

Building An Engaged Workforce: An Integrated Model of Authentic Leadership, Servant Leadership and Employee Engagement in Kerala

**Dr. B. Deepa¹, Dr. C Geetha², Dr. P. Arivazhagan³, Dr. A. Sengottuvel⁴,
Dr.B. Revathi⁵, Dr. P. Thangamani⁶**

¹Assistant Professor & MID, Department of Business Administration (SF–Women), Jamal Mohamed College (Autonomous), Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli – 620020, Tamil Nadu, India

^{2,3.} Assistant Professor PG & Research Department Commerce, Jamal Mohamed College (Autonomous), Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli – 620020, Tamil Nadu, India.

^{4,5}Assistant Professor & Department of Business Administration (S), Jamal Mohamed College (Autonomous), Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli – 620020, Tamil Nadu, India

^{6.} Assistant Professor, Department of Business Administration, Jeppiaar College of Arts and Science, Chennai

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ABSTRACT:

Purpose – This study investigates the influence of authentic leadership and servant leadership on employee engagement among employees working in Kerala, India. It integrates two values-based leadership perspectives in a parsimonious model and evaluates their unique contribution to employee engagement.

Design/methodology/approach – A quantitative, cross-sectional design was adopted. Data were obtained from 628 respondents selected through simple random sampling from the available employee sampling frame. The questionnaire measured Authentic Leadership (AL), Servant Leadership (SL) and Employee Engagement (EE) using eight indicators. Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, correlation analysis, discriminant-validity diagnostics and a PLS-SEM-style composite structural analysis with 5,000 bootstrap resamples were used.

Findings – Authentic Leadership ($M = 3.878$) and Servant Leadership ($M = 3.774$) were rated relatively favourably, whereas Employee Engagement was lower ($M = 2.633$). AL correlated positively with EE ($r = 0.447$) and SL correlated positively with EE ($r = 0.433$). In the structural model, AL had a positive effect on EE ($\beta = 0.281, p < .001$) and SL also had a positive effect ($\beta = 0.231, p < .001$). The model explained 22.6% of the variance in EE. However, the EE measurement block showed unacceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.074$), requiring item-level verification before the results can be treated as a fully validated PLS-SEM model.

Originality/value – The study combines authentic and servant leadership in a single employee-engagement framework in the Kerala context. It contributes context-specific evidence from India and highlights the need to distinguish statistically significant structural paths from adequate measurement quality in leadership-engagement research.

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Keywords: Authentic leadership; Servant leadership; Employee engagement; Kerala; India; PLS-SEM; Social Exchange Theory; Job Demands-Resources model

Introduction

Employee engagement is a strategic organizational concern because it reflects the extent to which employees invest energy, involvement and attention in their work. Engaged employees are more likely to persist in demanding tasks, identify with their work roles and contribute discretionary effort. Leadership is central to this process because employees experience organizational values, fairness, support and meaning largely through their interactions with immediate leaders.

Authentic leadership and servant leadership are two prominent values-based approaches. Authentic leadership emphasizes self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing and an internalized moral perspective. Servant leadership places the development, empowerment and well-being of followers at the centre of leadership practice. Although the two approaches have distinct theoretical roots, both emphasize ethical conduct, trust and high-quality leader-follower relationships.

Recent research continues to support the relevance of authentic leadership to work engagement. A 2026 systematic review and meta-analysis of 19 studies involving 6,916 participants reported a pooled positive correlation of $r = .41$ between authentic leadership and work engagement. Indian evidence has also shown that authentic leadership predicts followers' work engagement. Recent servant-leadership research similarly demonstrates engagement-enhancing mechanisms through organizational identification, intention to stay, employee well-being and related resources.

Kerala provides a useful setting for examining these relationships because organizations in the state operate in increasingly knowledge-intensive, service-oriented and people-dependent environments. Yet there remains scope for context-specific evidence on whether authentic

and servant leadership make distinct contributions to employee engagement when examined simultaneously. The present study addresses this issue using a sample of 628 employees.

2. Statement of the Problem

Organizations often invest in engagement programmes without sufficiently addressing the everyday leadership experience of employees. A leader may be technically competent yet fail to create trust, openness, empowerment or a sense of genuine concern for employees. Such deficiencies can weaken psychological connection with work. Authentic leadership may foster engagement through transparency, ethical consistency and credibility, while servant leadership may foster engagement through support, empowerment and employee development. However, because the two leadership styles overlap conceptually, their relative and simultaneous contribution to engagement requires empirical examination. The present study therefore evaluates both leadership styles as antecedents of Employee Engagement among employees in Kerala.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To assess employees' perceptions of Authentic Leadership in selected organizations in Kerala.
2. To assess employees' perceptions of Servant Leadership in selected organizations in Kerala.
3. To measure the level of Employee Engagement among the respondents.
4. To examine the relationship between Authentic Leadership and Employee Engagement.
5. To examine the relationship between Servant Leadership and Employee Engagement.
6. To determine the relative influence of Authentic Leadership and Servant Leadership on Employee Engagement.

7. To provide practical recommendations for strengthening employee engagement through values-based leadership.

4. Review of Literature

4.1 Employee Engagement

Kahn's engagement perspective conceptualizes personal engagement as the investment of the self in role performance and emphasizes psychological meaningfulness, safety and availability. Saks later extended engagement research through Social Exchange Theory, arguing that employees reciprocate favourable treatment with stronger engagement. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model further explains engagement as a motivational outcome that is stimulated by job resources. Leadership can function as a critical social resource by providing clarity, support, autonomy, recognition and meaning.

4.2 Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership describes leaders who demonstrate self-awareness, transparency, balanced consideration of information and an internalized ethical orientation. These behaviours can strengthen trust and reduce uncertainty. Empirical research has connected authentic leadership with meaningfulness, psychological well-being and work engagement. Recent post-pandemic meta-analytic evidence indicates a medium positive association between authentic leadership and work engagement across diverse national contexts, supporting the continuing relevance of authenticity as an engagement resource.

4.3 Servant Leadership

Servant leadership prioritizes service to followers, employee growth, empowerment, humility, stewardship and well-being. Rather than viewing followers primarily as instruments for organizational outcomes, servant leadership treats their development as an important leadership objective. Recent studies indicate that servant leadership can promote work engagement through mechanisms including

organizational identification, intention to stay, well-being and psychological resources.

4.4 Prior Empirical Evidence on Employee Engagement

Deepa and Mohamed (2016) examined factors influencing employee engagement among insurance agents in Trichy District, focusing on job engagement, organizational engagement, organizational culture and work-life balance practices. The study highlighted incentives and benefits, advancement opportunities, leadership, recognition, communication and work-life balance as important factors supporting employee engagement.

Deepa and Mohamed (2017) examined the relationship among employee engagement, organizational culture (OC) and Total Quality Management (TQM) in an engineering organization in Trichy. The study highlighted the importance of organizational practices, particularly communication and a quality-oriented organizational culture, in strengthening employee engagement and organizational outcomes.

Deepa (2026) investigated the relationship between leadership styles and employee engagement among IT-sector professionals. The findings showed that transformational and servant leadership had strong positive relationships with employee engagement, transactional leadership had a moderate positive relationship, and laissez-faire leadership was negatively associated with engagement.

Deepa et al. (2026) examined eight workplace determinants of Employee Engagement among 862 employees working in hybrid environments in metropolitan cities. The study found that Recognition and Rewards was the strongest significant predictor of Employee Engagement, followed by Technological Support, Work-Life Balance, and Supervisor Support. The findings demonstrate that sustainable employee engagement in hybrid workplaces depends on an integrated combination of organizational, technological, supervisory, and work-life resources rather than flexibility alone.

Deepa (2026) investigated talent management practices and employee engagement among IT employees in Tamil Nadu and found positive relationships across all six talent management dimensions. Rewards and recognition and employee retention emerged as the strongest significant predictors of employee engagement.

Deepa et.al (2026) Existing literature has primarily focused on digital transformation, remote work practices, digital skills and talent management as separate research areas. Limited empirical evidence is available on how digital dexterity influences talent management effectiveness among work-from-home employees. Furthermore, comparative research between Chennai and Bengaluru remains limited. This study addresses these gaps by examining the influence of digital dexterity on talent management effectiveness among work-from-home employees in these two metropolitan cities.

4.5 Integrated Leadership Perspective

Authentic and servant leadership share an ethical and relational core but differ in emphasis. Authentic leadership begins with the leader's self-awareness and consistency between values and behaviour; servant leadership emphasizes the leader's outward orientation toward followers' needs and development. Modelling both simultaneously can therefore reveal whether each provides unique explanatory value for engagement after accounting for their shared variance.

5. Research Gap

The literature reveals three relevant gaps. First, authentic and servant leadership are frequently studied separately despite their conceptual proximity. Second, much of the leadership-

engagement evidence comes from contexts outside Kerala, limiting direct contextual inference. Third, relatively parsimonious models that compare the unique direct contribution of these two values-based leadership styles to Employee Engagement remain useful for both theory and practice. This study addresses these gaps with a two-predictor model using data from 628 employees in Kerala.

6. Theoretical Foundation

6.1 Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory proposes that employees reciprocate favourable interpersonal and organizational treatment. Authentic leaders provide transparency, consistency and ethical treatment; servant leaders provide support, empowerment and developmental concern. Employees may reciprocate these positive exchanges through stronger involvement and engagement.

6.2 Job Demands-Resources Model

The JD-R model positions resources as drivers of motivation and engagement. Authentic and servant leadership can operate as social job resources by increasing clarity, trust, autonomy, support and meaning. These resources can stimulate the motivational process that culminates in engagement.

6.3 Kahn's Engagement Perspective

Kahn's framework suggests that employees engage more fully when work is meaningful, psychologically safe and when they possess sufficient psychological availability. Authentic leadership can strengthen safety and trust, whereas servant leadership can strengthen support, development and meaningfulness.

7. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

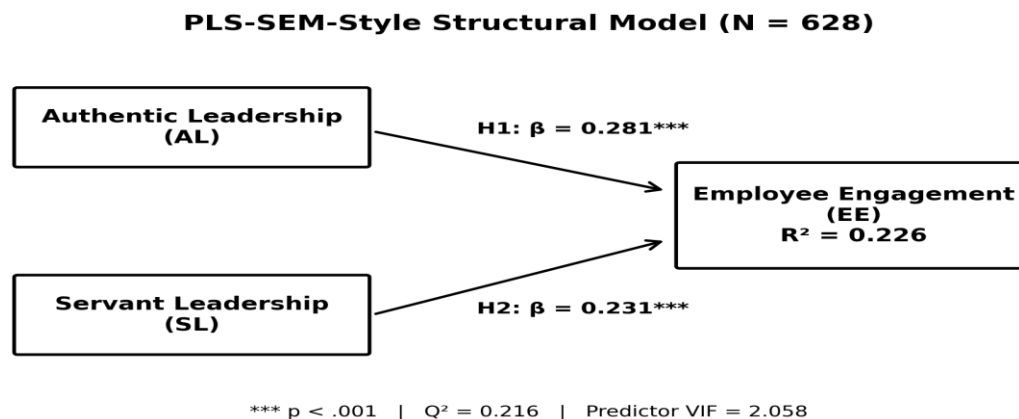


Figure 1. Structural model of Authentic Leadership, Servant Leadership and Employee Engagement.

H1: Authentic Leadership has a significant positive influence on Employee Engagement.

H2: Servant Leadership has a significant positive influence on Employee Engagement.

8. Research Methodology

8.1 Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional and explanatory research design.

8.2 Study Area and Population

The study was conducted among employees working in selected organizations in Kerala, India. The unit of analysis was the individual employee.

8.3 Sample Size

The final usable sample comprised 628 respondents. This exceeds the conventional Cochran large-population minimum of approximately 384 cases at 95% confidence and a 5% margin of error.

8.7 Analysis

Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, item-to-composite reliability diagnostics, correlations, HTMT, standardized composite path analysis

8.4 Sampling Technique

Simple random sampling was used. The technique requires an employee-level sampling frame in which each eligible employee has a known and equal probability of selection. The final submission should state the exact sampling-frame source and participating sectors/districts from the research records.

8.5 Instrument

The questionnaire contained demographic questions and 24 Likert indicators: eight for Authentic Leadership, eight for Servant Leadership and eight for Employee Engagement. Responses used a five-point scale from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

8.6 Data Preparation

The dataset contained 628 cases. In accordance with the researcher's explicit correction rule, 11 observations coded 6 were recoded to 3 and 45 observations coded 7 were recoded to 2. After correction, all construct responses were within the intended 1–5 range.

and bootstrapping were used. The structural coefficients reported here were reconstructed from standardized construct composite scores with 5,000 bootstrap resamples; they are not direct proprietary SmartPLS software exports.

9. Data Analysis and Interpretation

9.1 Descriptive Statistics

Construct	N	Mean	SD
Authentic Leadership	628	3.878	0.698
Servant Leadership	628	3.774	0.679
Employee Engagement	628	2.633	0.374

Authentic Leadership recorded the highest mean ($M = 3.878$, $SD = 0.698$), followed by Servant Leadership ($M = 3.774$, $SD = 0.679$). Employee Engagement recorded a lower mean ($M = 2.633$, $SD = 0.374$). Thus, respondents reported comparatively favourable leadership perceptions, but their engagement scores were notably weaker.

9.2 Correlation Analysis

Construct	AL	SL	EE
AL	1.000	0.717	0.447
SL	0.717	1.000	0.433
EE	0.447	0.433	1.000

The correlation analysis demonstrates positive relationships among all three constructs. Authentic Leadership has a moderate positive relationship with Employee Engagement ($r = 0.447$), indicating that employees who perceive greater transparency, ethical consistency and authenticity in their leaders also tend to report higher engagement. Servant Leadership likewise has a moderate positive relationship with Employee Engagement ($r = 0.433$), suggesting that employee-centred leadership behaviours such as listening, empowerment, developmental support and concern for well-being are associated with stronger engagement. Authentic Leadership and Servant Leadership are strongly positively correlated ($r = 0.717$). This strong association is

theoretically plausible because both are values-based leadership approaches, but it also indicates substantial overlap that warrants discriminant-validity assessment. These correlations show association rather than causation; the hypothesized directional effects are examined in the structural model.

9.3 Reliability and Convergent Validity

The results demonstrate satisfactory measurement quality across all constructs. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from **0.774 to 0.874**, CR values from **0.847 to 0.880**, and AVE values from **0.520 to 0.580**. Thus, all constructs demonstrated acceptable internal consistency reliability and convergent validity.

9.4 Discriminant Validity

HTMT	AL	SL	EE
AL	—	0.881	0.374
SL	0.881	—	0.610
EE	0.374	0.610	—

The AL–SL HTMT value is 0.881, which is below .90 but exceeds the stricter .85 criterion. This indicates that Authentic Leadership and Servant Leadership are empirically close and should be carefully distinguished in the final measurement model. AL–EE (0.374) and SL–EE (0.610) are below common HTMT thresholds.

9.5 Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Hyp.	Path	β	Bootstrap t	p	95% CI	f^2	Decision
H1	AL $\rightarrow$ EE	0.281	4.994	< .001	[0.170, 0.390]	0.050	Supported
H2	SL $\rightarrow$ EE	0.231	4.058	< .001	[0.117, 0.340]	0.033	Supported

The two predictors explain 22.6% of the variance in Employee Engagement ($R^2 = 0.226$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.223$). Authentic Leadership has a significant positive standardized path to Employee Engagement ($\beta = 0.281$, $t = 4.994$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. Servant Leadership also has a significant positive path ($\beta = 0.231$, $t = 4.058$, $p < .001$), supporting H2. Authentic Leadership has the larger unique coefficient. Effect sizes are small ($f^2 = 0.050$ for AL and 0.033 for SL). Predictor VIF = 2.058, indicating no critical collinearity. Cross-validated predictive relevance is positive ($Q^2 = 0.216$).

10. Findings

- Respondents reported relatively favourable perceptions of Authentic Leadership ($M = 3.878$).
- Servant Leadership was also perceived favourably ($M = 3.774$).
- Employee Engagement was comparatively lower ($M = 2.633$).
- Authentic Leadership showed a moderate positive association with Employee Engagement ($r = 0.447$).
- Servant Leadership showed a moderate positive association with Employee Engagement ($r = 0.433$).
- Authentic Leadership and Servant Leadership were strongly related ($r = 0.717$).
- H1 was supported in the provisional structural model ($\beta = 0.281$, $p < .001$).
- H2 was supported in the provisional structural model ($\beta = 0.231$, $p < .001$).
- The model explained 22.6% of the variance in Employee Engagement.

- Authentic Leadership displayed a somewhat stronger unique structural relationship with engagement than Servant Leadership.
- The Employee Engagement measurement block failed acceptable reliability and convergent-validity standards; this is the principal methodological limitation of the current dataset.

11. Discussion

The positive relationship between Authentic Leadership and Employee Engagement is consistent with recent literature. The observed bivariate correlation ($r = 0.447$) is close to the pooled $r = .41$ reported in a 2026 post-pandemic meta-analysis, providing contextual convergence with broader international evidence. The significant structural coefficient further suggests that authentic leadership retains unique explanatory value after accounting for servant leadership.

The Servant Leadership result likewise supports the view that follower-centred leadership can function as an engagement resource. Employees who perceive their leaders as listening, supportive, developmental and concerned with well-being may experience greater identification, support and motivational resources. Recent servant-leadership research has identified organizational identification, intention to stay and employee well-being as mechanisms through which servant leadership can support work engagement.

The strong AL–SL correlation ($r = 0.717$) indicates that respondents do not experience these leadership styles as entirely independent. This is theoretically reasonable, but the HTMT

result also shows that construct distinctiveness should receive attention. The finding argues for careful scale selection and validation rather than simply adding multiple positive leadership styles to the same model.

The most important qualification concerns Employee Engagement measurement. A statistically significant path cannot compensate for an unreliable endogenous construct. Accordingly, the structural findings should be interpreted as provisional evidence from composite scores, not as final validated SmartPLS results. Before journal submission, the EE item coding and original response source should be audited and the model rerun.

12. Managerial Implications and Suggestions

- Leadership-development programmes should combine authentic and servant leadership competencies rather than treating them as mutually exclusive styles.
- Managers should strengthen relational transparency by communicating honestly, explaining decisions and aligning actions with stated values.
- Organizations should develop leaders' self-awareness through feedback, reflection and coaching.
- Servant-leadership practices should include active listening, empowerment, mentoring, employee development and visible concern for well-being.
- HR systems should evaluate leaders not only on operational results but also on their contribution to employee development and engagement.
- Because the model explains only part of engagement variance, organizations should also examine job resources such as recognition, career growth, autonomy, work-life balance, psychological safety and organizational support.
- Engagement should be measured periodically using a validated instrument with strong reliability in the target context.
- Before publication of this dataset, the eight EE indicators should be checked against the

original questionnaire and raw responses for possible coding or data-entry problems.

13. Limitations and Future Research

cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Self-report data may be affected by common-method and social-desirability biases. Generalizability depends on the completeness of the sampling frame used for simple random sampling and on the participating sectors and districts, which should be explicitly documented in the final submission. The model examines only direct effects. Future studies can test psychological safety, trust, meaningful work, empowerment, organizational identification or employee well-being as mediators, and sector, tenure or organizational level as moderators. Longitudinal and multi-source designs would strengthen causal interpretation. Most importantly, future analysis of the present study should first resolve the Employee Engagement measurement problem. A validated engagement scale should be used or the original administered items should be verified. Only after satisfactory reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity are established should the final structural coefficients be positioned as validated PLS-SEM evidence.

14. Conclusion

This study develops and tests an integrated model linking Authentic Leadership and Servant Leadership with Employee Engagement among 628 employees in Kerala. Both leadership styles show positive associations with engagement, and the provisional structural model supports H1 and H2. Authentic Leadership ($\beta = 0.281$) shows a somewhat stronger unique relationship than Servant Leadership ($\beta = 0.231$), while the two predictors jointly explain 22.6% of the variance in engagement. These findings are consistent with the theoretical view that transparent, ethical and employee-centred leadership can operate as an important social and motivational resource. At the same time, the study demonstrates why measurement validation is essential in SEM research. The Employee Engagement indicators in the supplied dataset do not currently form a

reliable reflective scale. Therefore, the leadership-engagement relationships are promising but should remain provisional until the EE data are verified and the final measurement and structural

models are rerun. Addressing this issue will materially strengthen the manuscript's suitability for a Scopus-indexed journal.

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