


Article

How Can Managers Promote Employee Sustainability? A Study on the Impact of Servant Leadership on Emotional Labor

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Abstract: How managers can promote sustainability among their employees has become an important research issue in the field of organizations. Based on the theory of person–environment fit and social learning, the internal mechanism and the conditions of servant leadership on the two dimensions of emotional labor of the epidemic situation were studied through the analysis of the questionnaire data at two time points. The study revealed that the adoption of servant leadership by managers can have a positive impact on employee well-being and deep acting in the context of COVID-19, and this is critically important for the sustainable development of employees. Employee well-being is positively correlated with deep acting and negatively correlated with surface acting. Employee well-being plays a mediating role between servant leadership and the two dimensions of emotional labor. Perceived organizational support plays a moderating role between servant leadership and surface acting. The research findings can serve as a reference for enterprises to take measures in mitigating the adverse impact of COVID-19. Moreover, they provide new insights for managers to facilitate the sustainable development of their employees.

Keywords: COVID-19; servant leadership; emotional labor; employee well-being; perceived organizational support



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1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 has had a huge impact on the economy of China and the world. The service industry has been significantly impacted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to bankruptcies for many companies and challenging operational circumstances for others. In the face of such adversity, those fortunate enough to survive are increasingly contemplating strategies to overcome these difficulties, with a key focus on promoting the sustainable development of their existing employees [1]. In current research, employee sustainability development not only encompasses the willingness of employees to continue working in an organization and their aspirations for upward growth but also requires employees to possess long-term perspectives in their work. It entails their integrating their own interests with the interests of their organizations, pursuing the long-term health and development of their companies [2]. However, promoting the sustainable development of employees is not an easy task. It demands continuous care, active guidance, and encouragement from both companies and managers. This poses even greater challenges in the present service industry.

Among the service industries, employees need to be in close contact with customers while they are working. However, since the outbreak of COVID-19, the increased risk of virus transmission to service industry employees from customers coming from various parts of the country has been primarily due to close contact with infected individuals. As a result, employees may experience fear, exhibit negative career development intentions, and even submit resignation requests [3]. Even if some employees are compelled to remain in their current positions due to limited job opportunities, their willingness for

sustainable development may be diminished due to the worsened working conditions in service settings, which can manifest in their job behaviors. However, the manifestations of such negative job behaviors are subtle and not easily observed or measured. To address this issue, we have identified a behavior closely associated with employee sustainability development—emotional labor [4].

Emotional labor can effectively reveal employees' latent intentions for sustainable development. Poor emotional labor strategies may indicate that employees are experiencing doubts regarding organizational policies, job responsibilities, and professional identities. In such circumstances, employees are unlikely to integrate their personal interests with those of their organizations, ultimately leading to a loss of their willingness for sustainable development. From this perspective, we examine how managers in the context of the pandemic can suppress employees' negative behaviors, promote their positive behaviors, and consequently drive their sustainable development.

To leave customers with good consumer experiences, enhance customer loyalty, and increase the likelihood of repeated consumption, enterprises often require employees to maintain smiles and positive emotions while serving. Even though employees in the service industry face fears of being infected or dismissed under the epidemic, to accomplish the tasks of their companies and leaders in actual work, employees often show their enthusiasm and kindness to customers by adjusting, and this process is called emotional labor [5]. Emotional labor is divided into two dimensions: surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting means that when employees feel anger or sadness in the work process, they are forced to adjust their emotions due to the requirements of their managers and their companies' rules and regulations and show enthusiasm and positivity in front of customers, while these employees are still experiencing negative emotions in their hearts [6–8]. Deep acting means that when employees feel anger or sadness at work, they actively adjust themselves to create positive emotions in their hearts and show these positive emotions to customers [9].

Relevant studies have indicated that surface acting is detrimental to organizational performance and employee loyalty towards an organization [10], and deep acting has been shown to enhance employees' enthusiasm, reduce their turnover intentions, and foster their career success [11]. In previous studies on employee sustainability, the majority of research has focused on exploring employee retention and career development [12]. However, emotional labor, as a crucial variable in employee behavior, not only has close ties to these two factors but also reflects the extent to which employees are willing to comply with organizational regulations and their intrinsic levels of job identification [13]. This indicates that the emotional labor strategies chosen by employees have become significant factors influencing their sustainable development. Especially in the case of COVID-19, employees who perform deep acting at work, regardless of whether they feel the fear caused by the epidemic, may not affect the quality of their service due to their inner loyalties to their organizations and their positive work statuses. However, employees who perform surface acting at work, and who themselves lack a sense of identification and loyalty to their organizations, may reduce the quality of service under the influence of the epidemic. Surface acting will not only bring adverse effects to the employees themselves but also affect the image and reputation of an enterprise. Therefore, it is crucial for managers to guide employees towards adopting positive emotional labor strategies for their sustainable development. This involves taking measures to discourage surface acting and encourage employees to engage in deep acting.

Wu et al. [14] pointed that servant labor is an employee-oriented leadership style, and that managers who adopt this leadership style manage their employees by serving them and meeting their legitimate needs. When employees feel cared for by their managers, they often develop a sense of well-being, and this positive feeling will allow them to serve customers with a more enthusiastic and energetic outlook at work. According to social learning theory, subordinates will imitate the working style and behavior of leaders in their ordinary work, and subordinates of managers who adopt servant leadership tend to learn

from their managers in their work and serve customers from their hearts. The outbreak of COVID-19 has brought tremendous pressure on both managers and employees, and many employees have a high sense of insecurity, which is detrimental to the development of work. If managers take a servant leadership approach during an epidemic, they may be able to alleviate employees' fears caused by the epidemic and lead them to show more positive work attitudes at work. Therefore, the first question studied in this paper is whether managers will affect their employees' emotional labor strategies if they manage employees using the method of servant leadership.

The theory of person–environment fit [15] suggests that when individual traits are aligned with an organizational environment, they make employees more motivated to perform under the influence of the organizational environment. In the context of COVID-19, employees tend to have a lower sense of happiness due to the impact of the epidemic. When employees in the service industry develop a sense of well-being, it may promote their enthusiasm for work and stimulate their deep acting. The first question in this paper concerns whether servant leadership affects employee well-being and leads to more positive emotions within employees that in turn affect employees' emotional labor. Whether employee well-being mediates the relationships between servant leadership and the two dimensions of employees' emotional labor is the second question in this paper.

Organizational support, as part of the organizational environment, has a significant impact on the generation of emotional labor. According to organizational identity theory, an organization itself has a certain attractiveness that makes employees willing to serve and give to the organization. When employees feel strong organizational support, they will positively regulate their own emotions and feel motivated to show deep acting. Conversely, when employees feel a low level of organizational support, they will show surface acting behavior. In the context of COVID-19, organizational support can make employees feel fearful and stressed while making them believe that their organizations are not only capable of getting through the epidemic, but also capable of supporting and caring for employees, which in turn motivates them and strengthens their deep acting. Given this, as an important boundary condition, whether there is a regulatory role between the servant leadership and the emotional labor under COVID-19 is the third problem studied in this paper.

Most of the existing studies on the relationship between servant leadership and emotional labor have only explored the direct relationship between these variables. However, the mechanisms through which servant leadership influences the two dimensions of emotional labor and the boundary conditions that exist in the influence process are not yet clear. In addition, most studies have explored the relationship between servant leadership and emotional labor in general organizational settings, but there has not been much research on servant leadership and emotional labor in the context of COVID-19. Many organizations are taking measures to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic and enhance the sustainable development of their employees. If our research can validate that in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, servant leadership exhibited by managers can enhance employee well-being, which can in turn influence their emotional labor by promoting deep acting and inhibiting surface acting, with perceived organizational support acting as a crucial boundary condition in this relationship, then our study can effectively fill the gap in the existing related research.

In summary, this study takes COVID-19 as a background, based on person–environment fit theory and social learning theory, to reveal how servant leadership affects emotional labor through employee well-being and explore the role of perceived organizational support to enrich the research on emotional labor. This study provides insights for business managers on how to implement measures to enhance employee sustainability in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1. *Servant Leadership*

Servant leadership, as an employee-centered leadership style, is attracting attention because of its significant impact on enterprise performance and employee loyalty. Greenleaf proposed the concept of servant leadership, and he believed that servant leadership is a management style in which the leader transcends personal interests. This management style takes the personal interests of employees as the starting point, and relevant decisions are made and daily management is done from the perspective of the employees to maximize the consistency of all employees' opinions [16]. Servant leadership takes into account the feelings of employees as subjects of an enterprise. With this type of leadership, managers can maximize the potential of employees and their willingness to serve the organization. Social learning theory suggests that a manager's management style subconsciously influences their employees [17,18].

When employees sense that their managers are taking an employee-centered leadership approach, they will be more motivated to work. Therefore, servant leadership from a manager positively influences employees to be more motivated to work. Current research has identified important effects of servant leadership on employees and organizations. For example, servant leadership affects employees' emotional commitment, utilitarian commitment [19], organizational citizenship behavior, workplace deviant behavior [20], and work passion [21]. In addition, research has found that servant leadership can positively regulate the degree of influence of autonomous motivation on work engagement [22]. Therefore, managers can adopt servant leadership to manage employees in the process of enterprise management.

2.2. *Emotional Labor: The Confluence of Surface Acting and Deep Acting*

Emotional labor refers to the process of employees self-regulating in order to make their emotions and states meet the requirements specified by an enterprise during work. Further research has revealed that employees have two distinct strategies to engage in emotional labor: surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting refers to the display of emotions that align with organizational expectations without necessarily changing one's internal emotional experience; on the other hand, deep acting involves making an effort to modify one's inner feelings to align them with a desired emotional display [23]. It was found that surface acting in emotional labor affects employees' mood at work and causes emotional exhaustion [24]; employees who frequently engage in deep acting during the work process tend to perform better [25]. This shows that emotional labor has an important impact on employees' work behavior, health, and enterprise performance. Surface acting is detrimental to the development of an organization, while deep acting is conducive to the development of the organization. In the context of COVID-19, employees may face the risk of infection and potential unemployment risk due to the epidemic, which may keep employees from concentrating on their work. Employees who take deep acting at work do not let these risks affect the service quality because of their love for their work and their loyalty to their organizations. However, employees who take surface acting at work may be inattentive when serving customers, which may affect the service quality.

According to social learning theory, the leadership styles of managers will influence their subordinate employees, and employees will subconsciously imitate their managers' working styles and way of doing things in the work process. In the context of COVID-19, when managers adopt the servant leadership style, employees will imperceptibly learn the working styles of their managers, be kind to others, and more seriously engage in their work because they feel the concern and attention of their managers. Employees will actively adjust their statuses in the face of the fears brought about by the epidemic and the difficulties in their work, and behave using deep acting in their work. When managers do not adopt servant leadership, employees cannot feel the importance that managers attach to them, and if employees face complex and diverse work environments at work, as well

as the fear brought by the epidemic, employees tend to perform surface acting at work. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis 1. *Servant leadership (a) positively affects deep acting and (b) negatively affects surface acting in the COVID-19 context.*

2.3. Mediating Role of Employee Well-Being

Employee well-being is an overall assessment of how employees experience and feel about the work process. The current definition of the concept of employee well-being and the division of dimensions are not unique. Some scholars regard employee well-being as a unidimensional concept, while some researchers believe that employee well-being includes three dimensions: physical, psychological, and social. Current research has found that organizational support resources can improve employees' job satisfaction through work and family, thereby improving employee well-being [26].

Variables such as job demands, control or autonomy, and social support within a workplace can affect employee well-being, which can influence organizational performance, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, and employees' intentions to leave [27]. This shows that employee well-being has an important impact on employees' own health and work statuses and on organizational development. In the context of COVID-19, many enterprises are facing business difficulties. Especially in the service industry, because it requires close contact with customers when serving them, many enterprises are unable to operate normally for a long period of time. As a result, these enterprises are at risk of closing down and their employees are at risk of losing their jobs. Even if the epidemic is gradually controlled, the risk of infection is higher for service industry employees than others. In this context, the happiness of service industry employees is lower.

According to the person–environment fit theory, when employees feel that they are duly respected and valued, they will have a sense of happiness, which in turn determines their work value orientation. Under the influence of COVID-19, if managers adopt servant leadership, employees feel that they are sufficiently valued and respected to satisfy their own needs in the midst of the epidemic scare, which will produce a situation where their own behavior matches the behavior of the organizational environment and then generate a sense of well-being. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2. *In the context of COVID-19, servant leadership has a significant positive impact on employee well-being.*

Employee well-being as a positive emotion that positively influences employee behavior and enhances organizational performance [28]. When employees compare themselves with colleagues of similar ranks or positions, if they think they are unfairly rewarded or treated in a certain way, they will feel a sense of deprivation, and this emotion will have a negative impact on their work. Conversely, when employees feel a strong sense of well-being, it will have a positive impact on their future work. Under the impact of the epidemic, when an employee's well-being is high, the employee will have higher enthusiasm and motivation for work and will spontaneously and proactively meet the requirements of the enterprise. In the process of contacting with customers, the employee will show the customer a positive mood that not only conforms to his own heart but also meets the requirements of the enterprise, which is manifested as deep acting in work. Employees in service industries with complex work environments are more likely to develop emotional labor when they come into contact with large numbers of customers every day [29]. In this case, service industry employees with high employee well-being will proactively engage in emotional regulation. Specifically, in the epidemic situation, when employees face a complex and changing work environment, service employees with a higher sense of well-being have a greater probability of generating deep acting through their own posi-

tive adjustment. Conversely, service industry employees with low happiness will make negative adjustments, but they will generate surface acting to meet the requirements of the enterprise. That is, employee well-being positively affects deep acting and negatively affects surface acting. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis 3. *In the context of COVID-19, employee well-being (a) positively affects deep acting and (b) negatively affects surface acting.*

In combination with Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3, servant leadership may significantly affect employee well-being in the context of COVID-19, while employee well-being may significantly affect the two dimensions of emotional labor [30,31]. Previous studies have found that employee well-being is an important mediating variable that affects employee work behavior. For example, research has demonstrated the mediating roles of employee well-being between inclusive leadership and employee innovative behavior [32], between employees' relative deprivation and intention to leave [33], and between organizational support alignment and new-generation employees' willingness to leave [34]. Employees often face greater work pressure than usual, as well as fear of unemployment and infection, in the context of COVID-19. When a manager adopts the servant leadership method to manage employees, because employees feel the care from the manager, they will improve their happiness in a short time, and the improvement of their happiness will make employees more conscientious and responsible at work, which manifests as deep acting and lower surface acting. Therefore, this study argues that employee well-being also plays a mediating role between the two dimensions of servant leadership and emotional labor. The following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 4. *In the context of COVID-19, employee well-being mediates the relationships between servant leadership and (a) deep acting and (b) surface acting.*

2.4. Moderating Role of Perceived Organizational Support

Under COVID-19 conditions, many organizations have encountered great difficulties and challenges in their operations. If employees perceive that an enterprise is still capable of supporting their work, this will make the employees think that the enterprise has the ability to continue operating in the midst of the epidemic. In this way, employees will experience reduced negative effects of potential unemployment and be more active in their work. Service industry employees with high levels of perceived organizational support have more positive attitudes toward work and are willing to serve customers with enthusiasm. Based on the person–environment fit theory [35], when individual traits are aligned with an organizational environment, they will make employees more motivated to work under the influence of the organizational environment. Perceived organizational support, as an important source of employee emotional supplementation, plays an important role in the generation of employee emotional labor. Moreover, perceived organizational support enhances employees' identification with their organizations and motivates them to work actively. A higher level of perceived organizational support can, to some extent, compensate for the negative impact of a lower level of servant leadership on employees, so that employees can show work behaviors that meet the requirements of an enterprise as much as possible. Under different levels of organizational support, the influences of servant leadership on emotional labor are different. If employees feel support from an organization during the epidemic, the positive impact of servant leadership on deep labor will be enhanced. Conversely, if employees do not feel organizational support, or feel weak organizational support, the negative impact of servant leadership on shallow labor will also be reinforced. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 5. *In the context of COVID-19, perceived organizational support moderates the relationships between servant leadership and (a) deep acting and (b) surface acting. The theoretical model of this study is shown in Figure 1.*

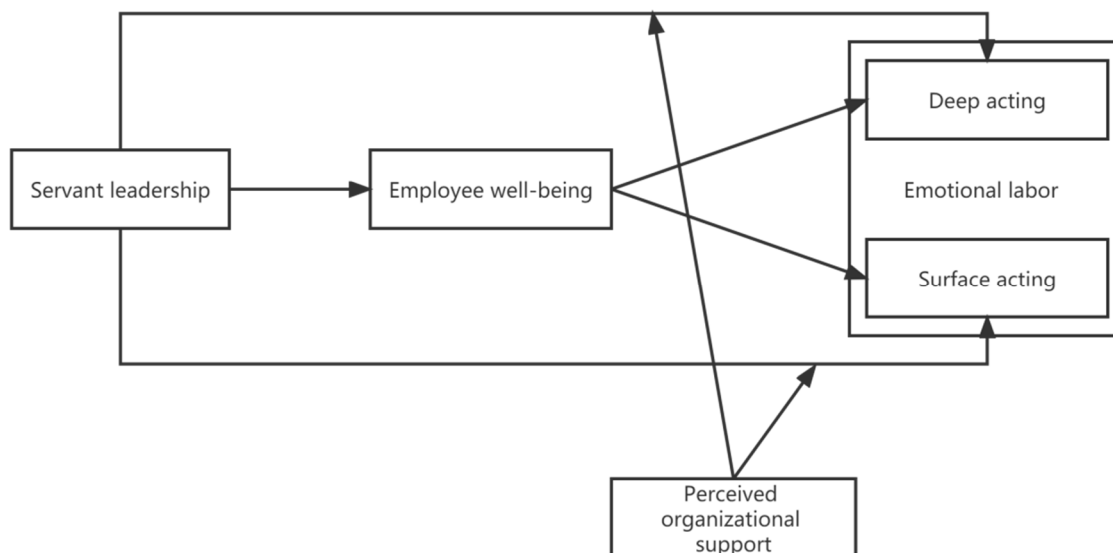


Figure 1. Theoretical model.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Sample and Data Collection

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the service industry has faced significant challenges. Many stores have had their operations restricted, and customer traffic has declined severely. To investigate the impact of servant leadership on emotional labor in the context of COVID-19, this study selected participants from the service industry in Suzhou, China, an area heavily affected by the pandemic. In May–June 2022, employees from eight service industries in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province were selected as the survey objects. In order to ensure the voluntary and anonymous nature of the questionnaire, we sought the opinions of the participants before the survey and informed them that the data and findings of this study would be used for academic research only and would not be used for other purposes. Participants who did not wish to participate in our survey could automatically withdraw. All questionnaires were anonymous and participants were not asked to fill in their names or other personal information that would reveal their identities. To effectively reduce the common method bias, multiple time periods and enterprises were selected for the distribution of the questionnaire, and the interval of each survey was 1 month. In the process of the investigation, enterprise executives were invited to assist. The first phase of the questionnaire, which began on 15 May 2022, measured servant leadership, perceived organizational support, employee well-being, and demographic information. At the time of measurement, the survey objects were asked to fill in the last four digits of their cell phone numbers in the questionnaire design in order to be able to accurately match the data collected in the second stage with the data from the first stage. A total of 574 questionnaires were collected at this stage. After screening, 530 effective questionnaires were obtained at the first stage, with an effective rate of 92.33%. The second phase of the questionnaire was distributed on 15 June 2022, and this measured surface acting and deep acting. In this stage, questionnaires were distributed to the employees who had filled out valid questionnaires in the first stage, 460 questionnaires were returned by the survey objects, and the questionnaire recovery rate was 86.79%. After screening, 436 valid questionnaires were finally obtained, with a questionnaire efficiency of 94.78%; the sample characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The sample characteristics (N = 436).

Variable	Property	No.	Percent (%)	Variable	Project	No.	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	198	45.41	Marital status	Married	248	56.88
	Female	238	54.59		Unmarried	188	43.12
Age	18–20	18	4.13	Tenure	Less than 1 year	158	36.24
	21–25	166	38.07		1–5 years	64	14.68
	26–30	16	3.70		6–10 years	214	49.08
	31–35	20	4.60	Monthly income	Less than 1500 RMB	40	9.17
	36–40	16	3.70		1500–2499 RMB	38	8.72
	41 and above	200	45.87		2500–3499 RMB	68	15.60
3500–4499 RMB					86	19.72	
Education	High School and below	136	31.19	4500 RMB and above	204	46.79	
	Junior college	60	13.76	The impact of COVID-19 on work	Almost no impact	52	11.93
	Bachelor	192	44.04		Moderate impact	221	50.69
	Postgraduate	48	11.01		Significant impact	163	37.39

3.2. Variable Measurement

The scales used in this study are mature scales that have been developed, verified, and used many times. During the questionnaire design process, the English scale was translated into Chinese using the “back translation” method. Specifically, the English scale was translated into Chinese by two PhD students after discussion, and the Chinese version was subsequently translated into English by the authors after discussion. Then, the four translators discussed and resolved the differences between the two English versions and finally determined the Chinese scale used in this study. All variables, except for the control variables, were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with values from 1 to 5 representing “completely disagree” to “completely agree”. See Appendix A for specific items.

- (1) Emotional labor: The measurement of this variable was mainly based on the scale developed by Grandey [36], which includes two dimensions with six question items. Among them, 3 question items were used to measure the surface acting. For example, “I just pretended to have the emotions that I needed to display to this customer”. In this study, the Cronbach’s α value of surface acting was 0.848. Deep acting was measured by using 3 question items—e.g., “I tried to experience the emotions I had to show to the customer”. In this study, the Cronbach’s α value for deep acting was 0.762.
- (2) Servant leadership: The scale of this variable mainly refers to the scale prepared by Liden et al. [37], which contains 7 question items in total—for e.g., “my leader gives me the freedom to handle difficult problems in the way I think is best”. The Cronbach’s α value for servant leadership in this study was 0.916.
- (3) Perceived organizational support: This variable is mainly referred to using scale developed by Rhoades et al. [38], which contains 8 question items such as “my organization really cares about my well-being”. The Cronbach’s α value for perceived organizational support in this study was 0.849.
- (4) Employee well-being: This variable is mainly measured with reference to the scale developed by Waterman et al. [39] and contains 21 question items such as “my life is centered around a set of core beliefs that give meaning to my life”. The Cronbach’s α value for employee well-being in this study was 0.829.
- (5) Control variables: In the process of questionnaire development, some of the questions were modified according to the actual scenario of the survey. Gender, age, marital status, monthly income, tenure, and education were used as control variables. Given that this study would explore the impact of servant leadership on employee emotional labor in the context of COVID-19, it was crucial to understand the perceived impact of COVID-19 on the participants’ work. Therefore, we specifically included a measurement of how employees perceived the impact of COVID-19 on work and

categorized it into three levels: almost no impact, moderate impact, and significant impact. This variable was also included as a control variable in our measurement and analysis. To reduce covariance, all standardized data were used in the analysis of the data except for categorical variables.

4. Results

4.1. Common Method Bias Test

The data were first verified for common method bias. By using Harman's single-factor test method and the SPSS.23 software, exploratory factor analysis was conducted on all question items in the scale at the same time. The results showed that there were eight factors with characteristic roots greater than one, and the maximum factor variance was explained by 31.89%, indicating that the homogeneity of the data had not affected the analysis results. To further ensure the reliability of the study results, a common method latent factor was used to test the effect of common method bias. A common method latent variable without measurement was added to the five-factor model so that all question items were loaded on this common method latent variable. Then, the aggregation degree of the new model was compared with the previous five-factor model. The results of the study showed that the new six-factor model could not be fitted in the Amos.26 software. In summary, it can be concluded that there is no serious problem of common method bias in this study.

4.2. Exploratory Factor Analysis

In order to explore the underlying factor structure and dimensionality of the measured variables, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted. To assess the adequacy of sampling, we first conducted the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's sphericity test. At the level of $p = 0.000$, the values for these tests were calculated to be 0.912 and 6312.325, respectively. The good values of the KMO test and Bartlett's test of sphericity indicated that the data was suitable for factor analysis. We further analyzed both the factor loading values for each item in the questionnaire as well as the composite reliabilities for each variable. The results are shown in Table 2.

Since all the scales used in this study were established scales, the factor loading values for each item were greater than 0.65, and the composite reliabilities for each measurement variable met the requirements. Therefore, no items were removed from the questionnaire.

4.3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Due to concerns about the potential lack of discriminant validity among the five measured variables in the questionnaire, which could potentially affect the accuracy of subsequent analysis results, we employed a series of competitive factor models based on a baseline model and compared their fitnesses. The specific procedure was as follows.

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted on the model through the Amos.26 software. The baseline model, containing servant leadership, employee well-being, perceived organizational support, surface acting, and deep acting, was first subjected to validated factor analysis. Then, we built a four-factor model where servant leadership and employee well-being were considered as one factor while perceived organizational support, surface acting, and deep acting remained as separate factors. Next, we constructed a three-factor model where servant leadership and employee well-being were combined as one factor, perceived organizational support and surface acting were treated as another factor, and deep acting remained as a separate factor. In the two-factor model, servant leadership and employee well-being were considered as one factor, while perceived organizational support, surface acting, and deep acting were grouped together as the second factor. Lastly, we created a single-factor model, treating servant leadership, employee well-being, perceived organizational support, surface acting, and deep acting as one factor. Then, these variables were analyzed respectively. Results of confirmatory factor analysis ($N = 436$) are shown in Table 3. Comparing the fitting indexes of different models, it is found that the benchmark

model has the best fitting effect ($\chi^2 = 1546.44$, $df = 730$, $\chi^2/df = 2.12 < 3$, $TLI = 0.92 > 0.9$, $CFI = 0.91 > 0.9$, $RMSEA = 0.07 < 0.08$, $SRMR = 0.07 < 0.08$). It is clear that the baseline model (five-factor model) fits variables all better than the other possible competing factor models, which indicates that the five variables in this study can be clearly differentiated.

Table 2. Factor loadings and composite reliabilities (N = 436).

Variables	Items	Factor's Loadings	Composite Reliabilities
Surface acting (SA)	SA1	0.803	0.833
	SA2	0.782	
	SA3	0.786	
Deep acting (DA)	DA1	0.828	0.868
	DA2	0.836	
	DA3	0.821	
Servant leading (SL)	SL1	0.753	0.897
	SL2	0.762	
	SL3	0.732	
	SL4	0.723	
	SL5	0.761	
	SL6	0.747	
	SL7	0.731	
Perceived organizational support (POS)	POS1	0.714	0.894
	POS2	0.732	
	POS3	0.705	
	POS4	0.683	
	POS5	0.749	
	POS6	0.732	
	POS7	0.711	
	POS8	0.712	
Employee well-being (EW)	EW1	0.718	0.953
	EW2	0.702	
	EW3	0.693	
	EW4	0.704	
	EW5	0.678	
	EW6	0.679	
	EW7	0.694	
	EW8	0.679	
	EW9	0.714	
	EW10	0.701	
	EW11	0.712	
	EW12	0.704	
	EW13	0.671	
	EW14	0.711	
	EW15	0.718	
	EW16	0.703	
	EW17	0.711	
	EW18	0.723	
	EW19	0.719	
	EW20	0.689	
	EW21	0.682	

Table 3. Results of confirmatory factor analysis (N = 436).

Model Factors	Combination	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
Baseline model	A, B, C, D, E	1546.44	730	2.12	0.92	0.91	0.07	0.07
Four-factor model	A + B, C, D, E	1972.83	734	2.69	0.71	0.72	0.09	0.09
Three-factor model	A + B, C + D, E	2385.11	737	3.24	0.62	0.64	0.10	0.11
Two-factor model	A + B, C + D+E	2512.95	739	3.40	0.59	0.61	0.11	0.11
Single-factor model	A + B+C + D+E	2638.49	740	3.57	0.56	0.59	0.11	0.11

Note: A indicates servant leadership, B indicates employee well-being, C indicates perceived organizational support, D indicates surface acting, and E indicates deep acting.

4.4. Descriptive Analysis

The correlation analysis of each variable is shown in Table 3. There is a significant negative relationship between deep acting and perceived organizational support, as well as between employee well-being and employee surface acting, while the relationship between servant leadership and surface acting is not significant. There is a significant positive relationship between perceived organizational support, employee well-being, and servant leadership for employee deep acting. There is also a significant positive relationship between servant leadership and employee well-being. There is also a significant positive relationship between servant leadership and employee well-being. The square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each variable is shown at the diagonal of Table 4. It can be seen from Table 3 that the square root of the mean variance extracted for each variable is greater than the correlation coefficient between the variables, which also indicates that the discriminant validity between the variables of the research model is good and that the model passes the discriminant validity test.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis of variables (N = 436).

Variables	Mean	SE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Gender	1.546	0.499	-											
2. Marital status	1.431	0.496	−0.024	-										
3. Age	4.032	1.954	0.020	−0.931***	-									
4. Tenure	2.128	0.917	−0.053	−0.892***	0.890***	-								
5. Education	2.349	1.037	−0.093	0.682***	−0.683***	−0.600***	-							
6. Monthly income	3.862	1.337	−0.108	−0.132	0.138*	0.233***	0.115	-						
7. The impact of COVID–19 on work	2.257	0.654	0.028	−0.094	0.149*	0.267**	0.103	−0.112	-					
8. Surface acting	2.853	0.822	0.032	0.167*	−0.154*	−0.178**	0.119	−0.065	0.278***	0.790				
9. Deep acting	3.636	0.714	−0.013	−0.218**	0.193**	0.189**	−0.162*	0.016	−0.189***	−0.382***	0.828			
10. Employee well-being	3.334	0.55	−0.06	−0.109	0.101	0.106	0.008	0.075	−0.153*	−0.387***	0.528***	0.744		
11. Perceived organizational support	3.231	0.635	−0.011	−0.003	0.021	−0.020	0.024	0.063	0.025	−0.358***	0.429***	0.609***	0.717	
12. Servant leadership	3.519	0.603	−0.047	0.080	−0.057	−0.058	0.040	0.022	−0.086	−0.113	0.412***	0.509***	0.660***	0.700

Note: * indicates significant correlation at the $p < 0.05$ level, ** indicates significant correlation at the $p < 0.01$ level, and *** indicates significant correlation at the $p < 0.001$ level; the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) of each variable is shown at the diagonal.

4.5. Hypothesis Test

The above test results indicate that the measurement model passed the test. Further analysis was conducted on the path test results of the structural model. In this study, the structural equation model was constructed and tested using the Smart PLS 3.0 software. The coefficients and significances of all paths in the complete model are shown in Figure 2.

Based on Figure 2, it can be observed that servant leadership has a significant positive impact on deep acting ($B = 0.438$, $SE = 0.063$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, Hypothesis 1a is verified. However, the influence of servant leadership on surface acting is not significant ($B = -0.126$, $SE = 0.069$, $p > 0.05$), and Hypothesis 1b is not verified. The reason for this result is that employees who exhibited deep acting during the epidemic have a high sense of organizational loyalty in themselves. If they perceive that their managers are adopting a servant leadership management style, they will further strengthen their identification with their organizations based on their previous sense of loyalty and continue to show deep acting at work. However, the employees who show surface acting do lack a sense of identification with their organizations. They may only work in these organizations to meet basic living needs. Under the epidemic situation, they can develop a higher level of insecurity, which seriously affects their daily work. If, at this point, they sense that the manager is taking servant leadership, they do not increase their identification with their organizations, but rather believe that this is what their organizations should do. Thus,

under COVID-19, servant leadership significantly and positively affects deep acting and does not have a significant effect on surface acting.

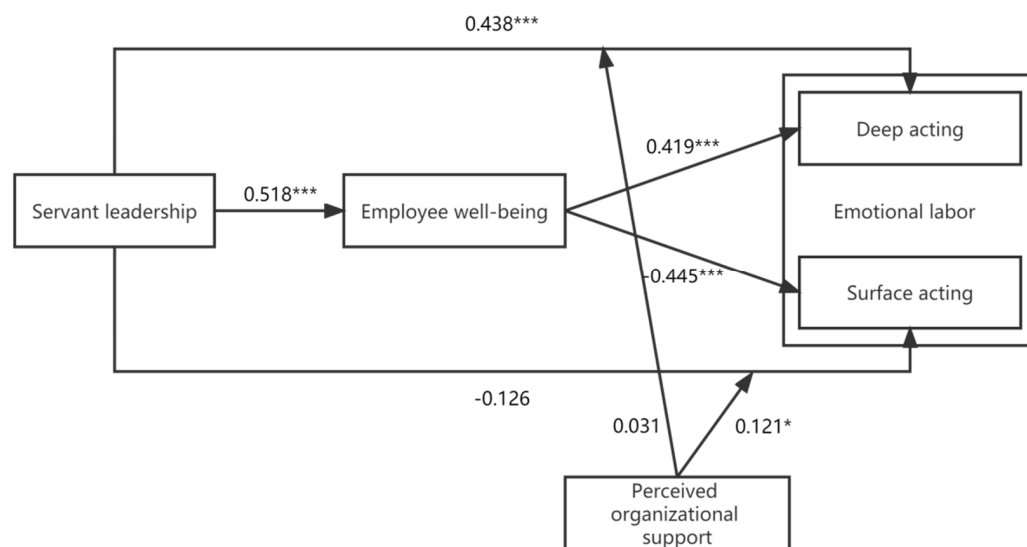


Figure 2. Path coefficients of the model. (* represents $p < 0.05$, *** represents $p < 0.001$).

From the figure, it can also be observed that servant leadership has a significant positive impact on employee well-being ($B = 0.518$, $SE = 0.065$, $p < 0.001$), verifying Hypothesis 2. Employee well-being has a significant positive impact on deep acting ($B = 0.419$, $SE = 0.069$, $p < 0.001$), and a significant negative impact on surface acting ($B = -0.445$, $SE = 0.074$, $p < 0.001$), verifying Hypothesis 3.

To examine the mediating roles of employee well-being between servant leadership and the two dimensions of emotional labor, the mediation analysis procedure recommended by Preacher was employed in this study. The results show that the indirect effect of employee well-being on the relationship between servant leadership and deep acting is 0.209, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.134, 0.291]. Since the confidence interval does not contain 0, it indicates the presence of a mediating role, i.e., employee well-being mediates the relationship between servant leadership and deep acting. Similarly, the indirect effect of employee well-being on the relationship between servant leadership and surface acting is -0.225 , with a 95% confidence interval of $[-0.320, -0.127]$. Since the confidence interval does not contain 0, it indicates the presence of a mediating role. Thus, Hypothesis 4 is verified.

Lastly, based on Figure 2, it can be observed that perceived organizational support does not significantly moderate the relationship between servant leadership and deep acting (interaction coefficient $B = 0.031$, $SE = 0.051$, $p > 0.05$), and Hypothesis 5a is not verified. However, perceived organizational support significantly moderates the relationship between servant leadership and surface acting (interaction coefficient $B = 0.121$, $SE = 0.052$, $p < 0.05$), verifying Hypothesis 5b.

The reason for this is that employees in the service industry who show deep acting in their work have a strong sense of identification with and loyalty to their organizations. Whether or not they feel organizational support in the epidemic, they will take deep acting to ride out the storm with their organizations. However, the employees who exhibit surface acting in their work do not have a high sense of identification with their organizations and are pessimistic in the midst of the epidemic. If they perceive that the managers in an organization take servant leadership to care for employees and the organization itself takes measures to support employees, the two factors together may enhance their good feelings and identification with the organization and reduce surface acting at work. Based on the results of the analysis, the moderating role of perceived organizational support on

the relationship between servant leadership and surface acting was drawn, as shown in Figure 3.

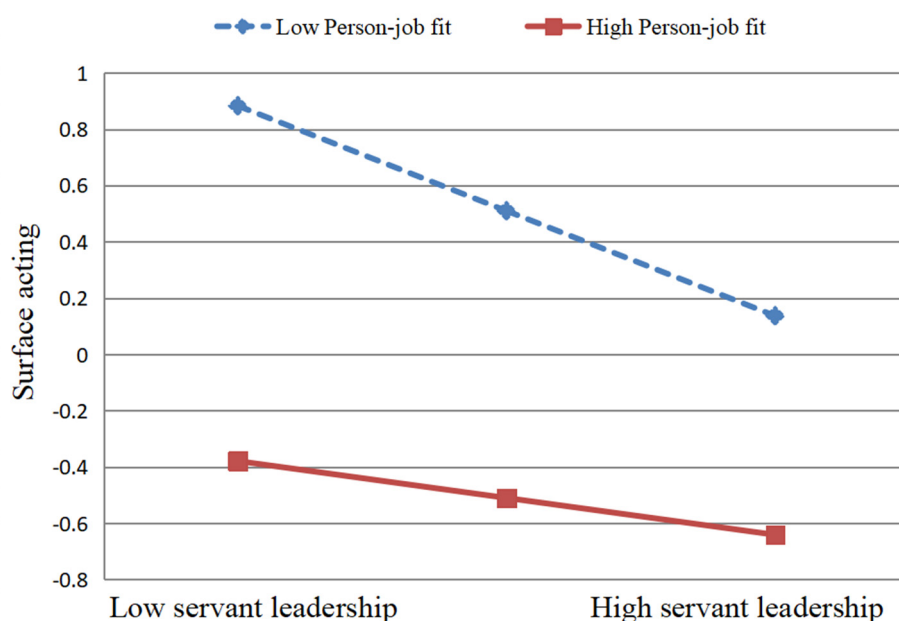


Figure 3. Moderating diagram.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical Implications

In summary, this study aims to investigate the promotion of the sustainable development of employees in the context of COVID-19. We have selected emotional labor, an employee behavior closely associated with sustainable development, as the research variable, and explored the positive impact of servant leadership on emotional labor. Our findings shed light on the relationship between leadership style and emotional labor, which is still a relatively new area of research [40,41]. Given the significant changes in the organizational context since the outbreak of COVID-19, the role of managerial leadership style in helping employees overcome difficulties and perform well during this crisis has become increasingly important [42]. While previous studies have explored the impact of leadership style on emotional labor [43], the specific influence of leadership style on emotional labor during COVID-19 has not been sufficiently examined. By focusing on servant leadership as a key antecedent variable of employees' emotional labor, our study highlights the positive impact of this leadership style on employees during the pandemic.

Furthermore, this study expands the applicability of theories based on the person–environment fit theory and the social learning theory. We have provided new insights into the mechanisms through which servant leadership influence emotional labor in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak. Although prior research has extensively explored these two theories, most of these studies have been conducted in general organizational contexts [44–47]. However, since the onset of the epidemic, organizations have faced significant challenges and have actively implemented measures to mitigate the adverse effects. Our study validates the relationship between the two dimensions of servant leadership and emotional labor in the context of COVID-19, thereby expanding the applicability of theories based on person–environment fit theory and social learning theory.

Additionally, our study elucidates the mechanism by which servant leadership influences the two dimensions of emotional labor under epidemic conditions and confirms the significant influences of employee well-being and perceived organizational support on emotional labor. Employees' appropriate selection of emotional labor strategies not only benefits organizational performance but also contributes to the sustainable development of employees. Particularly in the context of COVID-19, promoting the sustainable develop-

ment of employees has become the choice of most managers. Our research suggests that managers can promote employees' deep acting and inhibit surface acting by employing servant leadership, thereby facilitating their sustainable development. In addition to managerial leadership style, employees' perceived organizational support is also a vital factor in shaping emotional labor [48–50]. When managers and organizations collaborate to support employees, service industry employees experience reduced work stress and are more likely to engage in deep acting, ultimately benefiting both employees and organizations.

Finally, our study simultaneously examined the effects of organizational environment, leadership style, and personal traits on employee emotional labor in COVID-19. The emergence of emotional labor is not unilaterally caused by the individual employee or the organization, but is the result of a combination of employee, leadership, and organizational factors. However, in previous studies, these have often not been considered together as antecedent variables affecting emotional labor, and only the effects of individual variables on emotional labor have been examined [6,7,13,41]. Our study takes into account all three perspectives—individual employee, manager, and organization—at the same time, and more comprehensively explores the mechanisms of emotional labor formation in COVID-19.

5.2. Practical Implications

In addition to the aforementioned theoretical contributions, our study provides practical guidelines for managers in dealing with epidemics and promoting employee sustainability. In the practice of using managerial efforts to promote the sustainable development of employees, many individuals have focused solely on employee retention and upward career aspirations while overlooking the importance of employees' internal perceptions regarding organizational policies, work standards, and their professions, as well as the subsequent behaviors stemming from those perceptions. It is obviously not enough for managers to simply try to promote employee sustainability by improving employee retention and career development visions, but at the same time, due to the diverse and hidden nature of employee sustainability, it is difficult for managers to find a breakthrough in promoting employee sustainability in practice. By focusing on the key variable of emotional labor, our research provides a novel and practical management approach to promote employees' sustainable development.

Emotional labor plays a crucial role in shaping employees' attitudes toward work, their degree of personal investment in an organization's interests, and fostering the long-term health and development of a company. Our study demonstrates a new management approach that effectively encourages employees to adopt positive emotional labor strategies, thereby making a significant impact on promoting employees' sustainable development. Specifically, it highlights the positive influence of servant leadership in shaping employees' emotional labor strategy choices. Traditional Chinese culture often fosters a centralized climate within organizations, which can have negative effects on employees' development [51]. Servant leadership can counterbalance the negative effects of a centralized climate by transforming their leadership style from dictatorship and coercion to one focused on serving and supporting employees. Especially in the context of the new crown pneumonia outbreak, many employees are unable to concentrate on their work due to the impact of the epidemic, and they not only have to worry about whether they will be infected but also have to take on a greater workload. In such circumstances, many employees may lower their emotional labor strategies and rely more on surface acting as a substitute for deep acting. Therefore, it is crucial for managers to promptly identify these changes in employees and motivate and inspire them through servant leadership. Our research has confirmed that this approach can enhance employees' work engagement during the pandemic and encourage them to choose deep acting more often.

Second, our study found that in the epidemic, employee well-being significantly influences staff emotional labor strategies and has a mediating role between servant leadership and emotional labor. Therefore, managers take appropriate measures to enhance employees' happiness [52]. For example, a company may implement a "people-oriented" management

philosophy and provide logistical support to employees during the epidemic so that they can reduce their job insecurity and work for the company with confidence, thus creating a sense of well-being. Since the outbreak of the epidemic, employees in the service industry have been under tremendous pressure and risk, and their own happiness indexes have been greatly reduced. If an organization can make employees feel happy at this time, then it can make them work in the state that the company wants them to work in, helping the company to get through the epidemic.

Next, the choice of emotional labor strategies by employees is closely related to their sustainable development. The way employees manage their emotions and express them in the workplace can significantly impact their well-being, job satisfaction, and overall career development. By adopting appropriate emotional labor strategies, such as engaging in deep acting rather than surface acting, employees can maintain their psychological well-being, enhance job performance, and foster long-term sustainable growth in their careers. Thus, it is important for organizations and managers to recognize the significance of emotional labor strategies and create a supportive environment that encourages employees to choose strategies that align with their well-being and sustainable development. Providing resources, training, and support to help employees effectively manage their emotions can contribute to their overall job satisfaction, motivation, and professional growth.

Finally, we found that perceived organizational support moderates the impact of servant leadership on emotional labor. Therefore, organizations take steps to make employees feel supported by them during the epidemic so that they can work without worries. Since the outbreak, both organizations and employees have faced great difficulties and challenges, and many employees may believe that their organizations will not be able to survive the epidemic. If employees can feel that their organizations support them, employees will gain confidence during the epidemic. Therefore, an organization can often care to ask employees about their work status and inquire whether they are experiencing difficulties in the work process. It can also provide employees with frequent epidemic subsidies and epidemic-related medicines so that they can feel supported by the organization when they are working on the front line of service, believe that the epidemic will eventually pass, and then go to work in a full state.

5.3. Research Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although valuable conclusions were obtained in the study, the following limitations still exist: first, the sample of the research was mainly focused on the service industry in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, which could improve the internal consistency validity of the conclusions obtained but had a certain impact on the generalizability of the study. In future, the research scope can be expanded to the northern regions of China or carried out nationwide to improve the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, from the perspective of methodology, in order to reduce the impact of common method bias, this study adopted the method of distributing questionnaires and collecting data at different time points, and this was reflected in the causal relationship between the variables to a certain extent. However, the questionnaire was designed with each variable being self-reported by employees, and the time interval between the multi-temporal studies was not long. Future studies using experimental methods or more rigorous methods could be considered. Thirdly, the direct impact of servant leadership on employee surface acting was not verified in the study. In the future, we can explore the influencing factors of surface acting in the context of the epidemic, deepen our understanding of surface acting, and guide employees to take reasonable and effective measures to curb employee surface acting. Finally, we have verified only one mechanism of the impact of servant leadership on emotional labor. There are still very valuable and interesting questions about servant leadership and emotional labor in COVID-19 that deserve to be studied in depth. For example, in the selection of leadership styles, we chose servant leadership as the independent variable. However, whether other leadership styles also have effects on emotional labor in COVID-19 is one of the questions that can be explored in future studies. In addition, for the selection of mediating mechanisms, we

chose well-being as a mediating variable. However, whether there are other important mediating variables on the influence of leadership style on emotional labor is a question that can be explored in the future. In the exploration of boundary conditions, in addition to organizational support, the relationship between employees and colleagues, organizational climate, and the severity of COVID-19 may be important boundary conditions that can be investigated in the future.

6. Conclusions

This study aimed to explore, using empirical research methods, how managers can promote employees' sustainable development in the context of COVID-19. The main findings of this study are as follows: First, servant leadership significantly and positively affects employee well-being and deep acting under the influence of COVID-19. Secondly, employee well-being is significantly positively related to deep acting and significantly negatively related to surface acting. Thirdly, employee well-being has a mediating role between the servant leadership and emotional labor dimensions. Finally, perceived organizational support has a moderating effect on the relationship between servant leadership and surface acting.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: This study does not involve any ethical issues.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Items measuring surface acting in emotional labor (Source: Grandey [36])

1. I just pretended to have the emotions that I needed to display to this customer.
2. I put on a “mask” to display the emotions my manager wants me to display.
3. I put on a “show” or “performance” when interacting with this customer.

Items measuring deep acting in emotional labor (Source: Grandey [36])

1. I tried to experience the emotions I had to show to the customer.
2. I worked hard to feel the emotions that I needed to show to this customer.
3. I made a strong effort to feel the emotions that I needed to display toward this customer.

Items measuring Servant leadership (Source: Liden et al. [37])

1. If I encounter personal problems, I will seek help from my superiors.
2. My leader emphasizes the importance of giving back to society.
3. If something is wrong, my superior will point it out.
4. My leader gives me the freedom to handle difficult problems in the way I think is best.
5. My superior prioritizes my professional development.
6. My leader puts my interests before his/her own interests.
7. My leader would compromise ethical principles to achieve success.

Items measuring Perceived organizational support (Source: Rhoades et al. [38])

1. My organization really cares about my well-being.

2. My organization strongly considers my goals and values.
3. My organization shows little concern for me.
4. My organization cares about my opinions.
5. My organization is willing to help me if I need a special favor.
6. Help is available from my organization when I have a problem.
7. My organization would forgive an honest mistake on my part.
8. If given the opportunity, my organization would take advantage of me.

Items measuring Employee well-being (Source: Waterman et al. [39])

1. I find I get intensely involved in many of the things I do each day.
2. I believe I have discovered who I really am.
3. I think it would be ideal if things came easily to me in my life.
4. My life is centered around a set of core beliefs that give meaning to my life.
5. It is more important that I really enjoy what I do than that other people are impressed by it.
6. I believe I know what my best potentials are and I try to develop them whenever possible.
7. Other people usually know better what would be good for me to do than I know myself.
8. I feel best when I'm doing something worth investing a great deal of effort in.
9. I can say that I have found my purpose in life.
10. If I did not find what I was doing rewarding for me, I do not think I could continue doing it.
11. As yet, I've not figured out what to do with my life.
12. I can't understand why some people want to work so hard on the things that they do.
13. I believe it is important to know how what I'm doing fits with purposes worth pursuing.
14. I usually know what I should do because some actions just feel right to me.
15. When I engage in activities that involve my best potentials, I have this sense of really being alive.
16. I am confused about what my talents really are.
17. I find a lot of the things I do are personally expressive for me.
18. It is important to me that I feel fulfilled by the activities that I engage in.
19. If something is really difficult, it probably isn't worth doing.
20. I find it hard to get really invested in the things that I do.
21. I believe I know what I was meant to do in life.

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