



GROWING VOCATIONAL TEACHERS' LOYALTY: THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND WORK MOTIVATION

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Abstract

Teacher organizational commitment is the cornerstone of successful vocational education in Indonesia, particularly amidst the transformation of Vocational High Schools (SMK) into Centers of Excellence and the high mobility of teaching staff. This study examines the influence of servant leadership and work motivation on the organizational commitment of private vocational school teachers. Using a quantitative, path-analytic approach with 119 teachers from private SMK Schools of Excellence in Bogor Regency, Indonesia, the study found that servant leadership has a positive direct effect on organizational commitment ($\beta = 0.184$, $p < 0.01$) and work motivation ($\beta = 0.423$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, work motivation exerts the strongest direct influence on organizational commitment ($\beta = 0.272$, $p < 0.01$). Work motivation also significantly mediates the relationship between servant leadership and organizational commitment ($\beta = 0.115$, $p < 0.05$). These findings confirm that strengthening service-oriented leadership and enhancing teachers' intrinsic motivation are key strategies for cultivating vocational teacher loyalty.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Work Motivation, Teacher Organizational Commitment, Vocational High School (SMK) Center of Excellence, Path Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Vocational education in Indonesia is confronting complex transformational challenges. The government-initiated Vocational High School (SMK) Center of Excellence program requires schools to transform their instructional approaches, strengthen partnerships with industry and the business sector, and develop a professional work culture (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, 2021). This program aims to establish SMK as a reference point that embodies a spirit of dissemination and serves as a hub for quality improvement and performance enhancement for other vocational schools (Idinsight, 2024). The program's success heavily depends on teachers' active participation as the primary implementers of the educational process. However, private schools face a serious challenge of high teacher mobility. Of the 320,197 SMK teachers recorded in the 2024 Dapodik database, approximately 64,000 are from productive subject areas, with the remainder from normative and adaptive fields (Serambinews, 2025). The phenomenon of teachers moving to other sectors offering better welfare threatens school organizational stability and the continuity of quality development programs.

The quality of Indonesian education continues to face various challenges, as reflected in the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results. OECD (2023) data show that Indonesia's scores were 366 in mathematics, 359 in reading, and 383 in science, all below the OECD average. Indonesia ranked 69th out of 81 participating countries in PISA 2022 (Kompas, 2025). These

outcomes indicate that improving educational quality remains a critical agenda that requires support from various factors, including the quality and commitment of teachers in fulfilling their professional duties. The OECD (2023) emphasizes that the availability of high-quality educators, teacher stability, and a supportive school learning environment significantly influence the success of the educational system. In the vocational education context, these challenges are even more pressing, as SMKs aim to produce graduates with competencies aligned with the continuously evolving demands of the workforce.

Teacher organizational commitment emerges as a strategic factor in addressing these challenges. Meyer and Allen (2021) define organizational commitment as a psychological bond that connects individuals to their organization and influences their decision to remain organizational members. This commitment comprises three dimensions: affective commitment (emotional attachment), continuance commitment (consideration of benefits and costs), and normative commitment (sense of moral obligation). Teachers with high commitment tend to demonstrate loyalty, emotional attachment, and willingness to contribute their best to school advancement (Robbins & Judge, 2023; Colquitt et al., 2023). Meta-analytic studies by Meyer et al. (2002) and Mathieu and Zajac (1990) demonstrate that organizational commitment positively correlates with performance, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behavior, while negatively correlating with turnover intention. Prior research has identified various factors influencing teacher organizational commitment, including transformational leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), organizational culture (Schneider et al., 2013), and job satisfaction (Fadillah et al., 2024). However, studies specifically examining the role of servant leadership and work motivation in the context of private SMK Centers of Excellence remain limited.

Servant leadership is an approach that prioritizes service to organizational members through empowerment, individual development, and the creation of trust-based working relationships (Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck, 2011). Eva et al. (2019), in their systematic review, identified that servant leadership encompasses behaviors of valuing people, developing people, building community, displaying authenticity, providing leadership, and sharing leadership. Research demonstrates that servant leadership positively influences work motivation and organizational commitment (Liden et al., 2014; Newman et al., 2017; Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2017). Zheng et al. (2023) found that teachers' perceptions of servant leadership directly and indirectly relate to organizational commitment through reduced emotional labor. Meanwhile, work motivation—as internal and external drives that energize work behavior—has been established as an important predictor of organizational commitment (Aulia et al., 2024; Fadillah et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the mechanism by which servant leadership influences organizational commitment through work motivation among private vocational school teachers has not been extensively empirically tested, particularly within the context of the SMK Center of Excellence program, which demands a transformation of vocational education.

Based on the theoretical and empirical literature reviewed, this study aims to examine the direct effects of servant leadership and work motivation on teacher organizational commitment, and the mediating role of work motivation in the relationship between servant leadership and organizational commitment. Specifically, this study proposes the following hypotheses: (H1) servant leadership has a positive effect on teacher organizational commitment; (H2) work motivation has a positive effect on teacher organizational commitment; (H3) servant leadership has a positive effect on work motivation; and (H4) work motivation mediates the effect of servant leadership on teacher organizational commitment. By addressing these hypotheses, this study contributes theoretically to the development of a vocational teacher organizational commitment model. It provides practical recommendations for school principals and policymakers on formulating strategies to strengthen vocational education human resources.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative, correlational-causal survey design. The population comprised all teachers from private SMK Schools of Excellence (Pusat Keunggulan) in Bogor Regency, totaling 169 individuals. The sample was determined using the Taro Yamane formula with a 5% margin of error, yielding 119 respondents selected through proportional random sampling from 18 private SMK schools. Data collection was conducted using questionnaires developed based on the indicators of each research variable. The organizational commitment instrument consisted of 33 items ($\alpha = 0.964$), the servant leadership instrument comprised 34 items ($\alpha = 0.963$), and the work motivation instrument included 34 items ($\alpha = 0.980$). All instruments had undergone validity and reliability testing with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.70.

Data analysis proceeded in two stages. First, descriptive statistical analysis described the data characteristics. Second, path analysis using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0 software was employed to examine causal relationships among variables. Model evaluation included convergent validity (loading factors > 0.7 and AVEs > 0.5), discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion), and construct reliability (Composite Reliability > 0.7). Hypothesis testing was conducted using bootstrapping procedures to obtain T-statistic and p-values, with significance set at $\alpha = 0.05$. The research was conducted from January to May 2026.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Characteristics

A total of 119 teachers from 18 private SMK Schools of Excellence in Bogor Regency participated in this study. Respondent distribution varied across schools, with the highest numbers from SMKS Muhammadiyah 1 Cileungsi (13 teachers) and SMKS Yapia Parung (12 teachers).

Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the three research variables.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Theoretical Range
Organizational Commitment (Y)	140.66	12.28	103	165	33-165
Servant Leadership (X1)	135.96	13.31	102	161	34-170
Work Motivation (X4)	144.35	16.82	84	170	34-170

The organizational commitment variable had a mean of 140.66 (theoretical range 33-165) with a standard deviation of 12.28, indicating a relatively high level of commitment. The highest-scoring indicators were loyalty to the organization ($M = 4.44$) and awareness of obligations as an organizational member ($M = 4.40$). In contrast, the lowest-scoring indicator was perceived benefits of staying in the organization ($M = 3.89$).

Servant leadership had a mean of 135.96 (theoretical range 34-170) with a standard deviation of 13.31. The highest indicators were building community ($M = 4.60$), followed by providing leadership ($M = 4.45$), while the lowest indicators were valuing people ($M = 3.84$) and sharing leadership ($M = 3.95$). Work motivation had a mean of 144.35 (theoretical range 34-170) with a standard deviation of 16.82, indicating a very high level. The highest indicators were achievement motivation ($M = 4.52$) and responsibility in work ($M = 4.47$), while the lowest indicators were professional growth ($M = 3.88$) and goal commitment ($M = 3.99$).

Measurement Model Evaluation

Table 2 presents the results of validity and reliability tests for the constructs.

Table 2. Convergent Validity and Construct Reliability Results

Variable	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Organizational Commitment (Y)	0.606	0.918	0.896
Servant Leadership (X1)	0.761	0.902	0.870
Work Motivation (X4)	0.762	0.940	0.919

Convergent validity testing revealed that all indicators had loading factors exceeding 0.7 and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeding 0.5 for each variable. Discriminant validity was established based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion, where the square root of AVE for each variable exceeded its correlations with other variables. Construct reliability was also confirmed with Composite Reliability values exceeding 0.9 for all variables.

Hypothesis Testing

Table 3 presents the results of direct effect hypothesis testing.

Table 3. Direct Effect Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path	β	T-statistic	p-value	Result
H1	$X1 \rightarrow Y$	0.184	2.769	0.006	Accepted

H2	$X4 \rightarrow Y$	0.272	2.596	0.009	Accepted
H3	$X1 \rightarrow X4$	0.423	6.493	<0.001	Accepted

Path analysis results showed that servant leadership had a positive and significant effect on organizational commitment ($\beta = 0.184$; $t = 2.769$; $p = 0.006$). Work motivation also had a positive and significant effect on organizational commitment ($\beta = 0.272$; $t = 2.596$; $p = 0.009$). The effect of work motivation ($\beta = 0.272$) was greater than the effect of servant leadership ($\beta = 0.184$). Furthermore, servant leadership had a positive and significant effect on work motivation ($\beta = 0.423$; $t = 6.493$; $p < 0.001$).

Table 4 presents the results of testing the indirect effect (mediation) hypothesis.

Table 4. Indirect Effect (Mediation) Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path	β	T-statistic	p-value	Result
H4	$X1 \rightarrow X4 \rightarrow Y$	0.115	2.148	0.032	Accepted (Partial Mediation)

The indirect effect of servant leadership on organizational commitment through work motivation was also significant ($\beta = 0.115$; $t = 2.148$; $p = 0.032$). The research model explained 70.7% of the variance in organizational commitment ($R^2 = 0.707$), with a Q^2 value of 0.415 indicating good predictive relevance.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that servant leadership is a strategic factor in enhancing the organizational commitment of private vocational school teachers. These results support H1, which proposed that servant leadership positively affects teacher organizational commitment. Principals who prioritize service, appreciate teacher contributions, build harmonious work communities, and demonstrate authenticity foster an environment that fosters emotional attachment and teacher loyalty to the school. This finding aligns with Asih et al. (2024), who demonstrated that servant leadership positively affects the organizational commitment of state vocational school teachers in Denpasar ($\beta = 0.327$, $p < 0.05$). Zheng et al. (2023) also found that teachers' perceptions of servant leadership directly and indirectly relate to organizational commitment ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$). Liden et al. (2014), in their multi-level research, confirmed that serving culture created by leaders significantly influences organizational commitment and unit performance.

The SITOREM analysis identified two servant leadership indicators that remain weak and require priority improvement: valuing people (score 3.84) and sharing leadership (score 3.95). This finding indicates that although principals are perceived as having built community and provided clear direction, there is still room for improvement in appreciating individual teachers and providing opportunities for participation in leadership. It is important because SMK teachers with high technical competencies need recognition and broader participation space in school decision-making. Koçak and

Genç (2022) also found that school principals' servant leadership behaviors significantly affect teachers' organizational commitment and motivation, with organizational commitment mediating this effect.

The most significant finding of this study is that work motivation exerts the strongest direct influence on organizational commitment among the variables examined ($\beta = 0.272$). This result supports H2, which proposed that work motivation positively affects teacher organizational commitment. Teachers who demonstrate achievement drive, responsibility, and persistence in their work tend to show stronger loyalty and attachment to the school. This finding reinforces Aulia et al.'s (2024) research, which found that work motivation influences teacher organizational commitment ($\beta = 0.435$, $p < 0.01$). Fadillah et al. (2024) also showed that work motivation is a crucial determinant of teacher performance alongside organizational commitment ($R^2 = 0.714$). In the SMK context, work motivation becomes critical because teachers must adapt to curriculum changes, technological developments, and the dynamic demands of the industrial world (OECD, 2023).

The SITOREM analysis identified two work motivation indicators requiring improvement: professional growth (score 3.88) and goal commitment (score 3.99). It suggests that, while teachers demonstrate high enthusiasm and take responsibility, they still need encouragement to continue developing their professional competencies and to strengthen their commitment to organizational goals. Structured professional development programs and clear goal setting become important agenda items for schools. Señeris (2024), in a study of vocational education institutions, found that human resource management practices, including training and development, positively correlate with employee organizational commitment ($r = 0.682$, $p < 0.01$).

The finding of a mediating role for work motivation ($\beta = 0.115$; $p = 0.032$) supports H4 and makes an important theoretical contribution. Servant leadership affects organizational commitment not only directly but also through enhanced teacher work motivation. This mechanism reinforces self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2022), which states that fulfilling basic psychological needs—competence, autonomy, and relatedness—through supportive leadership enhances intrinsic motivation, ultimately strengthening organizational commitment. Chiniara and Bentein (2016) found that servant leadership affects individual performance through fulfilling needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Principals who practice servant leadership provide autonomy, support, and recognition that satisfy teachers' psychological needs, thereby promoting higher work motivation and ultimately strengthening teacher loyalty to the school. Koçak and Genç (2022) also found that organizational commitment mediates the effect of servant leadership behaviors on teacher motivation.

These findings are also relevant to the Indonesian context of vocational education transformation. The SMK Center of Excellence program requires teachers to function not merely as instructional implementers but as agents of change (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2021). Motivated, committed teachers will be better prepared to adapt to change, innovate in instruction, and support the achievement of school development targets. Rullah et al.

(2022), in their study of Indonesian university lecturers, also found that servant leadership significantly affects organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behavior. These findings reinforce the argument that strengthening leadership and work motivation constitutes mutually reinforcing strategies for cultivating vocational teacher loyalty. Organ et al. (2006) and Podsakoff et al. (2000) demonstrated that organizational citizenship behavior, which is closely related to organizational commitment, is influenced by leadership and work motivation.

CONCLUSION

This study provides evidence that servant leadership and work motivation are two strategic factors in cultivating organizational commitment among private vocational school teachers. Servant leadership directly affects organizational commitment and work motivation, and work motivation has the strongest direct influence on organizational commitment, serving as a partial mediator in the relationship between servant leadership and organizational commitment. These findings confirm that enhancing teacher commitment cannot be approached partially but requires an integrated strategy combining service-oriented leadership strengthening with the enhancement of teachers' intrinsic motivation. The research model explained 70.7% of the variance in organizational commitment, demonstrating strong predictive power.

In practice, SMK principals should adopt servant leadership, characterized by valuing people, fostering professional development, and sharing leadership. Structured professional development programs and clear goal setting should also be enhanced to strengthen teacher motivation and commitment. Future research is recommended to employ longitudinal designs to examine causal relationships and expand the scope to various school types and more diverse geographical regions. Research could also explore other mediating variables such as organizational trust and job satisfaction, as well as moderating variables such as teaching experience and employment status.

This study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design precludes strong causal inference. Second, measurement based on teacher perceptions may be subject to common-method bias. Third, the study was limited to private SMKs in Bogor Regency, so generalization should be undertaken cautiously. Fourth, the study examined only two independent variables and one mediating variable, while other variables, such as organizational culture, job satisfaction, and transformational leadership, may also influence teacher organizational commitment (Fadillah et al., 2024; Aulia et al., 2024). Future research is encouraged to test more comprehensive models incorporating these variables.

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