

## **Role of Servant Leadership on Organizational Commitment: An Exploratory Survey of State Corporations in Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

*The role of leadership in ensuring high performance organizations and employee organizational commitment cannot be overemphasized. The business environment has become so complex and it is no longer possible for organizations to guarantee employees a job for life which makes the issue of commitment even more pertinent. It has been noted that one of the key factors that will influence an employee's decision to remain with or leave an organization is the supervisors or manager's leadership style. Since committed employees are bound to perform over and beyond the call of duty, it may be in the organization's best interest for managers to understand how their leadership behaviour can influence employees' commitment to the organization. One of the contemporary leadership styles that holds great promise for effective organizational performance as well as enhancing employee loyalty and commitment to the organization is servant leadership. Various studies have indicated that one of the challenges facing state corporations in Kenya is the issue of commitment as evidenced by a shortage of human resources both in the headquarters and in the field and poor service delivery. Employees in these corporations are said to work only within the working hours and consider any work outside these working hours to be none of their concern or their responsibility. This study therefore seeks to explore the role of servant leadership on organizational commitment in Kenyan state corporations. Finally, this study develops a conceptual framework that attempts to explain the relationship between servant leadership and employee organizational commitment.*

**Keywords:** Servant leadership; Organizational Commitment; State corporations

### **1.1 Introduction**

Despite the centuries of speculations and decades of empirical investigations on leadership, organizational researchers are still preoccupied with understanding, defining, refining and explaining the essence of leadership (Yukl, 2006). According to Dierendonck (2011), the 21<sup>st</sup> century has launched a rocketing interest in leadership theories. This is because organizations have been said to succeed or fail because of leadership. As the world continues to witness many changes, the study of leadership theories and what makes a good leader becomes increasingly necessary. Different styles of leadership and leadership theories have been created and implemented within organizations. In attempting to define principles within organizations that are more successful than that of their competition, Collins (2001) suggested that the leadership style adopted and promoted within an organization is a key component of a leader's ability to be successful in achieving long-term goals.

A great deal of time and effort has been devoted to the study of leaders and their leadership styles because leadership plays a critical role in a global environment (Johnson, 2008). Ensuring the well being of employees so that they can remain committed to their organizations is also another major challenge facing organizations today. There are very high costs associated with employee turnover and in order to deal with these costs organizations have to strive to create a bond between the employee and the organization (Johnson, 2008). Whichever way leadership and its pattern is defined, one thing that is certain and generally acknowledged among scholars is that from time immemorial, the role of leaders in ensuring excellent organizational performance and workers commitment to work cannot be over emphasized (Akinola & Olumide, 2011). Those organizations that meet the needs of the employees and help them to become the best that they can be are more likely to have employees who are content and motivated and who in turn can be more committed to the organization.

## 1.2 Background of the Study

The Kenyan government forms state corporations to meet both commercial and social goals (Njiru, 2008). These corporations are very important to the Kenyan economy as they provide essential products and services to Kenyans and also offer employment to many people. State corporations in Kenya as is the case in most African countries have been faced with a myriad of challenges. There are a number of problem indicators which include absenteeism from work, lateness, corruption, theft, a high rate of complaints, low quality work output and high turn-over of professional staff. (Chepkilot, 2005). Some public servants do not attend to customers efficiently as it is still possible to find long queues of people waiting to be served while there is no one in the office. Miring'u (2011) also notes that state corporations face challenges of mismanagement, bureaucracy, wastage, incompetence and irresponsibility by directors and employees. All the stated problems are an indication of lack of commitment and also leadership issues.

Kenya's Vision 2030 notes that despite being awarded the 2007 UN public service award, there are certain constraints to be overcome by the state corporations in order to provide the desired quality of service and this includes change in employee attitude. This is because the delivery of public services in Kenya is still characterized by a culture rooted in the poor understanding of the fundamental principle of the public service namely to serve rather than to dictate to citizens. Yet, an efficient, motivated and well trained public service is expected to be one of the major foundations for the implementation of the Vision 2030 (GOK, 2007). Though there has been an improvement in service delivery by the state corporations in the recent years, there is still a lot that needs to be done to enhance efficiency and effectiveness. Further reforms and improvements particularly in leadership, governance, productivity and organizational culture are needed (World Bank Group, 2007; International Monetary Fund, 2008 as cited in Koigi, 2011).

The challenges facing the public sector suggest a need to transcend traditional rationality and move towards recognizing the pivotal role leadership plays, particularly leadership based on moral values in fostering organizational performance and commitment (Reinke, 2004). This is because management styles can influence the commitment level of employees. According to Stum (1999), employee commitment reflects the quality of an organization's leadership. Koopman (1991) studied how leadership styles affected employees and found those employees who favored their manager's style also favored the organization more. Nierhoff *et al.* (1990) found that the overall management culture and style driven by the top management actions are strongly related to the degree of employee commitment.

These relationships between leadership and commitment bring to light the importance of having strong managers and the need to examine their roles in enhancing organizational commitment. The leader who serves the needs of the staff will develop their desires to bring out the best in them and this in turn will build a sense of community, affective attachment and belonging to public agency or the organization they are serving (Ambali *et al.*, 2011). Servant leadership comprises an understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those who are led above the self-interest of the leader. A servant leader has true commitment to his or her followers and predominantly serves the needs of followers, hence providing vision and empowerment, with service being the main activity of the servant leader (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Spears, 2010). Servant leadership has gained support and momentum, as evidenced by the ever-increasing number of scholarly articles on servant leadership (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Patterson, 2003; Hale & Field's, 2007; Earnhardt, 2008; Budwest & Bocarnea, 2008; Ambali *et al.*, 2011; Van Dierendonck, 2011; Mittal & Dorfman, 2012).

Servant leadership has been said to be the key to the better world that people are yearning for that is freer, healthier, more humane and more prosperous. It is a leadership style that is good for the leader as well as the led because it is ethical, practical and a meaningful way to live and be led (Dierendonck, 2010). According to Barbuto and Wheeler (2002, 2006), servant leadership however, is one of the most popularly discussed in the literature but the least critically examined leadership philosophies in most of the public organizations and yet it should be a natural model for these organizations. Levering and Muskowitz (2000) contend that servant leadership has been practiced and advocated in some of the best companies to work for in America on the basis of the Fortune Survey. Three of the five best places in Fortunes January 2000 "Top 100 best Companies to Work for in America" were held the companies that lived by the practices of servant leadership. There is however little research conducted to document the use of this leadership style in state corporations in Kenya. This study aims at exploring servant leadership in the context of state corporations in Kenya with a view of filling this gap.

## 1.2 Servant Leadership and Organizational Commitment

Servant leadership is a subject that has drawn a lot of interest in the leadership literature in the recent years. It is a phrase that was coined by Robert Greenleaf in his essay called, *The Servant as Leader* (Hamilton, 2005). Having read Herman Hesse's short novel entitled, *Journey to the East*, Greenleaf (1970) concluded that a great leader is first experienced by others as a servant to others (Spears, 1996). According to Spears (2004), interest in the philosophy and practice of servant leadership is now at an all time high. Keith (2009) concurs by stating that servant leadership is becoming a more increasingly popular concept in the repertoire of leadership styles. Numerous academic and popular writers also agree that servant leadership is a valid leadership style for consideration in today's business world (Russell, 2000; Russell & Stone, 2002). Popular leadership writers and researchers have stated that servant leadership should be considered by the leaders of today's organization (Covey, 2006; Blanchard, 2002; Northouse, 2004).

Over the years, there has been increasing interest in the relationship between servant leadership and organizational commitment. In their study of Kenyan and US financial firms, Walumbwa *et al* (2005) found that transformational leadership not only had a positive effect on organizational commitment but on job satisfaction as well. Since transformational leadership has some similarity with servant leadership in the sense that it also puts some focus on followers then servant leadership can also contribute to organizational commitment. Studies by Barbuto and Wheeler (2006), Enrhart (2004), Joseph and Winston (2005), Cerit (2010) and Ambaliet *al* (2011) have found the existence of a positive relationship between servant leadership and organizational commitment.

## 2. Theoretical Review

In order to explain the relationship between servant leadership and organizational commitment, there is need to examine some theories that are relevant such as the social exchange and servant leadership theories.

### 2.1 Social Exchange Theory

This is a theory which helps to shed light on what enhances organizational commitment. The theory views the employment relationship as consisting of exchanges both social and economic (Kipkebut, 2010). Employees are motivated and are more likely to increase their performance when they perceive that their employment relationship is based on a fair social exchange. The idea of reciprocation originated with Blau (1964), who suggested that the partners to the exchange will strive to maintain balanced relationships of social exchange. Employees will take action to restore negative imbalances (Robinson, 1996). For example, several studies have reported that employees reciprocate the fulfillment of employer promises by adjusting the perceived employee obligations to employer (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2002; Robinson, 1996).

Alternatively, employees may perceive that their organizations have provided them with more inducements than they expected such as a better welfare package, better career advancement, and more support (Conway & Briner, 2002; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2002; Turnkey & Feldman, 2000 as cited in Kipkebut, 2010). From the perspective of employees, negative imbalances create inequalities in the employment relationship. If employees believe they have met their obligations to their employer, they are likely to feel indebted and increase their sense of obligation to the employer (Turnley *et al*, 2003). According to this theory therefore, commitment of employees develops as a result of the employee's satisfaction with the rewards and inducements the organization offers, rewards that must be sacrificed if the employee leaves the organization (Kipkebut, 2010).

## 2.2 Servant Leadership Theory

Servant leadership, first proposed by Greenleaf (1970) is a theoretical framework that advocates that a leader's primary motivation and role is service to others. Greenleaf first coined this modern term servant-leadership in 1970 in the essay entitled, *The Servant as Leader* (Spears, 1996). Servant leadership is a type of leadership which comes under the democratic style. This theory advocates that a leader's primary motivation and role is to serve and meet the needs of others, which optimally should be the prime motivation for leadership. Servant leaders develop people, helping them to strive and flourish (Russell & Stone, 2002; McMinn, 2001).

Servant leadership is a belief that organizational goals will be achieved on a long term basis only by first facilitating the growth, development and general well being of the individuals who comprise the organization (Stone *et al*, 2003). It is therefore a leadership style that emphasizes that leaders should be attentive to the concerns of their followers and empathize with them and at the same time they should take care of them and nurture them (Northouse, 2007). The best test of the leader is whether those served grow as persons and whether while being served they become healthier, wiser and more able themselves to become servant leaders (Wheeler, 2011).

### Models of Servant Leadership

According to Dierendonck (2011), servant leadership covers a wide range of behaviours which are hard to grasp in one or two constructs and may sometimes seem difficult to disentangle. Laub (1999) developed a conceptual model consisting of six servant leadership characteristics which include; develops people, valuing people, building community, displaying authenticity, providing leadership and sharing leadership. Russell and Stone (2002) identified twenty attributes observed among servant leaders. They further categorized these attributes into nine functional attributes and eleven accompanying attributes which include; Vision, modeling, communication, persuasion, honesty, pioneering, credibility, listening, integrity, appreciation, competence, encouragement, trust, empowerment, stewardship, service, delegation, visibility and influence.

Patterson (2003) noted that servant leadership is a natural extension of transformational leadership and she came up with a model which comprises of seven dimensions of agapao love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment and service. Building on the work of Greenleaf (1991), Spears (2004) listed ten characteristics that he perceived servant leaders portrayed and they are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment and building society.

Enrhart (2004) identified major behaviours of servant leaders as forming relationships with subordinates, empowering subordinates, helping subordinates grow and succeed, behaving ethically, having conceptual skills, putting subordinates first and creating value for those outside the organization. Other attributes of servant leadership include emotional healing, creating value for the community, conceptual skills, empowering, helping subordinates grow and succeed, putting subordinate first and behaving ethically (Liden *et al*, 2008). Despite the vast array of terms used to describe servant leadership, the following are consistently mentioned as the cornerstone of servant leadership and they are vision, empowerment, humility and service (Hales & Fields, 2007; Patterson, 2003). These are the constructs that will be examined in this study.

## 3. Conceptual Model

The conceptual framework for this study is based on two variables that is servant leadership which is characterized by vision, empowerment, humility and service. The dependent variable is organizational commitment which is characterized by affective, normative and continuance commitment. The personal determinant of education will be discussed as the moderating variable. This has been diagrammatically illustrated in figure 1.

### 3.1 Vision

Vision refers to the degree to which leaders plan and anticipate for future needs, develop concrete mission statements and keep situations and problems in perspective. The central role of the servant leader is establishing a strategic vision for the organization (Covey, 1996; De Pree, 1997). People need a glimpse of the big picture in order to understand how they can fit in the same. Lubin (2001) maintained that the leaders job is to encourage people to share their good ideas to eventually create a shared vision that everyone cares about.

Taylor (2002) concurs by stating that the mark of a leader and the attribute that puts him or her in a position to attract followers is when the leader demonstrates the ability to see more clearly the best destination for the organization. Greenleaf (1977) said that the servant leader needs to have a sense for the unknowable and be able to see the unforeseeable. Consequently, the central role of the servant leader is establishing a strategic vision for the organization (Bennis&Nanus, 1997; Covey, 1996; Depree, 1997). A number of empirical studies have supported this variable (Russell & Stone, 2002; Dennis & Winston, 2003; Hales & Fields, 2007; Budwest&Bocarnea, 2008).

### **3.2 Empowerment**

Increased competition has seen many organizations come up with strategies and schemes aimed at increasing employee involvement in the organizational process. One of the schemes is empowerment which is seen as an advanced manifestation of employee involvement with its advocates arguing that it is the answer to gaining increased organizational commitment (Walton, 1985). Empowerment is the process of giving power to others and for the servant leader it involves effective listening, making people feel significant, emphasizing teamwork and valuing love and equality and it is a major factor in servant leadership and should be one of its primary focus (Russell & Stone, 2002). Bass (1990) posits that empowerment is power sharing with followers in planning and decision making. According to Winston (2003), empowerment provides the follower with the power, authority, accountability, responsibility, and resources to achieve what the follower wants to achieve relative to his/her vision within the organization. Mittal and Dorfman (2012) concur by stating that empowerment aims at fostering an environment where followers develop a proactive and self-confident attitude which facilitates their personal growth. The notion of empowerment therefore involves the workforce being provided with a greater degree of flexibility and more freedom to make decisions relating to work which increases organizational commitment. Followers who are empowered display more commitment; they portray a greater level of self-confidence and have a greater sense of being able to influence their work environment in a positive way (Zhu, May & Avolio, 2004 as cited in Mahembe&Engelbrecht, 2013). Several empirical studies have studied and supported this attribute (Page & Wong, 2000; Earnhardt, 2008).

### **3.3 Humility**

Hale and Fields (2007) state that humility is about placing the success of followers ahead of a leader's personal gain. Button (2005) says that it is about lowering one's status in relation to another and is related to one's own self – awareness. It is not about someone who lacks self-esteem but rather someone who recognizes their own standing and is unassuming and humble (Bower, 1997). According to Patterson (2003), humility is the non-overestimation of one's merits. She says that it is not to be equated with poor self-esteem. She further states that a servant leader holds himself or herself neither too high nor too low and that a servant leader with humility has good communication skills such as a willing listener. Servant leaders have no problem admitting that they can benefit from the knowledge and expertise that is held by others (Dierendonck, 2011). Effective leaders maintain their humility by showing respect for employees and acknowledging their contributions to the team (Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005). Servant leader acknowledge the contribution of others not only towards achieving organizational goals but for their development and this humility is demonstrated by the extent to which a leader puts the interests of others first (Mittal & Dorfman, (2012). All these can go a long way in enhancing the organizational commitment of the employees. There are several studies that have supported this servant leadership construct (Page& Wong, 2000; Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005; Wong&Davey, 2007; Patterson, 2003).

### **3.4 Service**

Service is quite an essential characteristic of servant leadership and has been said to be the hallmark of servant leaders (Russell& Stone, 2002; Covey, 2002; Wis, 2002). Servant leadership begins when a leader assumes the position of servant when interacting with the followers and it is this virtue of service that is at the core of the servant leadership model (Patterson, 2003). Servant leaders are first and foremost servants at heart and are called to a life of service. Servant leaders choose to lead based on the interest of others, as opposed to self-interest (Russell & Stone, 2001; Patterson, 2003). Amy (2012), states that Greenleaf gave significant weight to the idea that true leadership carries a responsibility to think first about being of service to others. According to Patterson (2003), servant leaders model service through their own behaviour thus cultivating an organizational culture of service that inspires and motivates followers.

Winston (2003) proposed that the leader's service to the follower results in the follower's reciprocal service to the leader. Stone *et al* (2004) argued that the motive of the servant leader's influence is not to direct others but rather to motivate and facilitate service and stewardship by the followers themselves. Servant leadership is therefore different from other leadership styles since its main focus is on the service of people rather than control or self-interest and as such it can contribute significantly to employee organizational commitment. Empirical studies have supported this servant leadership variable (Hale & Fields, 2007; Patterson, 2002; Russell & Stone, 2002; Mazare *et al*, 2013).

### 3.5 Level of Education

Personal determinants have been found to have a relationship with organizational commitment. These determinants include age, education, gender and status. Researchers support that there is a relationship for example between age and organizational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1997). As employees age, alternative employment opportunities become scarce and so they have to stay in their current jobs (Matthieu & Zajac, 1990; Mowday *et al*, 1982). The older employees have a stronger investment in the organization unlike the younger employees. The younger employees tend to be more detached and their commitment levels are lower.

This study however proposes to focus on education as possibly modifying the influence of servant leadership on organizational commitment. The more educated employees have been said to have lower levels of organizational commitment (Matthieu & Zajac, 1990; Mowday *et al*, 1982). This could be due to the fact that when people have higher qualifications they tend to have more expectations than what their organizations are ready to give or have and as such are more likely to leave the organization. With higher levels of education, people are more likely to get other employment opportunities unlike those who have lesser education.

### 3.6 Organizational Commitment

Commitment is an issue of great significance to an organization as it is concerned with an employee's eagerness to go above and beyond the call of duty while performing his or her duties and it also about employees desire to maintain membership with an organization. Like a strong magnetic force attracting metallic objects to another, it is a measure of the employee's willingness to remain with a firm in the future commitment reflects the employee's belief in the mission and goals of the firm, willingness to expend effort in their accomplishment and intentions to continue working there.

This commitment is usually stronger among longer term employees, those who have experienced personal success in the organization and those working within a committed employee group (Newstrom, 2009). Commitment can be enhanced if managers can gain the confidence and respect of their teams and in specific areas of their responsibility for gaining commitment for example performance management Armstrong (2009). Managers need to design a job such that staying on is more attractive and development programmes that improve the quality of leadership form an important part of any strategy for increasing commitment (Dessler, 2008).

There are many positive outcomes of organizational commitment. People who are committed are less likely to quit and accept other jobs and are less likely to be tardy or absent from work. They will usually have good attendance records, demonstrate a willing adherence to company policies and have lower turnover. There is generally an improvement in customer satisfaction because long-tenure employees have better knowledge of work practices, and customers like the familiarity of doing business with the same employees, make referrals resulting in new customers and even pay a premium price. Last but not least, organizational commitment has also been found to be positively associated with higher work motivation, greater organizational citizenship, as well as higher job performance (Meyer *et al*, 2002; Newstrom, 2009; Wasti, 2003). Thus, given the contribution that a highly productive, trained employee can make to organizational productivity, keeping such an employee should be a high priority for the organization (Nehmeh, 2009).

According to Meyer and Allen (1997) organizational commitment has three components namely affective, normative and continuance commitment. First, affective Commitment refers to employee's emotional attachment to, identification with and involvement in the organizations activities (Allen & Meyer, 1990). Employees with a strong affective commitment continue to stay with the organization because they want to or they stay out of their own free will. These kinds of employees are devoted and are loyal to the employer. They come to work with a positive state of mind and are prepared to go an extra mile for the company Bragg (2002).

Employees with strong affective commitment are more willing to engage in citizenship behaviour than those with weak affective commitment (Nehmeh, 2009).

Second, normative commitment reflects a feeling of obligation on the part of the employee to continue with employment. Employees with a high level of normative commitment feel that they have to remain with the organization. Employees feel they have to remain in the organization which means that they feel they are trapped in the organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990). This basically reflects a sense of obligation on the part of the employee to maintain membership in the organization (Kamarul & Raida, 2003; Bragg, 2002). Finally, continuance commitment captures the cost associated with leaving the organization by the staff, which can be envisaged via loss of benefits or seniority (Kamarul & Raida, 2003). Hence employees feel that they are obligated to stay with an organization. In short, they feel that they ought to stay and have a value system that says that it is not the right time to leave the work (Bragg, 2002).

#### **4. Empirical Review**

There are various studies that have been conducted pertaining to servant leadership and organizational commitment. A study conducted by Ambali *et al* (2011) revealed that there existed a positive relationship between servant leadership attributes and organizational commitment of staff and the integrity attribute had the highest influence on commitment. In a study undertaken by Woods (2007), the research determined that there was a statistically significant and moderately strong association between the servant leadership practices of leaders within organizations employing small private Iowan University MBA graduates and the organizational commitment of those MBA students.

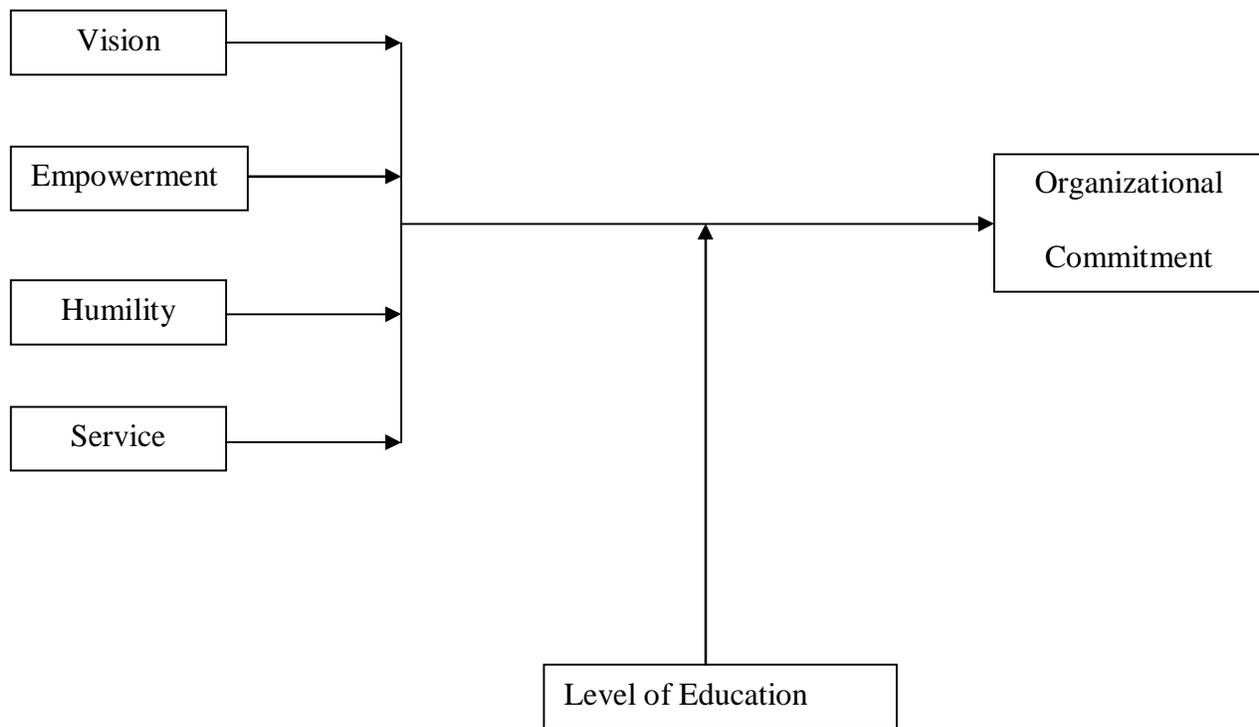
A study by Bocarnea and Bud West (2008) on servant leadership and organizational outcomes found out that there existed a significant positive relationship between servant leadership, affective organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Cerit (2010) conducted a study on the effects of servant leadership on organizational commitment in primary schools in Turkey. The study revealed that there was a significant positive relationship between servant leadership behaviours of school principals and the teacher's commitment to the school.

In general, the empirical research available has shown that servant leadership is positively correlated to follower satisfaction, their job satisfaction, intrinsic work satisfaction, caring for the safety of others and organizational commitment (Avolio *et al*, 2000). This study therefore seeks to further research on servant leadership by exploring the role that this leadership style has on organizational commitment in Kenyan state corporations. This is because according to Page and Davey (2007) servant leadership seems to offer an answer to recent concerns about corporate scandals, toxic work environment, employee burn out and retention problems.

#### **5. Summary and Conclusion**

From the literature that has been reviewed, it is clear that there is need to conduct more research on the relationship between servant leadership on organizational commitment in other contexts other than America and Europe. The challenges facing the public sector in many developing countries including Kenya suggest a need to transcend traditional rationality and move towards recognizing the pivotal role leadership plays, particularly leadership based on moral values in fostering organizational performance and commitment (Reinke, 2004). State corporations in Kenya play a key role in the social and economic growth and it is important to secure the commitment of the employees for enhanced productivity.

**Servant Leadership**



Independent Variables

Moderating Variable

Dependent Variable

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework linking Servant Leadership, Level of Education and Organizational Commitment**

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