSR activities (He and Harris, 2020).

Even though enterprises are highly oriented toward protecting shareholders' and investors' interests, many companies demonstrate altruistic engagement for the benefit of society (García-Sánchez and García-Sánchez, 2020). The current pandemic offers a broad range of opportunities to leaders who are concerned about CSR. The largest American corporations became involved in CSR during the pandemic in nonmarket, extraordinary ways (Zhang, 2021). Moreover, many large Polish companies listed on the stock exchange became involved in nonstandard CSR, and their tradings were higher than those of the Warsaw Stock Exchange primary indices (Ankiewicz, 2021).

This paper aims to investigate (1) how executive managers handle stakeholder management in the challenging pandemic context (Waldman *et al.*, 2020) and (2) how executive managers' moral identity affects their attitudes and decisions when faced with crisis (Mazutis and Zintel, 2015). Moreover, we provide insight into (3) the influence of socially responsible servant leadership on followers' job satisfaction and work engagement (de Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2014; van Dierendonck *et al.*, 2014).

In this article, we make several contributions to the literature on socially responsible leadership. First and foremost, we analyze how socially responsible leaders manage stakeholders during crisis. Second, we describe how moral identity shapes socially responsible leaders and affects their attitudes and decisions when their enterprise faces a crisis. Third, we contribute to the discussion on servant leadership as a leadership style that supports socially responsible leadership by investigating its influence on staff well-being. Finally, we study an Eastern European context to provide pioneering research on servant leadership.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we present an overview of the literature on socially responsible leadership and stakeholder management. We consider the issue

of corporate philanthropy and a leader's focus on company performance in the context of a crisis. Then, we analyze the issue of leaders' moral identity and its impact on socially responsible leadership. Next, we deliberate on the influence of socially responsible leadership on employees. A servant leadership theoretical framework is used for this purpose. We discuss the impact of servant leadership on work engagement, organizational identification and job satisfaction. Next, we present the course and results of two studies: (1) qualitative research on stakeholder management in the pandemic crisis and leaders' moral identity as the basis of their activities and (2) the results of quantitative research focusing on the influence of socially responsible leadership on public sector employees. The final part of the paper includes a general discussion, conclusions and theoretical and practical implications.

2. Literature Review and Development of Hypotheses

2.1 Socially Responsible Leadership and Care for Stakeholders

Many authors, (Harrison *et al.*, 2010), claim that extraordinary care for stakeholders provides a company with a long-lasting strategic advantage and translates into higher value for the enterprise from a long-term perspective (Javed *et al.*, 2020a, 2020b; Ye *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, in operating practice, shareholders' interests are inconsistent with suppliers' or clients' interests, which in a pandemic crisis lead to a higher risk of lack of payment or failure to deliver prepaid products (Demir and Javorcik, 2020). This inconsistency causes dilemmas and puts leaders in a position of having to manage a paradoxical situation (Waldman and Bowen, 2016; Zhang *et al.*, 2015). Rudolph *et al.* (2021) identified the case of leaders being forced to manage a paradox as a feature of a pandemic crisis. Getting involved in helping various stakeholders depends, on the one hand, on a company's leadership quality and, on the other hand, on the company's standing and flexibility (Fox *et al.*, 2020).

A crisis in an enterprise increases the challenges faced by its leaders in terms of social responsibility. A series of case studies confirmed that observing the rules of responsible leadership helps manage a company's brand reputation risk (Coldwell *et al.*, 2012; Varma, 2021). Analyzing business situations in emerging markets, Pless *et al.* (2021) discovered that a responsible leader should imagine stakeholders' different needs and consider what can be done in such a crisis situation.

Stock-exchange listed companies that are willing to strengthen their reputation and improve their relations with stakeholders often become involved in corporate philanthropy (Cha and Rajadhyaksha, 2021; Chen *et al.*, 2018). In a natural disaster crisis, such as a pandemic, companies with greater resources and a more substantial market presence (stock-exchange listed) devote more funds to philanthropic aid (Gao and Hafsi, 2017). The institutional context reveals that politically linked companies are more likely to make charitable donations when a disaster strikes (Gao and Hafsi, 2017). The philanthropic aid devoted to medical assistance in the case of

the COVID-19 pandemic was directed to entities that were geographically close to a donor's location (Boodoo *et al.*, 2021). This phenomenon is the result of reconciling corporate philanthropy with business objectives and focusing on an organization's stakeholders.

Honest communication with all stakeholders, including but not limited to associates, is a vital aspect of how companies can effectively address a pandemic crisis (Sun *et al.*, 2021). In a pandemic-scale crisis, people prefer leaders who nurture the sense that "we are in this together" (Van Bavel *et al.*, 2020). Leaders' essential roles in crisis include relationship building, team integration and care for the environment; it is difficult to substitute leaders in these roles (Wachowiak and Winch, 2016).

In the face of disastrous events, corporate philanthropy generates positive moral capital in companies, delivering benefits to shareholders from a long-term perspective (Godfrey, 2005). However, various studies have confirmed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, corporations became involved in CSR in nonstandard ways that were not driven only by their concern for company results (Ankiewicz, 2021; Manuel and Herron, 2020; Zhang, 2021).

The deliberations presented above led us to the following hypothesis.

H1: In a crisis, leaders of capital market companies take care of stakeholders by demonstrating their social responsibility.

2.2 Moral Identity of Socially Responsible Leaders

Moral identity has been defined as "a commitment to one's sense of self to lines of action that promote or protect the welfare of others" (Hart *et al.*, 1998). Another definition describes moral identity as "a self-conception organized around a set of moral traits" (Aquino and Reed, 2002). Moral identity is thus a power that shapes ethical attitudes in different situations. First, it affects ethical decisions at work (Wang *et al.*, 2019). Second, moral identity contributes to more ethical behavior at work (Bryant and Merritt, 2021). Third, moral identity is shared with followers during social learning (Bandura and Walters, 1977; Zhu *et al.*, 2016).

The ethical behavior of leaders in organizations in decision making is influenced by leaders' moral development level and empathy (Trevino, 1986). The integration-based approach is based on the expectation that socially responsible leaders will have a moral imagination (Pless *et al.*, 2021). The dilemmas faced by different stakeholder groups often involve the need to choose between good and good. Particularly under crises (Rudolph *et al.*, 2021), leaders must engage in paradox management (Waldman and Bowen, 2016; Zhang *et al.*, 2015). Moral imagination helps leaders find solutions beyond the existing constraints of stakeholder management (Pless *et al.*, 2021).

Alpaslan and Mitroff (2021) described the moral fundamentals of crisis management resulting from leaders' individual experiences. Such management addresses the need for the fair treatment and protection of stakeholders against potential and actual loss. The reference point of crisis management should be a broad circle of stakeholders. Mazutis and Zintel (2015) stated that values such as openness to change, self-transcendence, collectivism, a future orientation, humanitarianism, ecocentrism and religiousness are positively linked to CSR.

Religion is also an essential source of moral identity (Weaver and Agle, 2002). Religiousness determines the identification of the moral aspects of ethical decisions that are made at work (Vitell *et al.*, 2009) and is a predictive factor of reactions to many ethical decisions (Conroy and Emerson, 2004). Various studies have revealed a significant influence of religion on a lower acceptance of ethically dubious business practices (Emerson and Mckinney, 2010). Finally, it should be emphasized that servant leadership is related to religion and can be religiously motivated (Gümüşay, 2019; Sendjaya and Sarros, 2002).

Based on the deliberations above, we formulated another research hypothesis.

H2: Leaders' moral identity affects their sense of social responsibility and concern about the wellbeing of stakeholders.

2.3 Servant Leadership and Job Satisfaction

Servant leadership is a holistic approach to leadership that develops followers based on a leader's altruistic and ethical motivation (Greenleaf, 1977), which causes greater work engagement and effectiveness (Eva *et al.*, 2019). Greenleaf (1991) claimed that a servant leader is primarily a servant. One definition describes servant leadership as "*a model that identifies serving others – including employees, customers, and community – as the number-one priority*" (Spears, 2002). The authors of another definition explain servant leadership as "*a group-oriented approach to leadership that emphasizes serving others*" (Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2011).

Servant leaders focus on sustainable outcomes from a long-term perspective (Eva *et al.*, 2019). On the one hand, such leaders seek to manage the organization in the best possible way for the shareholders' benefit (van Dierendonck, 2010), but, on the other hand, they do not want to do so at the expense of people (Sendjaya, 2015). That is why such a leadership style can be described as involving a socially responsible orientation. Studies have revealed the universal nature of servant leadership in various cultures (Eva *et al.*, 2019; Van Dierendonck *et al.*, 2017) and different types of organization: business, nonprofit, health care, education and public administration (Cerit, 2010; van Dierendonck *et al.*, 2014).

Under a classical approach, job satisfaction represents a "*pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from an appraisal of one's job or job experiences*" (Locke,

1976). Job satisfaction has also been defined as “*an affective reaction to one’s job, resulting from the incumbent’s comparison of actual outcomes with those that are desired (expected, deserved, and so on)*” (Cranny *et al.*, 1992). Job satisfaction is regarded as a multifaceted structure covering a position’s internal and external aspects (Howard and Frink, 1996). A high satisfaction level facilitates loyalty toward the employer and influences individual performance (Wang *et al.*, 2010). This paper adopted a general approach to satisfaction, which is defined herein in terms of individual job satisfaction level (Fields, 2002).

Servant leadership influences various components of staff well-being (Parris and Peachey, 2013) including job satisfaction (Amah, 2018). Subordinates tend to trust servant leaders, which strengthens the influence of servant leadership on their job satisfaction (Chan and Mak, 2014). Cerit’s (2010) research revealed the influence of headteachers (principals) and servant leaders on teachers’ job satisfaction. Mayer *et al.* (2008) claimed that job satisfaction is the result of organizational fairness and the satisfaction of staff needs. Hence, we formulated another hypothesis.

H3: Servant leadership contributes to subordinates’ job satisfaction.

2.4 Servant Leadership Versus Work Engagement

Kahn (1990) claimed that work engagement is a relationship between a person’s identity and professional role. Britt (1999) stated that work engagement involves a sense of responsibility for one’s work. The definition adopted in the paper describes work engagement as “*a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption*” (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). Vigor is perceived as the possession of a high level of energy, a willingness to try and will to execute entrusted work. Dedication is defined as an enthusiastic approach and a sense of importance and pride. Absorption represents a state of raised concentration while maintaining the ability to stop working (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2008). Work engagement is the opposite of job burnout (Maslach *et al.*, 2001).

Servant leadership influences associates’ engagement through an individual approach to staff members (de Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2014). Qualitative (Carter and Baghurst, 2014) and quantitative (de Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2017) research have confirmed the influence of servant leadership on work engagement. Work engagement can be a mediator of servant leadership’s impact on other positive phenomena including but not limited to staff innovativeness (Rasheed *et al.*, 2016). Servant leaders seek to understand their followers, demonstrate empathy and adopt an individualized approach, which boosts the staff’s positive energy and leads to work engagement (De Clercq *et al.*, 2014). Work engagement that results from servant leadership is developed through employees’ satisfaction and the fulfillment of their mental needs (van Dierendonck *et al.*, 2014). The deliberations above led to another hypothesis.

H4: Servant leadership contributes to subordinates' work engagement.

Job satisfaction is often correlated with work engagement (Kleine *et al.*, 2019). The results of several studies have revealed that job satisfaction serves as a mediator between servant leadership and civil behavior at work (Chiniara and Bentein, 2016; Grisaffe *et al.*, 2016; Ozyilmaz and Cicek, 2015). Moreover, job satisfaction has been found to serve a mediation function, e.g., between servant leadership and nurses' helping behaviors (Neubert *et al.*, 2016). Other studies have demonstrated that job satisfaction is a mediator of servant leadership's influence on work engagement (van Dierendonck *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, we put forward the following hypothesis.

H5: Job satisfaction is a mediator between servant leadership and subordinates' work engagement.

2.5 Servant Leadership, Organization Identification and Work Engagement

Organization identification is based on social identification theory (Tajfel, 1978). Typically, it is described as a convergence of individual and organizational values (Riketta, 2005). Organization identification is defined as a "perception of oneness with or belongingness to the organization" (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Organization identification causes employees who strongly identify with their workplace to follow the organization's values and take any incidents concerning the employer personally (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Mael and Ashforth, 1992).

Previous studies have revealed that organizational identification increases work engagement (Knippenberg and Schie, 2000). Furthermore, organizational identification has been demonstrated to directly and positively influence work engagement and indirectly influence job satisfaction (Karanika-Murray *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, the following hypothesis was formulated as a result of the analyses.

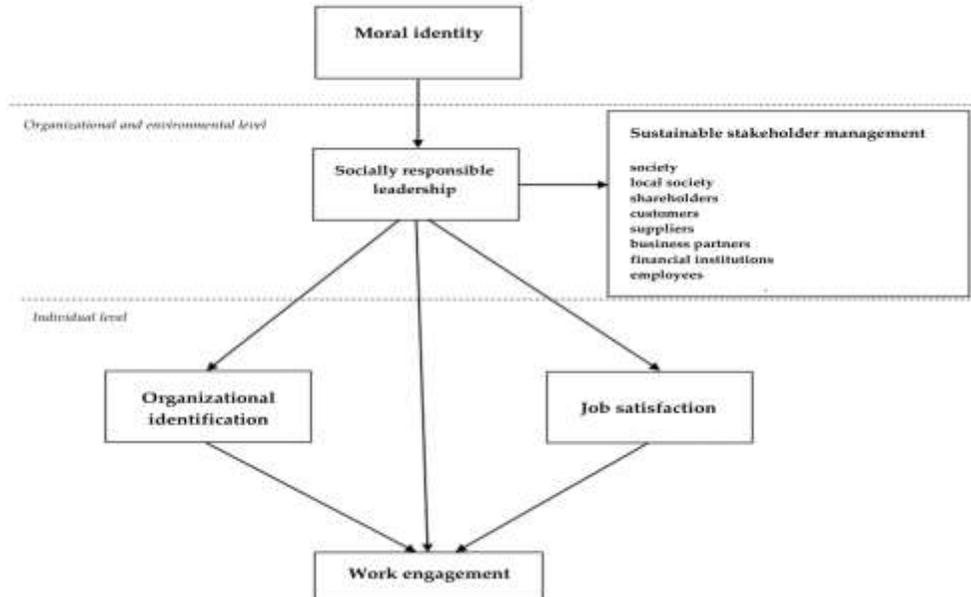
H6: Organization identification contributes to work engagement.

Lee *et al.* (2015) discovered that associates' organizational identification is the basis for other organizational behaviors and attitudes. Organization identification is a common influencing mediator of various activities and phenomena in organizations on employees' behavior (Gigol, 2021; Riketta, 2005). For instance, organization identification has been found to serve as a mediator between servant leadership and follower outcomes (Chughtai, 2016) and between servant leadership and staff civic behaviors (Zhao *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, organization identification has appeared to be a mediator between servant leadership and work engagement (de Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2014). Hence, the following research hypothesis was proposed.

H7: Organization identification is a mediator between servant leadership and subordinates' work engagement.

A hypothetical research model is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Hypothesized model.



Source: Own study.

3. Study 1

3.1 Research Methods and Tools

The research was carried out with a qualitative method to learn more about real-life phenomena and discover the factors that are likely to help explain the cause-and-effect relationship (Creswell and Poth, 2016). Semistructured interviews were selected as the data collection method. The interview scenario included a set of fifteen basic questions concerning two thematic groups: the enterprise's response to the COVID-19 crisis and leadership and ethics during the COVID-19 crisis.

This article presents the results of the research in response to the following research questions.

RQ1. Has your company's approach to corporate social responsibility (CSR) changed under the COVID-19 crisis, and, if so, how has it changed?

RQ2. How would you describe ethical obligations toward various stakeholder groups - owners, contractors, associates and banks?

RQ3. How do you cope with the contradictory interests of different stakeholder groups?

RQ4. What rules do you follow to manage ethically in such a situation?

3.2 Research Group Characteristics

The research group was target-screened. The research group included board members (executive managers) who directly influenced the enterprises' behaviors as they were making decisions. Six of them were CEOs, while the rest were vice presidents. One of the respondents fulfilled the CEO role simultaneously in two different companies, another respondent was a CEO in one company and vice president in another, while yet another respondent held the vice president position in two companies. The respondents managed national and international companies. Because three respondents had multiple functions, altogether, the respondents managed fifteen enterprises.

The respondents represented the following sectors: specialized industrial machinery and equipment, warehouse and logistics services, mining, railway transport, hotels and restaurants, chemical, health resorts (spas), air transport, alternative fuels, municipal services, power engineering, and railway logistics. All companies covered by the research were hybrid (Bruton *et al.*, 2015), i.e., they were owned by both the state and private shareholders. The companies were either present in the capital market, stock-exchange listed (10 companies) or included in investment fund portfolios (5 companies). Hybrid companies are susceptible to tensions between public and private owners whose objectives tend to contradict one another, and their boards are governed by different institutional logics (Bruton *et al.*, 2015; Vining and Laurin, 2020; Wasowska and Postula, 2018).

Two coauthors of this paper personally carried out individual in-depth interviews (six interviews each). The conversations lasted from 24 to 94 minutes. Some interviews were held during face-to-face meetings between the interviewer and the interviewee, but most conversations were conducted by phone due to the pandemic. All interviews took place between 18 October and 5 November 2020. They were recorded, and transcriptions of the interviews were produced. The transcriptions were used as the basis for analyzing the qualitative research results.

3.3 Results

3.3.1 Changes in Enterprises' Approach to Corporate Social Responsibility under COVID-19

The interviewees were asked about their approach to corporate social responsibility. The question was: *Has your company's approach to corporate social responsibility (CSR) changed under the COVID-19 crisis, and, if so, how has it changed? Did you provide aid in the pandemic due to social solidarity or for business reasons? Did such a dilemma exist?*

None of the respondents witnessed a dilemma between corporate social responsibility and business objectives. In contrast, activities related to fighting the pandemic reduced the risk of compromising business operation continuity. Nearly all

companies undertook charity activities or directly supported the fight against the coronavirus. They claimed that handling the general national crisis contributed directly to improving the company's situation. The enterprises managed by the respondents were highly involved in anti-pandemic activities, from production or involvement in importing protective masks and life-saving equipment to building temporary hospitals.

Two of the companies covered by the research were the key organizers of action to help the Poles who got stuck in other countries due to lockdown. The respondents saw no divergence between the actions focusing on stakeholders and the company's results. Some of these actions were reimbursed by the state, which enabled the companies to help others and to provide resources to cover fixed costs. Another group of philanthropic activities included help for local hospitals and other institutions. In this case, the respondents also emphasized the shared interests of the company and the local community.

3.3.2 Ethical Obligations of Companies toward Their Stakeholders

Another question posed to the interviewees applied to the ethical obligations of companies toward stakeholders. The question was as follows: *How would you describe the company's ethical obligations toward various stakeholder groups - owners, contractors, associates and banks? Such obligations include taking care of the staff's safety, providing reliable information, fulfilling obligations, making timely payments to contractors, and sponsoring according to previous agreements.*

All respondents understood the business managers' ethical obligations. The pandemic seems to contribute to an even better understanding of those obligations. Taking care of employees' safety and health constitutes a manager's vital ethical responsibility. This ethical obligation does not contradict business objectives as a company cannot operate without its associates.

The interviewees were aware of the significance of completing their agreements and timely payments of their liabilities toward employees, contractors and financial institutions. Eight out of the twelve respondents fulfilled all their agreements in a timely manner including involvement in sports and cultural sponsoring. Three companies helped their suppliers and clients by extending payment deadlines. One company offered up to an 80% discount for its services to companies under lockdown.

The companies managed by the interviewees experienced challenging situations, which included salary reduction, suspended bonuses and the inability to pay for the suppliers' services on time. One enterprise temporarily reduced staff salaries by 5%, but the executive managers cut their own salaries by 10%. In another company, all salaries were dropped by 20%. The leaders of both companies discussed and implemented the solution in agreement with the staff. For both reduced salaries and overdue payments to suppliers and financial institutions, it was essential to honestly

and openly inform them about the causes and planned activities, even before they entered into force. Salary reduction in agreement with the staff became a joint decision; it was easier for the employees to accept and did not evoke a sense of harm. In informing creditors that they would not receive their payment on time, the creditors' approval of the situation was likely to help maintain good relations in the future but also helped the debtors prepare for overdue payments and prevent financial liquidity loss.

One of the surveyed companies, which represents one of the industries most harshly struck by the COVID-19 pandemic, had to request debt restructuring from their debtors to survive. This prevented the company's immediate bankruptcy; however, the challenge did not disappear. Nevertheless, companies are not able to deal with such challenges on their own. Sharing the risk with debtors at the early stage of the crisis helped the company's survival, which will also be beneficial in the future for its debtors. Furthermore, the support offered by financial institutions to avoid bankruptcy of the referenced and other enterprises in its sector prevented the industry crisis from spreading to the financial sector and consequently helped avert a financial crisis.

From an ethical point of view, the activities conducted by the respondents' companies to save clients or suppliers were equally important. This reveals that for many managers, the pandemic evoked a sense of social solidarity and responsibility for the company's short-term survival and responsibility for stakeholders, which furthered the establishment of durable business bonds for the future and development opportunities once the pandemic is over.

3.3.3 Respondents' Methods of Coping with Stakeholders' Contradictory Interests

The interviewees were asked about their methods of dealing with stakeholders' contradictory objectives. The question was as follows: *How do you cope with the contradictory interests of different stakeholder groups? Such contradictory interests include striving for a positive financial result versus seeking to meet employees' bonus or employment needs, helping institutions in need of assistance in fighting the pandemic versus prioritizing the company's performance, focusing on continuous production versus ensuring employee wellbeing (remote work), and activating a granted loan despite knowing that the crisis breaches certain covenants.*

The conversations revealed that the dilemmas were most often related to contradictory company and employee objectives. On the one hand, such a conflict of interest was attributed to a real threat to jobs caused by the enterprises' deteriorating results due to the pandemic, but, on the other hand, it was linked to employees' health hazards. From the company's point of view, the effects could include absenteeism or even compromising the company's business continuity, while employees were most concerned about losing their health or even lives; the new virus caused significant anxiety among them.

Nevertheless, managers might always experience dilemmas related to the different objectives between company and employees, regardless of the pandemic. This was confirmed by a respondent who pointed out associates' typical attitude of employer entitlement. Nevertheless, many interviewees emphasized the employer's and manager's responsibility for the associates and their fate. Many respondents mentioned their associates' great engagement, demonstrating an understanding of the company's situation and the significance of proper and open communication to maintain good relations with the staff, leading to the employees' objectives reflecting those of the company and vice versa.

The dilemmas related to stakeholders' contradictory interests were more serious in companies that had been more severely struck by the pandemic crisis. The observed dilemmas resulted not only from the contradictory objectives of the employees and company or its owners but also from the contradictory objectives of the company and its clients and the company and its debtors.

One of the respondents quoted arguments justifying the decision to support the company's clients that were struck by the pandemic. The presented arguments revealed no contradictory objectives of the company and its clients. Saving clients offered an opportunity for future business development after the pandemic and prevented severe deterioration of a company's financial situation during the pandemic.

3.3.4 Ethical Principles Embraced by the Respondents as Managers

Another interview question concerned the ethical principles followed by the respondents as managers. The question was as follows: *What principles do you follow to manage ethically in such a situation? Or do you think the manager is responsible only for taking care of the company's interests? Does religion or a kind of ethical code help in such cases? Does a commercial company code suffice?*

Summarizing the answers given by the respondents, it should be stated that observing the applicable laws was not enough for leaders to declare that they were operating ethically. Laws and regulations were perceived as relevant, and the managers respected them in conducting activities. Nevertheless, the laws fail to regulate many management aspects. For example, consider mixed (State Treasury) companies in the context of anti-pandemic actions taken by the government. The presidents of several surveyed companies were asked to build hospitals for COVID-19 patients although it was unrelated to their companies' business areas. The immediate building of hospitals helped fight the pandemic, prevented the uncontrolled spread of the virus and supported care of the infected patients, consequently reducing adverse social effects.

From the company managers' point of view, such activities were in the best interest of their enterprises. The hospitals were established in their business operation areas. Therefore, the company's associates and their families were likely to be treated in

these hospitals, which eventually reduced the negative impact of COVID-19 on the enterprises. However, one of the respondents righteously pointed out that “ethical management must go along with observing commercial law”.

As pointed out by two respondents, ethical management is based on empathy. Empathy is defined as putting oneself in another person’s situation, e.g., an employee or business partner, which leads to a better understanding of the other party in the conflict and helps to develop a solution that is favorable to all parties involved. The sense of existing in a community, among people, and acknowledging the general rules of coexistence are essential for ethical management. The interviewees emphasized the significance of the manager’s culture and respect for others. Some respondents mentioned the significance of religion, which determines our conduct. Ethics is rooted in religion, and five interviewees highlighted the meaning of the Catholic religion for their ethics and attitude toward others. The interviews revealed that cherished values affected the person’s management style.

One of the respondents stated that he was focused on acting as a human while fulfilling his managerial duties. Four interviewees identified the humane fundamentals of ethics and the importance of remembering one’s humanity in pandemic crisis management. Four interviewees also recognized the significance of a sense of community and general social coexistence for ethical management. Ethical management was described as pivotal in the pandemic as the decisions that were made affected employees and their families. Two answers emphasized honesty and personal fairness as the foundation of ethical conduct during the COVID-19 crisis. Some respondents openly mentioned managers’ responsibility for people’s fate. One person pointed out that treating stakeholders’ ethically brings long-term benefits as they will always return the favor.

The respondents’ deliberations on the validity of actions related to debt incurring and restructuring by companies operating in a sector struck by the most severe crisis in its history are worthy of attention. The respondents expressed that as long as managers believed their actions would bring positive future effects for the company and its stakeholders, they could undertake such measures in good conscience. However, if they had not seen any possibilities of rescuing the company from the crisis, they would have considered these measures to have been unethical.

3.4 Discussion

It must be emphasized that nearly all respondents turned out to be socially responsible leaders. Although some still approached CSR as another strategy factor (Waldman and Siegel, 2008; Waldman *et al.*, 2020), it was not their dominant motivation. There were two indicative aspects. First, the stakeholder management method is characterized by a balanced approach to satisfying the needs of employees, clients and the institutional environment. The leaders’ actions often went beyond their local communities.

Therefore, the leaders can be said to have represented servant leadership. Second, moral identity was a significant motivator of the respondents' socially responsible leadership. Such an identity was either based on the Catholic religion or had humanistic foundations. These features are characteristic of servant leadership motivated by the leader's inner altruism (Greenleaf, 1977). The will to serve others can be rooted in religion, spirituality or humanistic ethics (Eva *et al.*, 2019; Sendjaya and Sarros, 2002).

A strong correlation was observed with other results concerning actions in the pandemic. The largest American corporations became involved in CSR during the pandemic in nonstandard ways (Zhang, 2021). Moreover, many large Polish companies listed on stock exchange engaged in nonstandard CSR actions in the face of the COVID-19 crisis (Ankiewicz, 2021). Stock exchange-listed Spanish companies offered help through nonprofit organizations by providing food and medical PPE and technological solutions to digitally excluded persons, according to their core business profiles (Raimo *et al.*, 2021).

State companies fulfilled multiple roles during the COVID-19 crisis. Lazzarini and Musacchio (2020) pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed an active role of state treasury companies in crisis-alleviating measures, going beyond a single company's operating horizon. Some enterprises shifted to the production of face masks and respirators and provided the necessary equipment for their plants, as the risk of production reorientation in private companies had to be preceded by economic calculation and the ROI was risky. The respondents indicated economic calculation as the cause of their behavior toward stakeholders in the pandemic.

These observations contrast with some Chinese research results. They suggest that due to the strong relationship with the state, the philanthropic reaction (of state-owned enterprises) was more negative than the reaction of nonstate-owned enterprises (Chen *et al.*, 2021). In Georgia, the crisis CSR focused on the safety of employees as stakeholders (Gigauri, 2021). During the pandemic, a large (state owned) telecommunications enterprise in Indonesia became highly engaged in philanthropic CSR and welcomed the positive results of higher customer loyalty and brand trust (Balqiah *et al.*, 2021).

4. Study 2

4.1 Research Methods and Tools

A quantitative research method was used. Servant leadership was tested with the SL-7 questionnaire, a short version of the SL-28 questionnaire (Liden *et al.*, 2015). The SL-28 questionnaire is one of the three basic and reliable questionnaires investigating servant leadership (Eva *et al.*, 2019). However, SL-7 neglects spiritual aspects of servant leadership (Eva *et al.*, 2019).

General job satisfaction was tested with a questionnaire that was part of the Organization Assessment Questionnaire (OAQ) (Fields, 2002), where respondents expressed their opinions on three statements according to a seven-point Likert scale for which 1 means “I fully disagree” and 7 means “I fully agree”.

Four independent translators translated the questionnaires, and then three scientists – experts with rich research experience – discussed the Polish version and their understanding of it. Work engagement was tested with the Polish version of the *UWES 9 – Utrecht Work Engagement Scale*, which was made available by the questionnaire’s authors (Schaufeli, 2013).

A single-item social identification (SISI) scale was used for organization identification testing (Postmes *et al.*, 2012). The scale revealed high reliability, validity and usability (Reysen *et al.*, 2013). The statement in the questionnaire was as follows: *I identify with my organization*. A seven-point Likert scale was used, where 1 meant “I fully disagree” and 7 meant “I fully agree”.

4.2 Research Procedure and Respondents

Registrars of Polish universities constituted the study population. The link to an electronic survey questionnaire was posted in the registrars’ social media groups. The results were collected until April 2020. One hundred fifty-seven subjects participated in the study. Women constituted 93.6% of respondents. The majority of the study population was aged 30-39 (37.6%), 35% of the respondents were 40-49 years old, 17.8% were over 50 and 7.6% were under 30 years of age. Most respondents (86%) were university graduates. The majority of them held managerial (38.9%) or specialist (38.9%) positions. The highest percentage (70.7%) of the respondents had worked for the university for at least seven years. In most cases (47%), the respondents’ universities employed at least 1,000 people, while 17.8% had a workforce of 500-999 people. Public universities accounted for 85.4% of the study participants.

4.3 Descriptive Statistics of the Studied Variables

The factor structure of the tool for studying work engagement was verified with a confirmative factor analysis based on the maximum likelihood method. The fit values of the indices were $CFI=0.96$; $RMSEA=0.09$, $NFI=0.93$. Table 1 summarizes the obtained values of factor loads. The lowest values of the factor loads were obtained for Items 3 and 8. Nevertheless, factor loads of +/- 0.40 are considered to fulfil the structure interpretation minimum level (Hair *et al.*, 2019). The required minimum sample must include 200 subjects. In our study, it was $N = 157$. Load values of 0.50 or higher are considered practically significant. The required sample is then 120 (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, conclusions related to the dedication factor separately cannot be drawn from our study because we approached work engagement holistically. Many authors, e.g., Kulikowski (2019), claim that vigor

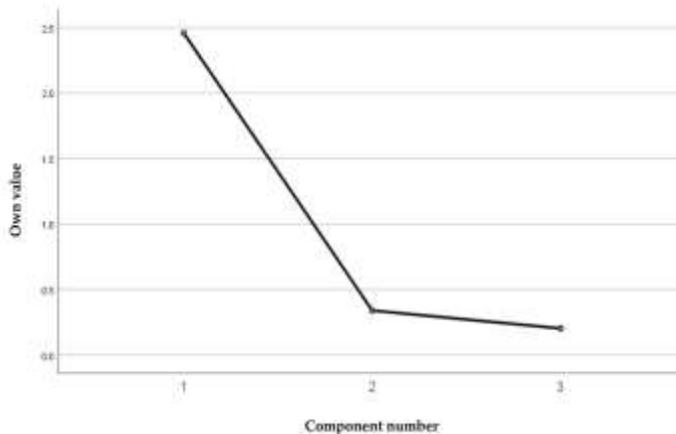
most effectively determines work engagement. Figure 2 shows a scree plot obtained in an exploratory factor analysis of job satisfaction.

Table 1. Values of factor loads obtained in a confirmative factor analysis concerning work engagement.

Dimension	Item	
Vigor	5	0.72
	2	0.88
	1	0.93
Dedication	7	0.73
	4	0.75
	3	0.42
Absorption	9	0.51
	8	0.48
	6	0.70

Source: Own study.

Figure 2. Scree plot obtained in an exploratory factor analysis of job satisfaction.



Source: Own study.

The obtained image suggested a one-dimensional solution. It explained 81.88% of the variance. Table 2 summarizes the values of factor loads obtained for each item.

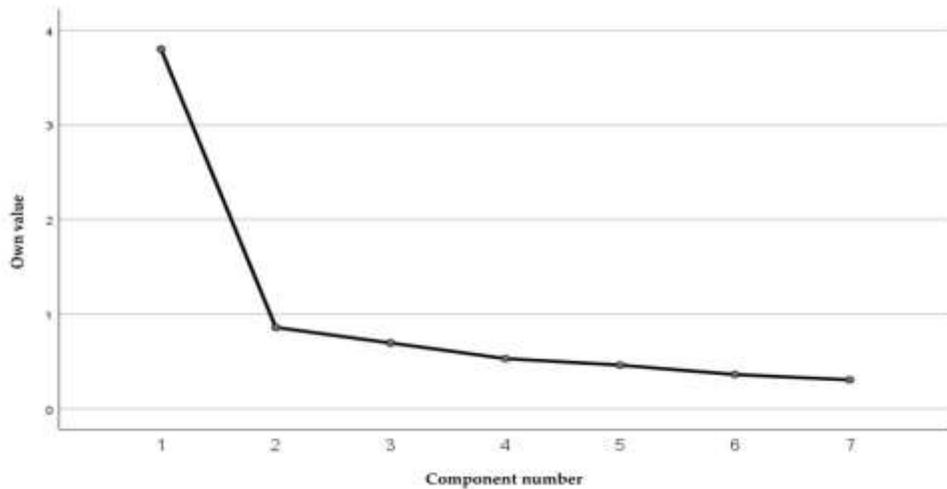
Table 2. Factor load values obtained in an exploratory factor analysis concerning job satisfaction.

	Item	Factor
1.	Overall, I am satisfied with my job	0.92
2.	In general, I do not like my job (R)	0.88
3.	In general, I like working here	0.91

Source: Own study.

Factor loads over 0.70 suggest a very well-defined structure (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Figure 3 shows a scree plot obtained in an exploratory factor analysis of servant leadership.

Figure 3. Scree plot obtained in an exploratory factor analysis concerning servant leadership.



Source: Own study.

The obtained image suggested a one-dimensional solution. It explained 54.31% of the variance. Table 3 summarizes the values of factor loads obtained for each item.

Table 3. Factor load values obtained in an exploratory factor analysis concerning servant leadership.

Item No.	Designation	Factor
1	My leader can tell if something work-related is going wrong.	0.81
2	My leader makes my career development a priority.	0.81
3	I would seek help from my leader if I had a personal problem.	0.79
4	My leader emphasizes the importance of giving back to the community	0.60
5	My leader puts my best interests ahead of his or her own.	0.80
6	My leader gives me the freedom to handle difficult situations in the way that I feel is best.	0.49
7	My leader would NOT compromise ethical principles in order to achieve success.	0.79

Source: Own study.

The lowest factor load value was discovered for Item 6. Factor loads of 0.40 are believed to fulfil the structure interpretation minimum level (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Loads of +/- 0.50 or higher, as in Item 6, are considered practically significant (Hair *et al.*, 2019). The required minimum sample must amount to 150 in 0.45 loads, while for 0.50 loads, there must be at least 120 respondents in the study sample. In our study, it was N = 157. The structure was adequately defined.

Table 4 shows descriptive statistics for the analyzed variable groups. The summary was completed with the Kolmogorov-Smirnoff test, which was used to verify the assumption of normal distribution of the analyzed variables and the Cronbach's α values of measurement reliability factors.

Table 4. *Descriptive statistics of the tested variables.*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>min</i>	<i>max</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>	α
Job satisfaction	5.55	1.13	1.33	7.00	0.20	0.001	0.89
Organization identification	5.25	1.56	1.00	7.00	0.20	0.001	-
<i>Vigor</i>	10.45	4.51	0	18	0.13	0.001	0.83
<i>Dedication</i>	12.19	3.76	3	18	0.13	0.001	0.65
<i>Absorption</i>	12.71	3.97	2	18	0.18	0.001	0.66
Work engagement	35.35	10.71	6	54	0.12	0.001	0.87
Servant leadership	2.80	0.83	1	5	0.09	0.002	0.86

Note: *M* – mean value; *SD* – standard deviation; *min* – minimum value; *max* – maximum value; α – Cronbach's α measurement reliability.

Source: Own study.

For all analyzed variables, statistically significant deviations from a normal distribution were discovered. That is why consecutive statistical analyses were performed based on the bootstrapping method. The lowest values of measurement reliability factors were obtained for dedication and absorption.

4.4 Analysis of the Relationship between the Analyzed Variables

Table 5 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients between the analyzed variables, determined by a bootstrapping method. The highlighted correlations are statistically significant.

Statistically significant positive correlations were obtained between job satisfaction and the other analyzed variables. Organization identification was positively correlated with the intensity of vigor, dedication and absorption, specifically, with work engagement and servant leadership. The levels of vigor, dedication and absorption, which represent work engagement dimensions, were positively correlated. The intensity of dedication and absorption revealed a positive correlation with servant leadership. Moreover, work engagement was positively correlated with job satisfaction and organization identification.

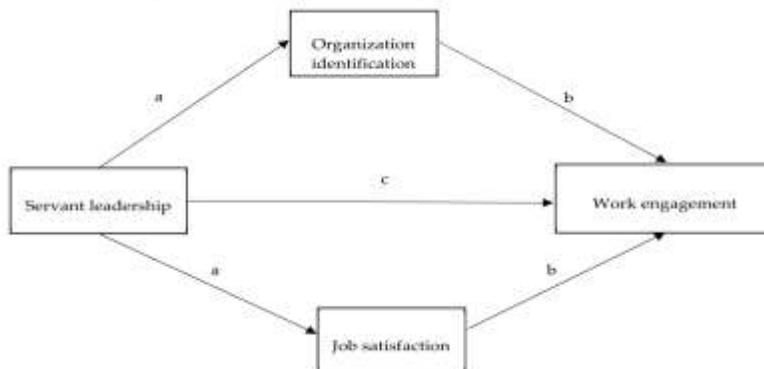
Table 5. Correlation coefficients between the analyzed variables, determined by a bootstrapping method.

	1.	2.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Job satisfaction	-					
2. Organization identification	0.453÷ 0.700	-				
5. Vigor	0.460÷ 0.704	0.285÷ 0.573	-			
6. Dedication	0.430÷ 0.640	0.502÷ 0.712	0.549÷ 0.760	-		
7. Absorption	0.202÷ 0.465	0.339÷ 0.599	0.401÷ 0.671	0.675÷ 0.822	-	
8. Work engagement	0.456÷ 0.662	0.468÷ 0.681	0.800÷ 0.901	0.880÷ 0.935	0.812÷ 0.907	-
9. Servant leadership	0.048÷ 0.351	0.102÷ 0.398	- 0.003÷ 0.299	0.150÷ 0.417	0.035÷ 0.306	0.086÷ 0.354

Source: Own study.

4.5 Organization Identification and Job Satisfaction as Mediators of the Relationship between Servant Leadership and Work Engagement

Organization identification and job satisfaction were analyzed as parallel mediators of the relationship between ethical leadership and servant leadership *versus* work engagement. Mediators and moderators for the study were selected based on an in-depth literature review (MacKinnon *et al.*, 2012). As recommended, the bootstrapping method was used for moderation and mediation examination (Hayes, 2013). The test sample (N=157) was sufficient for a mediation effect study (MacKinnon *et al.*, 2012). The analyses were carried out based on Hayes' process macro (Hayes, 2013) in Model 4. The calculations were performed based on the bootstrapping method. The verified relationship diagram is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Verified diagram of the relationships between the variables.

Source: Own study.

Ethical leadership and servant leadership were analyzed using two separate models. The analysis results are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. Mediation analysis results.

Phenomenon	Mediator	A	b	c	c [^]	Indirect effect	R ²
Servant leadership	Job satisfaction	0.04÷0.35	0.19÷0.49	0.07÷0.38	-0.06÷0.19	0.01÷0.13	0.41
Servant leadership	Organization identification	0.01÷0.41	0.20÷0.51			0.03÷0.16	

Note: R² – proposal of the explained variance.

Source: Own study.

Organization identification and job satisfaction were statistically significant mediators between servant leadership and work engagement. The greater the servant leadership intensity, the higher the organization identification level and job satisfaction. Both factors contribute to greater work engagement.

4.6 Discussion

Our results are further support for the previous research results on leadership influence on employee well-being in a broad sense (Eva *et al.*, 2019; van Dierendonck *et al.*, 2014). Our results also confirm the mediating role of organizational identification (de Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2014). Organization identification mediates the influence of servant leadership on work engagement. Job satisfaction and work engagement are well-being components (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2008). Well-being constitutes a vital objective of sustainable staff management (Di Fabio, 2017). The influence of servant leadership on job satisfaction and work engagement through organization identification positions this leadership style as supporting socially responsible leadership toward critical stakeholders.

Our research develops the discussion on the positive influence of servant leadership on direct subordinates. Servant leadership seems to be a universal leadership style in public management, according to the research. Our questionnaire neglects the spiritual aspects of the theory and focuses on the ethics of satisfying the needs of various stakeholder groups.

There seem to be some external reasons for the increasing popularity of servant leadership. Some attempts have been made to conceptualize servant leadership as green servant leadership concentrated on environmental objectives (Faraz *et al.*, 2021). These concepts use the fact that servant leadership causes value internalization in staff through social learning (Bandura and Walters, 1977). On the other hand, servant leadership relates to the traditional philanthropic approach to stakeholders that was a characteristic of many industrialists a century ago (Sheth, 2020).

5. General Discussion

Our research was carried out with a mixed-method with the aim of describing socially responsible leaders in action. The qualitative research revealed that the leaders of large business organizations listed on the stock exchange take care of different stakeholder groups if a serious crisis strikes, other authors have obtained similar results (Cheema-Fox *et al.*, 2021). The respondents demonstrated many features of servant leaders. Generally, they did not see a contradiction between taking care of business and taking care of stakeholders, which has been confirmed by many empirical studies on company results during the COVID-19 crisis (Ankiewicz, 2021; Ren *et al.*, 2021). CSR activities were found to protect company values to the benefit of shareholders (Qiu *et al.*, 2021). Some of the respondents openly stated that they were building the future of their organizations in this way. Others focused on the ethical foundations of their decisions in stakeholder management. Some elements of strategic and integration approaches were identified (Waldman *et al.*, 2020).

Leadership concepts have gradually been adapted from business to public administration management (Gigol, 2016). The servant leadership concept serves the purpose of leadership well as it does not emphasize business objectives although it relates to them with the stewardship concept (van Dierendonck, 2010). In this way, servant leadership fits the professions where work is also a mission or a vocation equally well as it fits the business. Business objectives are thereby achieved together. This is why we consider the results of our quantitative research and their influence on employee well-being to be of interest.

Our paper contributes to the literature devoted to socially responsible leadership in crisis. First, we describe how moral identity affects business leaders' attitudes and decisions. Second, we propose approaching servant leadership as a leadership style that is correlated with socially responsible leadership. Third, to the best of our knowledge, our research is the second empirical study of servant leadership in Poland. It is one of a few mixed qualitative and quantitative research projects that takes into account the concept of servant leadership and the first one of its kind in Poland. In this way, we provide input in response to the previously declared need for future research and the broadest review of scientific outputs on servant leadership (Eva *et al.*, 2019).

6. Limitations and Future Research

As is typical in most research, our study has a number of limitations. The research context is the first limitation. Our statements on socially responsible leadership in qualitative research might have to be verified as the research was carried out during a serious economic crisis caused by a pandemic. Repeating the research in other conditions could reveal a different image of top managers and their potentially lower sensitivity to the needs of various stakeholder groups.

The ownership structure of the studied enterprises was another essential element; hybrid enterprises, which are partly state-owned require paradoxical decisions that are governed by different institutional logics. One of the respondents stated that if his company had been private, he would have had to focus more on shareholders' interests. Finally, the questions on the moral bases of socially responsible actions could suggest ethical or religious motivations for crisis operations; in fact, they were strategic rather than derived from the leaders' characters or convictions.

The quantitative research was limited because it was carried out in universities and on a relatively small group of respondents. That is why the generalization of its results to a broader population should be approached carefully. On the other hand, the study group was very coherent. The research was transverse, which requires careful interpretation. Qualitative research should be directly associated with servant leadership theory. Future research on servant leadership as socially responsible leadership appears to be an interesting research perspective.

7. Conclusion

There are multiple conclusions drawn from our research. First and foremost, socially responsible leadership is an evident trend and poses a challenge for organization leaders. This phenomenon is due to the great emphasis on the sustainable development concept. Approaching employees as scarcely renewable resources that should be taken care of and not overexploited is an element of sustainable development. Second, the ongoing COVID-19 crisis strengthens socially responsible leadership.

The company leaders participating in the research, whose companies were partly state-owned but also operated on the capital market, were aware of the broad context of stakeholder management and recognized the need to not focus only on shareholders. Third, we observed an influence of moral identity on their decisions. When faced with challenges, they remembered the local environment and their employees and the company's contractors who were involved in national aid actions.

Finally, it can be concluded that the respondents' attitudes represented socially responsible leadership and servant leadership. Servant leadership concentrates on satisfying the needs of stakeholders including but not limited to company associates. The other research focused on the relationships between servant leaders and their immediate subordinates. A positive impact of leadership attitude was discovered on job satisfaction, organization identification and work engagement. They all constitute sustainable staff management components and therefore can be described as vital elements of socially responsible leadership.

The practical implications of the research indicate that servant leadership is a theory that should be developed and taught in universities and business schools. The difficulty is related to the fact that this leadership style derives from altruistic

internal motivations, which are often spiritual, deeply humanistic or religious and hence difficult to construct in contemporary educational institutions.

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