

Self-serving leadership behaviors and productive work behaviors: The role of proactive personality

Eric Delle ^{*}, Inusah Abdul-Nasiru ¹ and Daniel Bannor Somuah¹

Abstract

Studies investigating the circumstances under which self-serving leadership affect individual level outcomes are dearth. Drawing on the social information processing theory, the research investigated the extent to which proactive personality moderates the relationship between self-serving leadership and the performance of employees in government-based organisations in Ghana. A cross-sectional survey design was used to gather data from 272 employees working in public sector institutions in Ghana, who completed our anonymous and confidential survey. The results indicate that self-serving leadership behaviors and proactive personality have different effects on productive behaviors at work. Self-serving leadership behaviours related negatively to task proficiency and proactive behavior, whereas a proactive personality related positively with both proficient and proactive performance. Finally, it was revealed that self-serving leadership behavior was counterproductive to both task proficiency and proactivity for employees with high levels of proactive tendencies; however, the relationship was insignificant for those with low levels of proactivity. Self-serving leadership behaviour fosters the performance of public sector employees who are highly proactive. This research addresses an essential, yet under-researched question in leadership literature. Importantly, the study showed that self-serving leadership undermines task proficiency and proactive work behavior for employees with a high level of proactive personality in public sector organisations in Ghana.

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Introduction

Businesses sustain their competitive advantage through the work-related efforts demonstrated by their employees. Employee performance is a crucial strategic behavior that enhances the effectiveness and survival of an organization. Previous studies have mainly assessed employee performance as task proficiency (cf. Griffin et al., 2007; Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991; Murphy & Jackson, 1999). However, the existing dynamic work context, along with the intricacies of customer needs and demands, compels managers to assess individual performance beyond task proficiency and incorporate task proactivity (cf. Griffith et al., 2007). As they operate at the forefront of service delivery, employees can enhance organisational effectiveness by devising better ways of managing work-related challenges. Consequently, organisations need capable and proactive employees to gain a strategic advantage in their operational market. As employee performance is crucial for organisations, academics and practitioners have displayed a keen interest in identifying the factors that affect individual-level performance (Buil et al., 2019). Leadership is an important asset in the workplace, and research has connected work-related behaviors and attitudes to the dominant leadership style of the organisation. Supervisory behaviors, as recognised in research (Buil et al., 2019; Duarte et al., 2021; Kusumah et al., 2021), are work-related behaviors that foster employee performance.

This study examines how leadership behavior might influence a wider range of work performance indicators (i.e., task proficiency and proactivity) among employees in government-based organisations in Ghana. Specifically, studies linking self-serving leadership behaviors to employee task proficiency - those behaviors that facilitate the employee's job performance - and task proactivity - those self-initiated behaviors that have the potential to facilitate greater productivity for the organisation (Griffin et al., 2007) - have received little attention in the extant literature. Today, organisations need employees who are not only efficient and effective in performing their tasks, but who are also able to take initiatives that bring benefits to the organisation. The link between leadership behaviors (positive or negative) and outcomes is not simple, as underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions are involved in the relationship. In the case of self-serving leadership behaviors, contextual and personal variables have been found to moderate the relationship. For example, perceived distributive justice (Camps et al., 2012), task interdependence (Peng et al., 2019), ethical climate (Decoster et al., 2021), and leader competence (Mao et al., 2019a), and more recently, traditionality - a dispositional variable (Zhang et al., 2023) as important moderating variables.

We argue that proactive personality may act as an essential boundary condition in the correlation between self-serving leadership and employee performance in the public sector of Ghana. Workers showing proactive tendencies have the tendency to adjust to the current working environment. In addition, the literature on intelligent proactivity argues that it should be influenced by the present social and relational context within the organisation (cf. Parker et al., 2019). For instance, some studies support the idea that

leadership plays an important role in the longevity, competitiveness, and efficiency of organisations (Bharanitharan et al., 2020). According to the literature narrative, leadership is presented as a positive or constructive concept. This perspective has been influenced by numerous studies that have reported on positive or constructive leadership behaviors. These behaviors have the potential to enhance employee performance, organisational success, and employee-driven innovation (Liu et al., 2022). However, there has been a recent increase in academic and practitioner interest in negative leadership. This is due to concerns in the leadership literature about leaders prioritizing their own interests and pursuing unethical agendas (Decoster et al., 2021). Self-interested leadership behavior - representing a scenario in which leaders prioritize their personal objectives and interests - has become a prominent subject of research in the leadership literature (cf. Zhang et al., 2023; Rus et al., 2010a; Camp et al., 2012). Within the working environment, these leaders use all possible methods to advance their interests, often taking advantage of their followers and the organisation through actions such as reducing employee salaries and misusing company resources (Camp et al., 2012; Rus et al., 2010a) to meet their individual aspirations. As self-serving leadership behaviors have the potential to harm organizations, researchers have taken an interest in identifying the outcomes and circumstances under which such behaviors may prove worthwhile.

Research conducted in wealthy European countries and other contexts show a connection between positive leadership constructs, such as transformational leadership and work engagement (Nurtjahjani et al., 2021) and authentic leadership and individual employee performance (Duarte et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2022). In the African context, a South African-based study demonstrates the link between authentic leadership and employee flourishing (Kleynhans et al., 2022), while in the Ghanaian context, research shows that developmental leadership (Delle & Searle, 2022) and transformational leadership (Donkor et al., 2022) are related to individual-level outcomes, such as career adaptability, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions. Overall, these studies demonstrate the relevance of leadership in the work context, confirming that leadership, regardless of the situation, is an important factor in employees' work behaviors and attitudes. Moreover, these previous studies on the empirical relationship between leadership behavior and follower outcomes indicate the complex nature of this connection, as the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions have been investigated in them empirically (Delle & Searle, 2022; Donkor et al., 2022; Duarte et al., 2021; Kleynhans et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2022; Nurtjahjani et al., 2021). Even though the studies showcase the affirmative aspects of leadership, research into negative leadership has become increasingly fascinating, with studies exploring self-serving leadership, abusive supervision, and narcissistic leadership. As leaders represent the interests of organizations, followers often replicate their conduct. However, leader conduct can also be counterproductive, leading to similar behavior from the followers. This aligns with the stance that followers are prone to negative leadership behaviors (Nevicka et al., 2018), such as abusive supervision (Yuan et al., 2022), leader narcissism (Yang et al., 2020),

and authoritarian leadership (Guo et al., 2018). The current study concentrates on self-serving leadership, a type of negative leadership where the leader's interests, instead of the organization's, take precedence. Self-serving leaders pursue their interests without hostility towards their followers (Rus et al., 2010), but their self-centered behavior can erode followers' emotional obligation (Mao et al., 2019b) and teamwork creativity (Peng et al., 2019), and elevate followers' counterproductive work behaviors (Mao et al., 2019b). The worldwide literature has limited studies that link self-serving leadership behaviors to a wider gauge of individual-level performance, which are absent in the Ghanaian context. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the impact of self-serving leadership behavior on employee performance and how proactive personality moderates this relationship.

Based on social information processing theory (Decoster et al., 2021; Peng et al., 2019), we contend that self-interested leadership behaviors establish a work context where employees prioritize the leader's interests over the organisation's. Consequently, every employee's aim becomes to improve the leader's self-interest. In the African situation, where challenging leaders is difficult, it could be wise for employees to participate in enlightened proactiveness. Proactive conduct demonstrated by employees should aim to fulfil the leader's self-interest (cf. Brown, 2005; Parker et al., 2019). Therefore, this study brings three significant contributions to the current literature on detrimental leadership. In general, followers facilitate leaders in accomplishing the goals and objectives established by their respective organisations. The behavior of leaders can either promote or hinder goal achievement. Firstly, the study utilizes the existing social information processing (Pfeffer, 1978; Meyer, 1994) and wise proactivity literatures to provide empirical evidence that proactive personality increases the negative association between self-serving leadership behavior and employee performance outcomes (i.e., task proficiency and task proactivity). The hypothesized relationships tested in the present study are illustrated in Figure 1.

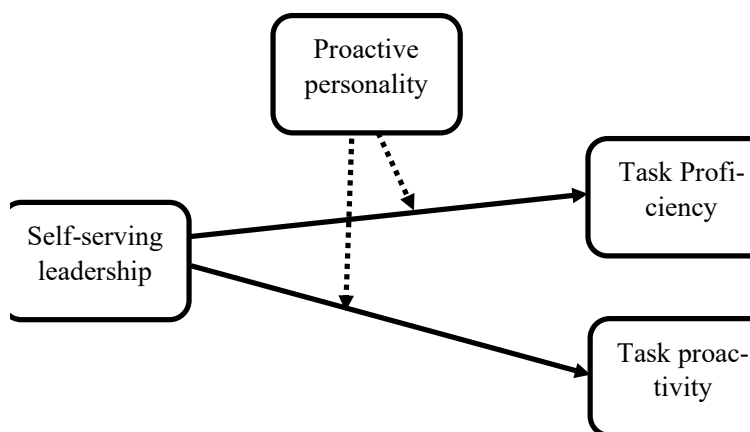


Figure 1: Hypothesised model

Self-serving leadership behaviour and employee performance

Leaders are considered as extensions of organisations; therefore, their behaviors have a significant impact on the behaviors of other members within the organisation. The behavior of a leader sets the tone for the entire workforce to follow. As such, a leader's behavior can either motivate or discourage the showing of positive attitudes and behaviors by followers. Leaders who prioritize their interests and ambitions over that of the organisation and employees are said to be self-serving (Camp et al., 2012). Behaviors that are self-interest oriented can have a harmful effect on followers. For instance, employees who work under a self-serving leader may demonstrate high levels of counterproductive work behaviors (Zhang et al., 2023), an increased intent to leave an organization, and deviant behaviors (Decoster et al., 2021; Decoster et al., 2014). Moreover, self-serving leadership behaviors undermine positive actions such as employee innovation (Mao et al., 2023). These discoveries prove the impact leaders have on employee conduct and attitudes at work. Based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), we propose that employees who work with self-serving leaders tend to acquire self-serving behaviors, attitudes, and values, and then display such conduct themselves (Haynes et al., 2017), which ultimately harms the interests of the organization. As a result, we contend that self-serving leadership behaviors could undermine employee performance at work.

Performance refers to employee behaviors and actions that enhance the effectiveness and competitiveness of organisations (Jnaneswar & Ranjit, 2020). In our study, performance is gauged by task proficiency, i.e., behaviors that meet the criteria of each work role, as well as task proactivity, which refers to self-initiated future-oriented behaviors from staff that improve procedures and situations (Griffin et al., 2007). Leadership behaviors greatly influence employee performance, underlining leaders' powerful impact on organisations (cf. Aftab et al., 2020). However, not all leadership behaviors aid the organisation, given self-serving ones tend to obstruct or derail organisational progress and efficiency. Leaders who are self-serving can foster a work culture where self-interest prevails over the interest of the organisation (cf. Peng et al., 2019). This can lead employees to exhibit behaviors that benefit themselves instead of the organisation. In fact, empirical evidence suggests that self-serving leadership behaviors foster actions that can harm the organisation, such as counterproductive work behaviors (Zhang et al., 2023), deviant behaviors (Decoster et al., 2021), and intentions to leave the organisation (Decoster et al., 2014). Moreover, such behaviors can hinder organisational effectiveness and sustainability, such as innovation (Mao et al., 2023). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1a: Self-serving leadership relates negatively to task proficiency.

H1b: Self-serving leadership relates negatively to task proactivity.

Proactive personality and employee performance

Proactive personality refers to the innate tendency to exhibit self-initiated and future-oriented acts of change, which affect individual conduct, behavior, and attitudes towards work surroundings (Bateman & Crant, 1993). Proactive personality traits are advantageous for job performance (Fuller & Marler, 2009; Han et al., 2019), prosocial behavior (Spitzmuller & van Dyne, 2013; Sun & van Emmerik, 2015), and employee-generated innovations (Horng et al., 2016). This investigation postulates that individuals with proactive personality traits are more likely to exhibit two important productive behaviors at work—namely, task proficiency and proactivity—enabling those with higher levels of proactive tendencies to demonstrate a more active and efficient approach than their less proactive peers. Individuals with proactive tendencies assume responsibility for managing their work environment and initiating changes to improve procedures, policies, and practices, resulting in enhanced performance for both individuals and the organisation (Crant, 2000). As a result, regardless of the situation, proactive individuals always endeavour to achieve greater performance (Chan, 2006). Studies indicate a positive relationship between a proactive personality and an employee's proactive behavior (McCormick et al., 2019) and their in-role performance (Fuller & Marler, 2009; Han et al., 2019). Based on this empirical evidence and proactive personality theory, it is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 2a: Proactive personality relates positively to employee task proficiency.

Hypothesis 2b: Proactive personality relates positively to employee task proactivity.

Proactive Personality as proactivity boundary variable

This research contends that a proactive personality could encourage a harmful correlation between self-serving leadership behaviors and employee performance levels at work, such as task proficiency and proactivity. The trait activation theory posits that the existing organizational climate controls the manifestation of personality traits, with Tett and Burnett (2003) emphasizing the impact of person-situation interaction on employee behavior. Leadership is a vital contextual resource in the workplace, in which the conduct and actions exhibited by leaders act as a role model for followers to emulate. The behavior of self-serving leadership leads to the development of a work climate that is oriented towards self-interest, resulting in a dereliction of the interests of both the organization and its followers (Vardaman et al., 2014). Leaders possess significant power and authority, and their actions convey and represent the attitude and intentions of the organization. Therefore, through demonstrating self-serving behavior, the leader communicates the values and potential rewards that they might endorse and acknowledge to the staff. As a result, the mentality of the employees becomes aligned with that of

the leader's through adopting self-serving behaviors that correspond with those of the leadership. This argument aligns with the social information processing theory, which posits that the actions of leaders provide critical information or cues that employees should internalize, process, and adapt to (Meyer, 1994; Pfeffer, 1978). As a result, the self-serving behaviors of leaders influence the personalities and behaviors of individuals, leading employees to engage in proactive behavior that aligns with the leaders' interests and ambitions (cf. Parker et al., 2019). Consequently, we postulate that:

Hypothesis 3a: Self-serving leadership relates negatively to employee task proficiency at a higher level of proactivity.

Hypothesis 3b: Self-serving leadership negatively to employee task proactivity at a higher level of proactivity.

Methods

Sample and procedure

This study included 270 permanent employees ($n = 270$) who work in government organizations, such as ministries, departments, and agencies. To obtain organizational support for the study, we sent letters to various government institutions, seeking permission to collect data on contextual and personal factors that could affect employee performance positively or negatively. We attached a sample questionnaire to the letter to give the human resource manager/director an insight into the type of questions the employees would respond to. All organizations we contacted approved our study. The human resource department agreed to administer the questionnaire. Envelopes were provided to the participants to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. They were instructed to put the completed survey into the envelope, seal it before placing it at the Human Resource Department. Clear instructions were provided to the participants to assist them in the completion of the survey. They were encouraged to independently complete the survey. Each participant completed the survey once.

Three hundred questionnaires were distributed using the paper-pencil approach. Weekly follow-up calls were made to obtain updates on the progress of data collection. This approach proved effective, with 270 out of the 300 retrieved and used for analysis. As a result, a response rate of 90% was achieved. The final sample comprised 140 women (52.2%) and 130 men (47.8%). In terms of job position, 232 (85.3%) participants were non-managerial and 40 (14.7%) were managerial. The participants in the sample were highly educated with 50.3% (137) with a First Degree as their highest qualification; 42.3% (115) holding a Higher National Diploma (HND); 6.6% possessing a master's degree, and 0.7% holding a PhD. The mean age of the sample was 27 years and six months ($SD = 6.02$) and all the participants have worked for at least two years ($SD = 3.14$) in their current organization.

Measures

Self-serving leadership - Self-serving leadership was assessed using four items (Camps et al., 2012). An example of an item on the scale is “Is selfish and only thinks of himself or herself.” The question does not have a correct or an incorrect response. Responses varied from strongly disagree, evaluated as 1, to strongly agree, evaluated as 5. The minimum and maximum possible scores on the scale 4 and 20, correspondingly. With a higher score, the leader showcases more self-serving tendencies.

Employee performance - Two aspects of work performance, namely task proficiency and proactivity, were measured using the scale developed and validated by Griffin et al. (2007). Three items were used to measure each performance construct. For each performance construct, a sample item was used for measurement; “carried out the core parts of your job well” was used for task proficiency and “initiated better ways of doing your core tasks” was used for proactivity. Higher scores indicate greater levels of proficiency and proactivity.

Proactivity of personality - Proactivity of personality was evaluated using three items from the original 10-item scale developed by Bateman and Crant (1993). The 10 items had issues with convergent and discriminant validity. Consequently, the items were systematically removed. For instance, an item was removed, and an analysis was re-run to confirm that the validity requirements were satisfied. This process resulted in the removal of seven items. Thus, three items were used to measure proactive personality in the study.

Analysis

The SPSS version 29 for IBM and AMOS version 29 software were employed to facilitate the analysis. Prior to testing the hypotheses, some preliminary analyses were conducted, including reliability analysis, factor analysis, and bivariate correlation. The reliability analysis was performed on all the main variables (i.e., self-serving leadership, proactive personality, task proficiency, and task proactivity) to ascertain their psychometric relevance in the study. Similarly, bivariate correlation was performed between the main variables and demographic factors in the study to determine the presence of multicollinearity (i.e., extremely high correlation, $r \geq 0.70$) in the results and to identify possible control variables. In addition to this, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were performed to ascertain whether the data was susceptible to common method bias. Accordingly, the Harman’s single factor analysis test was performed. Furthermore, the construct validity was evaluated. Finally, the hypothesized relationships were tested using a path analysis test (a form of structural equation modelling that utilizes only latent constructs).

Results

Preliminary analysis

We conducted internal consistency and bivariate correlation analyses to evaluate the psychometric relevance of the main variables. Table 1 shows the expected relationship between the main variables, i.e., self-serving leadership behaviors, task proactivity, task proficiency, and proactive personality. In addition, we observed no problematic correlations as the correlation ($r = .53, p < .001$) between task proficiency and proactivity, the two performance constructs were below the multicollinearity threshold of ≥ 0.7 . Due to the cross-sectional nature of the data, the possibility of common method bias should be considered. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted using the Harman single-factor technique to evaluate the presence of common method bias. The principal axis factor method was used. The findings revealed that the 13 items, when combined, represented 38.36% of the total variance. This indicates that common method bias is unlikely to have influenced the analysis, as it falls below the 50% threshold.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics, correlation, and internal consistency results of the study variables

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Gender	.52	.50	-								
Age	27.63	6.02	.10	-							
Managerial Status	.91	.28	-.08	-.55***	-						
Education	.93	.91	.02	.19**	-.13*						
Work tenure	2.87	3.14	-.01	.38***	-.29***	.18**	-				
Self-serving leadership	1.86	.84	-.22***	-.13*	.13*	.12	-.03	(.85)			
Proactive personality	3.99	.84	.07	.14*	-.10	.11	.15*	-.47***	(.83)		
Task proficiency	4.06	.77	.18**	.05	-.14*	.02	.09	-.41***	.59***	(.80)	
Task proactivity	3.92	.84	.03	.03	-.07	-.05	.10	-.33***	.46***	.53***	(.83)

Notes:

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$. Reliability coefficients in parenthesis.

Validity and measurement model analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis was utilized in the study to scrutinize the construct validity of the measurement model, which included four latent variables. A four-factor model was examined in this study, including self-serving leadership (four items), proactive personality (ten items), task proficiency (three items), and task proactivity (three items). Each item was loaded onto its respective latent construct. Validity results for all the four constructs in the model are presented in Table 3. Out of the four constructs, only one was found to have validity issues. To be specific, the proactive personality construct showed

unacceptable values for the average variance extracted (AVE), maximum shared variance (MSV), and average shared variance (ASV). Following the acceptable practice, the following items were removed to address the validity concerns related to the proactive personality construct: The items that were removed one at a time are: “I am constantly on the lookout for new ways to improve my life,” “Wherever I have been, I have been a powerful force for constructive change,” “nothing is more exciting than seeing my ideas turn into reality,” “I love being a champion for my ideas, even against others’ opposition,” “I excel at identifying opportunities,” “If I see something I don’t like I fix it,” and “No matter what the odds, if I believe in something I make it happen.” The items were removed one by one. Thus, three indicators were used to measure the proactive personality construct within the public sector context of Ghana. Specifically, these items were: “I am always looking for better ways to do things,” “If I believe in an idea, then no obstacle will prevent me from making it happen,” and “I can spot a good opportunity before others can.” All items loaded significantly and accurately onto their respective latent constructs (with factor loadings ≥ 0.60). Table 3 indicates no concerns regarding validity. In particular, the scores for average variance extracted (AVE, ≥ 0.5) and composite reliability (CR, ≥ 0.70) were within acceptable thresholds for convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Similarly, discriminant validity was established, as the square root of AVE is greater than all intercorrelations among the constructs (Hair et al., 2010).

Table 2: Assessment of construct validity

Variables	CR	AVE	MSV	ASV
Self-serving leadership	0.85	0.59	0.38	0.27
Proactive personality	0.83	0.62	0.56	0.42
Work proficiency	0.81	0.58	0.56	0.40
Proactive behavior	0.83	0.63	0.40	0.31

Notes:

CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted; MSV = maximum shared variance; ASV = average shared variance.

Model comparison

We compared three competing models. First, we generated results for the hypothesized four-factor model, comprising self-serving leadership, proactive personality, task proficiency and task proactivity. Second, we ran a three-factor model in which employee performance was measured as a unidimensional construct; and finally, we ran a one-factor model in which all items were loaded on a single latent construct. The results indicate that the four-factor model: $\chi^2 = 194.38$, $df = 59$, $p < .001$, CFI = .92, IFI = .93, TLI = .88, RMSEA = .09 is superior to the three-factor model: $\chi^2 = 327.40$, $df = 62$, $p < .$

001, CFI = .85, IFI = .85, TLI = .78, RMSEA = .13 and the $\chi^2 = 695.16$, $df = 65$, $p < .001$, CFI = .65, IFI = .65, TLI = .51, RMSEA = .19.

Testing the hypothesized model

We used path analysis (a form of structural equation modelling that uses latent constructs) to assess our hypothesized relationships. The hypothesized model is acceptable: $\chi^2 = 21.15$, $df = 9$, $p = .012$; CFI = .97; TLI = .90; IFI = .97; RMSEA = .07. The results showed that self-serving leadership relates negatively and significantly related to (a) task proficiency, $\beta = -.14$, $SE = .04$, $p = .008$; and (b) task proactivity, $\beta = -.16$, $SE = .05$, $p = .005$, confirming hypothesis 1a & b, respectively. It was also found that proactive personality significantly and positively related to task proficiency, $\beta = .58$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$ and task proactivity, $\beta = .50$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$, thus, hypotheses 2a & b are supported. Furthermore, the study found that proactive personality significantly moderated the relationship between self-serving leadership and employees’ task proficiency, $\beta = -.16$, $SE = .03$, $p = .002$, and proactive behavior, $\beta = -.29$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$. For a meaningful interpretation of the moderation analysis, we performed slope analysis following the Aikens and West (1991) procedure. The results in Figure 2 indicate that self-serving leadership behavior is negatively and significantly associated with work proficiency proactivity for highly proactive individuals, $\beta = -.41$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$, but the relationship is insignificant for less proactive employees, $\beta = .08$, $SE = .06$, $p = .264$.

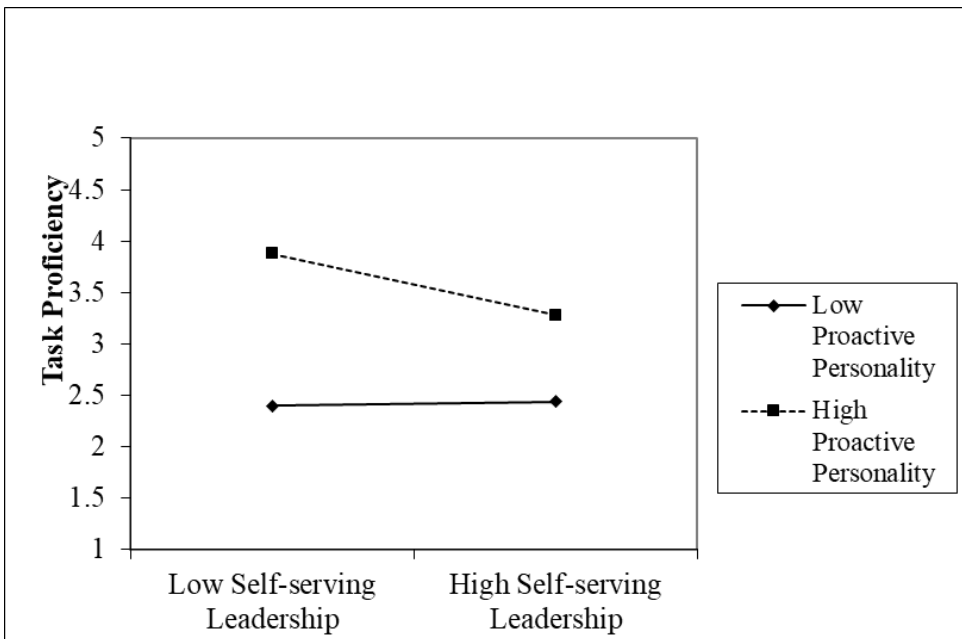


Figure 2: Proactive personality moderates the relationship between self-serving leadership and task proficiency.

The results in Figure 3 also show that self-serving leadership behavior undermines proactive behavior for highly proactive employees, $\beta = -.31$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$, but its effect on proactive behavior is insignificant for less proactive employees, $\beta = -.04$, $SE = .05$, $p = .528$.

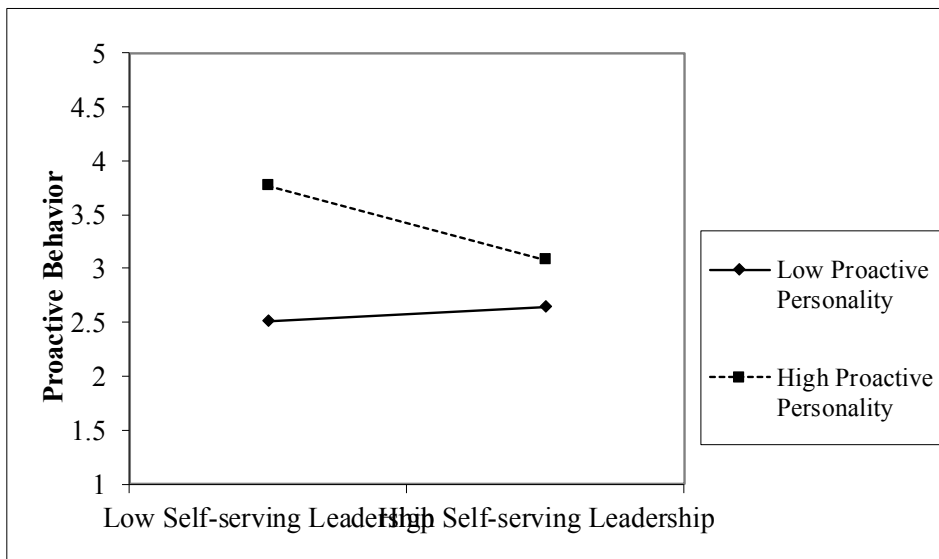


Figure 3: Proactive personality moderates self-serving leadership-proactive behaviour relationship.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the conditions that could lead to self-serving leadership behavior reducing work proficiency and proactive work behaviors among public sector employees in Ghana. By applying the social information processing and proactive personality theories, we discovered that self-serving leadership has a more notable negative impact on the work proficiency and proactive behaviors of highly proactive employees, compared to those who are less proactive. These findings possess notable implications for both theoretical and practical fields.

Theoretical contributions

Our findings suggest that proactive personality exacerbates the negative influence of self-serving leadership behaviors on employee work proficiency rather than alleviating it. The first contribution of our study to the emerging negative leadership literature is demonstrating that self-serving leadership undermines productive behaviors, including work proficiency and proactive work behaviors. This result confirms our study's expectation that leaders who pursue their self-interest instead of the organization's interest

tend to have their followers perform less optimally. In particular, the present findings corroborate prior research that self-serving leadership behaviors are counterproductive. Such behaviors have been linked to increased turnover intentions, decreased innovative behavior, and high levels of counterproductive work behaviors (Mao et al., 2019b). Self-serving leadership was found to discourage work proficiency and self-initiated behaviors that could contribute to organisational effectiveness and sustainability, as per the findings of the study. Therefore, the findings of the study call for more research on self-serving leadership across various contexts (Mao et al., 2019b).

Secondly, as anticipated, we discovered that a proactive personality facilitates work proficiency and proactive behavior among employees. These findings are consistent with previous research, conducted beyond the Ghanaian context, that individuals with proactive dispositions exhibit a tendency to take charge of their environment, adapt effectively to challenges, and perform tasks successfully within that environment (cf. Chan, 2006; McCormick et al., 2019). The outcomes highlight the self-efficacious nature of proactive employees. They are driven to produce and work towards their work-related goals, irrespective of any challenges in the environment (cf. Parker et al., 2010).

Finally, our study demonstrates that there are boundary conditions that affect the relationship between self-serving leadership and employee performance. Proactive personality (i.e., a personal trait) is an important moderating factor that amplifies the negative effect of self-serving leadership on employee performance. Our research indicates that self-serving leadership hinders work proficiency and proactive work behavior for highly proactive individuals, while the effect is negligible for employees who are less proactive.

Practical implications findings

The findings from this study provide practical benefits for organizations and employers. First, organisations should seek to hire leaders/managers whose values closely align with those of the organisation. This strategic step would help organizations have leaders who exhibit behavior in line with the organisation's expectations. Moreover, since followers tend to adopt the behaviors of their leaders, this step would result in followers who demonstrate behaviors that contribute to the organization's competitive advantage, leading to significant benefits for the organisation. Secondly, individuals with proactive tendencies may be counterproductive in a work environment that prioritizes self-interest. The findings indicate that even having a proactive personality does not help mitigate the negative impact of self-serving leadership on employee performance. This is due to the tendency of proactive individuals to adapt to their work environment. This study suggests that employees sometimes display what is referred to as 'wise proactivity', where individuals engage in behaviors that align with the leader's interests (cf. Parker et al., 2019).

Limitations and recommendations for future studies

Our study has made a unique contribution to the growing body of research on negative leadership. However, we recognize that there are some inherent limitations. To begin with, the cross-sectional design used to investigate the variables in the study makes it impossible for us to draw causal inferences. Moreover, the study is non-experimental. Thus, the significant relationship does not necessarily imply causation. Furthermore, the study was limited to employees working in public sector organizations in Ghana. Considering the reported limitations, we suggest that future researchers adopt a multi-source data collection approach to overcome the constraints of using a cross-sectional design. For instance, upcoming studies could include assessments of employee performance by either their supervisors or peers whilst the employees evaluate their immediate superior's self-serving leadership behavior. Furthermore, it may be helpful to conduct a longitudinal study to ascertain the relationship's stability over time. We also recommend that future studies expand their scope by including private sector organisations. Additionally, conducting a cross-cultural study is important since cultural differences between nations could become a possible explanation for why self-serving leadership behaviors appear less effective in certain contexts.

Conclusion

This study sought to investigate the association between self-serving leadership and employee performance in government-based organisations in Ghana. We specifically investigated the association between self-serving leadership and employee performance in the unique context of Ghana where such studies are uncommon. We examined the situations in which self-serving leadership could be either effective or ineffective. Our findings show that self-serving leadership negatively impacts work proficiency and proactive work behavior among public sector employees. However, in the same context, proactive personality tends to improve employee performance; and self-serving leadership hindered work proficiency and proactive work behavior for employees with higher levels of proactive tendencies. This study has contributed to the limited research available on self-serving leadership. We contend that leadership is a valuable asset for organisations, but negative leadership (i.e., self-serving leadership) impedes the performance of both the organisation and its employees. In conclusion, we observed that proactive personality amplifies the negative impact of self-serving leadership on employee performance.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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