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**HOW AND WHEN PERCEPTIONS OF TOP MANAGEMENT BOTTOM-LINE  
MENTALITY INHIBIT SUPERVISORS' SERVANT LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR**

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***Acknowledgments:** We would like to thank the editor and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive and developmental feedback, which helped improve our research.*

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**ABSTRACT**

Extending existing bottom-line mentality (BLM) perspectives, we provide a new theoretical account of how supervisors' perceptions of top management BLM influence supervisors' servant leadership (SL) behavior. Using role theory, we propose that these perceptions inhibit supervisors' SL behavior by reducing their SL role conceptualization or the extent to which supervisors consider SL part of their work responsibility. Further, given that the process underlying the relationship between perceived top management BLM and supervisor SL behavior may be explained by social learning theory and human adaptive capacity perspectives, we examine the incremental validity of supervisor SL role conceptualization versus supervisor BLM and empathy as mediating mechanisms. We also propose low perspective-taking among supervisors as a boundary condition that exacerbates the negative effect of perceived top management BLM on SL role conceptualization, which then results in less servant leader behavior. Data from two multi-wave field studies in China and the United Kingdom provided some support for our hypotheses. Across unique cultural contexts, our findings highlight the value of a role theory perspective in understanding perceptions of top management BLM. We discuss critical theoretical and practical implications of these findings and avenues for subsequent research.

**Keywords:** Bottom-line mentality; servant leadership; role conceptualization; perspective-taking; role theory

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

*“Today, many leaders [frontline supervisors] have orders from boards, shareholders, and owners [via top management]. Their first order of business [role] is to make as big a profit for the company as possible... They fail to see that you get more by serving others first.”*— Philippe Gouamba, former HR vice president at Skyline Windows (Laub, 2018: 135-136).

For decades, Nobel laureate Milton Friedman argued that the sole purpose of business is to maximize shareholder profit. From his standpoint, any distraction from securing “the bottom-line” would hurt organizations and render them less competitive (Kelly, 2019). Broadly defined, the term *bottom-line* refers to performance metrics tied to an organization’s profitability (Wolfe, 1988). Yet, a bottom-line *mentality* (BLM) refers to a one-dimensional frame of mind that “revolves around securing bottom-line outcomes to the neglect of competing priorities [e.g., employee well-being]” (Greenbaum, Mawritz, & Eissa, 2012: 344). Business leaders worldwide commonly espouse their singular commitment to the bottom line, and in so doing, effectively signal to managers what this focus should be in their roles as leaders. For example, top executives in China’s prominent tech industry historically endorsed the infamous “996 (9am-9pm, 6 days/week)” culture that overpoweringly places “profit” over “people.” As Jack Ma once said, “If you want to join Alibaba, you need to be prepared to work 12 hours a day. Otherwise, why even bother joining?” (Huang, 2021). Given the ubiquity of this mentality in modern organizations, there has been considerable scholarly work linking BLM to unfavorable employee outcomes, including unethical behavior, low task performance, and low commitment (e.g., Farasat & Azam, 2020; Mesdaghinia, Rawat, & Nadavulakere, 2019; Quade, McLarty, & Bonner, 2020; Quade, Wan, Carlson, Kacmar, & Greenbaum, 2021). Research has also begun to show that perceptions of top management BLM can have a significant bearing on supervisory leadership styles (viz., low ethical leadership practices; Greenbaum, Babalola, Quade, Guo, & Kim, 2021). However, this research is substantially limited.

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

The existing research highlights an issue of theoretical and practical significance. Specifically, evidence suggests that although the bottom-line priorities that top management espouse can and are often adopted by frontline supervisors (Greenbaum et al., 2012; Wolfe, 1988), strong BLM in these leaders often leads to adverse outcomes that threaten the bottom line. Our opening quote succinctly describes this dilemma. This quote suggests that for frontline supervisors to be successful, they also need to adopt a “serving others” role perspective. This approach argues that frontline supervisors are more likely to contribute to the bottom line if they also prioritize “people.” This view aligns with *servant leadership* (SL) research, which reflects a set of leadership behaviors that prioritize subordinates’ well-being, work to benefit them, and create value for the community (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008). To date, however, there is a limited theoretical understanding of how perceptions of top management BLM shape how supervisors adopt, conceptualize, and integrate SL principles into their leadership roles. This omission is surprising since frontline leaders’ perceptions of their roles are strongly influenced by their understanding of top management’s role expectations for them, which, in turn, impacts their job behaviors (Biddle, 2013; Cannella, Hambrick, Finkelstein, & Cannella, 2009). Nevertheless, prevailing theoretical perspectives in the BLM literature are largely divorced from any discussion of how supervisors perceive and conceptualize their roles.

For instance, the dominant social learning theory perspective (SLT; Bandura, 1977) assumes that managers at different levels display similar attributes because lower-level managers mimic those in higher authority (Greenbaum et al., 2012). However, research and practice reveal a fragmented connection between top management and lower-level manager behaviors. Such fragmentation occurs because lower-level managers do not always mimic those higher in the hierarchy whose primary role is to manage the organization’s reputation

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

(Chang, Budhwar, & Crawshaw, 2021). Therefore, role-modeling alone is insufficient to explain why people learn from the behaviors of others at work.

More recently, Greenbaum et al. (2021) proposed a human adaptive capacity perspective (Shepard, 1965), arguing that perceived top management BLM prevents supervisors from engaging in desirable behaviors due to their inability to emotionally connect with those around them (i.e., low empathy). This study is the only research that specifically focuses on the top management BLM-supervisor linkage. Although both social learning and human adaptation approaches view perceptions of top management BLM as environmental cues, they do not explicitly explain how supervisors' interpretations of top management's expectations influence a specific role behavior (viz. SL). Importantly, interpreting and responding to environmental cues (e.g., organizational demands, pressures of informal groups) is also an essential role-making process that drives workplace learning and behavior (Biddle, 2013; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Venkataramani, Bartol, Zheng, Lu, & Liu, 2021).

Thus, our primary goal in this research is to introduce a role-based theoretical perspective (viz. role theory; Katz & Kahn, 1978) to explain how perceived top management BLM relates to supervisors' SL behavior. We focus on SL behavior because it speaks directly to the tension between "people" and "profits" inherent in the BLM concept. Whereas SL prioritizes serving and facilitating the well-being of others (a *people* orientation) (Liden et al., 2008), perceptions of top management BLM imply that a focus on profits is more important than *anything else* (a *profit* orientation) (Babalola et al., 2020; Greenbaum et al., 2012). Yet, SL research has shown that servant leadership behavior can increase firm profitability (e.g., Peterson, Galvin, & Lange, 2012). In this respect, by focusing solely on profits and restricting people-oriented role conceptualizations, perceptions of top management BLM can, ironically, hinder the extent to which an organization receives the high-performance benefits of SL behavior (Hoch, Bommer, Dulebohn & Wu, 2018). Thus, knowledge of how and when

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

perceived top management BLM relates to supervisor SL behavior is essential to clarify how organizations can manage such tension and achieve bottom-line objectives.

Importantly, we also consider a role-based perspective for the influences of perceived top management BLM above and beyond the dominant social learning and contemporary human adaptive capacity perspectives. Role theory answers the query for human behavior by invoking the concept of expectation. Notably, it argues that individuals draw cues from their social environment to form expectations that help define what should or should not be part of their role responsibilities. In turn, they use these role conceptualizations to guide subsequent behaviors (Biddle, 1986; Katz & Kahn, 1978). Accordingly, we introduce *SL role conceptualization*, defined as the extent to which supervisors perceive SL as an integral part of their role or personal responsibility (cf. Morrison, 1994). We argue that it is a more unique, or perhaps stronger, mechanism than supervisor BLM and supervisor empathy in explaining the relationship between perceived top management BLM and supervisor SL behavior. By bringing SL role conceptualization to the forefront of analysis, we explicitly acknowledge formal and informal perceptions that make up an individual's role (Biddle, 2013).

We further adopt a role-based perspective to theorize that supervisor perspective-taking (i.e., an individual difference that captures concern for others and the cognitive skill of imagining the world from another's point of view; Davis, 1980; Ku, Wang, & Galinsky, 2015) serves as a boundary condition that shapes how supervisors respond to perceptions of top management BLM. Role theory suggests that role conceptualization is explicitly interactive and, thus, an outcome of the interplay between personal and social influences (Eagly & Wood, 2011). How individuals conceptualize their role in each context may vary depending on the characteristics they bring to the situation, influencing the link between occupants' perceptions of the context and their role conceptualization (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Because low perspective-taking reflects a self-centered orientation and narrow thinking

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

pattern (Galinsky, Magee, Rus, Rothman, & Todd, 2014), we theorize that supervisors low in perspective-taking will respond to their perceptions of top management BLM with less SL role conceptualization, resulting in less SL behavior.

Our research makes several significant contributions. First, we expand the understanding of how supervisors respond to their perceptions of top management BLM by examining its influence on supervisors' SL behavior. As Greenbaum et al. (2021: 109) noted, "to fully understand the implications of BLMs, research is needed on BLMs at multiple levels of leadership." We respond to this call by revealing an irony associated with perceived BLM at top leadership levels. Specifically, when top managers are perceived to adopt BLMs with their firm's financial standing in mind, supervisors display less SL behavior, which harms the bottom line. Second, we enrich the BLM literature with a new theoretical explanation regarding implications of perceived top management BLM. To do so, we move beyond the dominant SLT and a recently introduced adaptive capacity perspective to test a model that clarifies the underlying mechanism of supervisor SL role conceptualization compared to supervisor BLM and supervisor empathy. In using role theory, we provide a more complete explanation for how perceptions of top management BLM affect role conceptualizations and subsequent role behaviors. Third, we add to nuance by introducing perspective-taking and offering insights into how and when perceptions of top management BLM inhibit supervisor SL behavior. Finally, we contribute to the literature on SL antecedents by shedding light on the workplace conditions and processes that hinder SL behavior. Such a contribution is valuable as our findings indicated that perceptions of top management BLM have an inhibiting effect on supervisors' SL role conceptualization, and consequently, SL behaviors above and beyond perceptions of top management SL.



## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

### Role Theory

Role theory concerns the mechanisms by which individuals are socialized to assume characteristic behavioral patterns, known as roles, in a manner that sustains social order (Strauss, 1977). It begins with perceptions of normative expectations that define particular social positions and corresponding behaviors (Hunter, 2015). In essence, roles reflect “the behavior expected from an individual occupying a specific position (Biddle, 2013) such that the cognition and expected behavior associated with the position are fundamentally important to success in the role (Katz and Kahn, 1978)” (Aritzeta, Swailes, & Senior, 2007: 97). Therefore, roles are the building blocks that explain how people behave, interact with others, and coordinate their actions (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Welbourne, Johnson, & Erez, 1998).

Role research has been associated with cognitive social psychology (Biddle, 1986). Similar to SLT (Bandura, 1977), it concerns the influence of perceived environmental cues on individual behavior. However, role theory further extends SLT by focusing on the relationships between expectations and behaviors (Chang et al., 2021). Notably, employees do not simply take over roles and follow programmed scripts of behaviors. Instead, they accrue knowledge through socialization, interpreting others’ actions, and constructing the images they present in their work role (Turner, 1962). Thus, behaviors are best understood in concert with role identities, which individuals assume as members of social positions, and all related parties' expectations for behaviors are understood (Biddle, 1986).

In the role-making process, people internalize social norms (i.e., expected role behaviors; Bates & Harvey, 1975) and embrace specific role responsibilities by drawing cues from the expectations of those higher in the hierarchy. This information guides their attitudes and behaviors as they choose from possible actions competing for their attention and energy (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Hence, we use role theory to propose that supervisors assume social

cues related to the expectations, values, or orientations of those in higher levels (e.g., top managers) to determine work responsibilities, which drive corresponding behavior (Winkler, 2010). Thus, we predict that role theory provides a unique explanation above and beyond other cognitive, social psychology-related justifications concerning the influence of perceived top management BLM on supervisor SL behavior.

### **Perceived Top Management BLM and Supervisor SL Behavior: The Mediating Role of Supervisor SL Role Conceptualization**

Role conceptualization represents a process of using the knowledge of normative expectations from socialization to internalize expectations that promote behaviors capable of responding to environmental demands (Biddle, 1986; Katz & Kahn, 1978). Given the importance of role conceptualization for enacting work behaviors (Biddle, 2013), research has investigated how it aids in understanding specific workplace role behaviors. For instance, Paterson and Huang (2019) revealed that higher-level managers' focus on ethics was positively related to ethical role conceptualizations and a subsequent reduction in dishonest behavior. Further, Liu, Liao, Derfler-Rozin, Zheng, Wee, and Qiu (2020) found that individuals were less likely to view and conceptualize creativity as part of their role in a highly ethical environment.

Accordingly, we draw from role theory to argue that supervisors who perceive top management BLM are less likely to take on SL as part of their role responsibilities, thus, reducing their SL behavior. First, top management's high BLM perceptions communicate a clear set of normative expectations for supervisors (Greenbaum et al., 2021), leading to expectations that induce conformity (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Role theory argues that individuals only conform to one role and find it difficult to attend to others, especially when incongruent with expectations "from the top" (Biddle, 2013). Ostensibly, SL is a desirable supervisor role behavior from a value-based standpoint (Hoch et al., 2018). However, it is incongruent with

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

expectancies imposed by managers perceived to hold a BLM, whose emphasis revolves around putting profitability first rather than subordinates' well-being (Greenbaum et al., 2012; Liden, Wayne, Meuser, Hu, Hu, & Liao, 2015). People in these environments conform with the normative expectations guiding that environment. They also become focused on bottom-line goals above *all else* because such alignment is fundamentally crucial to success in the role (e.g., Babalola et al., 2020; Babalola, Mawritz, Greenbaum, Ren, & Garba, 2021; Greenbaum et al., 2012; Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002; Wolfe, 1988). In response to their perceptions of top management BLM, supervisors are more likely to define their roles in a manner that excludes SL.

Second, as role theory suggests, individuals are bounded by finite resources and can only take on limited role responsibilities from cues competing for their attention and effort (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Liu et al., 2020). Thus, an environment where top managers are perceived to focus on the bottom line exclusively competes with the resources needed to fulfill the SL role. For example, putting subordinates first, empowering them, acquiring knowledge to support their development, and bettering the broader community consumes significant personal capital (Lanaj, Johnson, & Wang, 2016). Consequently, supervisors must suppress self-interest, regulate thoughts, and take initiatives beyond the scope of work responsibilities to protect accessible resources (Wu, Tsui, & Kinicki, 2010). Taking on SL as a role responsibility increases demands along these lines, thereby depleting the supervisor's resource reservoir (Liao, Lee, Johnson, & Lin, 2021). Because perceptions of top management BLM convey to supervisors that the *only* thing valued and expected in their role is bottom-line attainment (Greenbaum et al., 2021; Wolfe, 1988), expending finite personal resources to serve others represents a distraction from communicated role expectations. Thus, when observing top management BLM, supervisors will direct their attention to essential,

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

profit-driven activities foundational to their success instead of taking on SL as part of their role responsibility.

In turn, low SL role conceptualization will result in less SL behavior. Central to role theory, content-specific role conceptualizations induce domain-specific actions because they provide a mental framework for directing behaviors (Biddle, 1986; Katz & Kahn, 1978). When individuals do not consider certain activities as part of their role, they fail to enact such behaviors (e.g., Hofmann, Morgeson, & Gerras, 2003; Liu et al., 2020; Morrison, 1994; Paterson & Huang, 2019). For instance, Tangirala, Kamdar, Venkataramani, and Parke (2013) found that individuals who do not conceptualize their role to include “voice” were less likely to engage in voice behavior. Similarly, Hoffmann et al. (2003) reported that a reduced safety citizenship role conceptualization was related to few safety citizenship behaviors. Extending these ideas to our current research, we argue that supervisors will engage in less SL behaviors as they reduce their SL role conceptualization.

Role conceptualization allows individuals to behaviorally express what they consider important (Tangirala et al., 2013). This behavioral expression occurs because role conceptualization enhances one’s accountability for their behavior (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Steinbauer, Renn, Taylor, & Njoroge, 2014). In this respect, SL role conceptualization should help direct supervisors toward effective engagement in SL behavior. Conversely, reduced SL role conceptualization should direct supervisors toward engaging in less SL behavior. To do so, they are presumed to reflect on their role definitions cognitively. For instance, a supervisor might justify low SL behavior by reasoning that, “It is not my job responsibility to be a servant leader; doing so is out of the scope of my job.”

Moreover, supervisors’ formally prescribed duties are difficult to avoid, as they often contribute to performance ratings (Mumford & Connelly, 1991). However, supervisors have a broader scope of freedom regarding SL since associated behaviors are typically not specified

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

in formal job descriptions (Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, van Dierendonck, & Liden, 2019). Thus, supervisors are less likely to engage in SL behavior when they do not view these behaviors as part of their role responsibility. However, when they define their responsibility to include SL, they are more likely to adopt similar cognitive processing (“SL is part of my role responsibility”), thereby increasing accountability for such behavior. Thus, we posit that low SL role conceptualization explains why supervisors’ perceptions of top management BLM reduce their engagement in SL behavior.

*Hypothesis 1: Supervisor SL role conceptualization mediates the negative relationship between perceived top management BLM and supervisor SL behavior.*

Although we posit that SL role conceptualization acts as a mechanism through which perceived top management BLM lowers supervisor SL behavior, research suggests that BLM represents an environmental cue that reveals important role-modeling and adaptation processes. For example, Greenbaum et al. (2012) utilized an SLT perspective to show that social learning (viz., subordinate BLM) plays a critical role in subordinates’ responses to supervisor BLM. In SLT terms, employees learn desirable behaviors by observing the expectations and values of role models (Bandura, 1977). Top managers function as prominent role models because of their position and power to make critical decisions. In this respect, research indicates that supervisors model their values and behaviors after top management (Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009; Tucker, Ogunfowora, & Ehr, 2016).

From the adaptive capacity perspective (Shepard, 1965; Staber & Sydow, 2002), individuals similarly rely on their perceptions of environmental cues for subsequent responses. Moreover, these cues assess one’s vulnerability in terms of survival. Because BLM advocates that only profit-based results count, perceptions of top management BLM trigger supervisors’ survival concern, which inhibits their ability to recognize the needs of others (viz., low empathy). Adopting this perspective, Greenbaum et al. (2021) found that

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

low empathy explains why perceived top management BLM prevents supervisors from engaging in desirable, ethical leader behaviors. Thus, SLT and adaptive perspectives may explain the link between perceived top management BLM and supervisor SL behavior by suggesting that supervisors emulate top management's BLM and respond with low empathy.

Both SLT and human adaptive capacity perspectives are relevant to the BLM literature. Like role theory, they presume individuals are socially aware and respond to perceived environmental cues (Biddle, 1986). However, these three theories describe different processes that drive human behavior. SLT (Bandura, 1977, 1986) is primarily concerned with how individuals learn from the cues provided by role models. However, it does not fully capture how formal and informal job responsibilities that make up organizational roles contribute to workplace learning and behavior (Biddle, 2013; Paterson & Huang, 2019). Adaptive capacity theory (Shepard, 1965) concerns two mutually exclusive adaptations – primary (a focus on the self) versus secondary (a focus on the collective) – individuals undertake in response to their interpretation of environmental cues. This perspective is concerned with an individual's capacity to act in ways that ensure survival in a particular context, for instance, environments characterized by top management BLM. Despite its emphasis on primitive adaptive states (Aram, Morgan, & Esbeck, 1971), this perspective does not consider the interdependency of role expectations that drive workplace behavior (Biddle, 2013).

On the other hand, role theory may be better suited to explain low supervisor SL behavioral responses to perceptions of top management BLM. As research indicates, the influence of top management on supervisors is also a process through which a shared understanding emerges in terms of the latter's role definition and behavior (Shivers-Blackwell, 2004; Sluss, Van Dick, & Thompson, 2011). The SLT and adaptive capacity

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

perspectives are largely divorced from this role conceptualization process, where role definitions and role-related behaviors occur (Biddle, 2013; Paterson & Huang, 2019).

Role theory argues that supervisors draw cues from their interpretation of normative expectations in the social environment to define what should or should not be part of their responsibility. In turn, these conceptualizations guide subsequent behaviors (Katz & Kahn, 1978). The formal authority of supervisors makes them more aware of role requirements rather than just replicating their top managers' behavior or responding emotionally (Chang et al., 2021; Shivers-Blackwell, 2004). Hence, supervisors who perceive top management BLM may engage in less SL behavior not so much because they mimic BLM (i.e., a social learning explanation) or feel less empathetic (i.e., an adaptive capacity explanation), but because they do not consider SL as part of their role responsibility (i.e., a role-based explanation).

In addition, role theory allows for a more precise understanding of how supervisors learn from top managers. For instance, whereas role-modeling contends that people understand and display similar attributes through observational learning and social mimicking (Bandura, 1977), extant research affirms that workplace learning is dependent on how employees view or define their work roles (Paterson & Huang, 2019). In this respect, SL role conceptualization helps to model the role definition aspect of learning not explicitly captured in alternative perspectives (like SLT and adaptive capacity). Thus, we predict that as a role-based mechanism, SL role conceptualization provides a stronger explanation, compared to SLT (viz., supervisor BLM) and adaptive capacity (viz., supervisor empathy) perspectives, for why perceived top management BLM lowers supervisor SL behavior.

*Hypothesis 2: The indirect effect of perceived top management BLM and supervisor SL behavior through (a) supervisor SL role conceptualization is stronger than the indirect effect through (b) supervisor BLM or supervisor empathy.*

### **The Moderating Effect of Supervisor Perspective-Taking**

Consistent with the tenets of role theory, the personal predilections individuals bring to a situation influence how they define roles in response to their perceptions of normative expectations (Biddle, 2013). Specifically, characteristics that aid in the processing of social expectations likely augment one's role conceptualizations (Katz & Kahn, 1978). We argue that perspective-taking operates in this regard by shaping the impact of perceived top management BLM on supervisor SL role conceptualization. In support, recent research affirms perspective taking's role as an essential boundary condition capable of impacting participation in SL (Liao et al., 2021). Perspective-taking captures the tendency to understand the point of view of another person (Baston 1991). Parker, Atkins, and Axtell (2008) argued that perspective-taking allows "the observer to understand, in a nonjudgmental way, the thoughts, motives, and feelings of others, and why they think/ behave the way they do" (p. 151). Research has shown that broadening one's perspective to include others can increase situational awareness (Torrence & Connelly, 2019), enabling individuals to consider the uniqueness of a given situation from each stakeholder's view (Gorenflo & Crano, 1998).

We suggest that supervisors low in perspective-taking are more likely to respond to their perceptions of top management BLM with reduced SL role conceptualization. Compared to those who are high in perspective-taking, low perspective-taking individuals are generally inconsiderate (Davis, 1983; Davis, Conklin, Smith, & Luce, 1996), unwilling to prioritize colleagues (Kamdar, McAllister, & Turban, 2006; Richardson, Green, & Lago, 1998), and less prone to exhaust personal resources on others (Davis, 1983). Accordingly, the self-oriented tendencies embedded in low perspective-taking (Axtell, Parker, Holmaan, & Totterdell, 2007; Davis, 1980) can lead supervisors to focus on their own (rather than others') needs when responding to perceptions of top management's bottom-line expectations. Because perceptions of top management BLM convey profit as the defining responsibility



## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

(Babalola et al., 2020; Greenbaum et al., 2021) and SL places a unique demand on supervisors (Lanaj et al., 2016), low perspective-taking supervisors are more likely to conform to the bottom-line expectations of top management. They are also less likely to utilize finite resources for non-expectation-oriented (i.e., non-profit) purposes. As a result, low perspective-taking supervisors likely devalue a SL role conceptualization when top management BLM is perceived to be high because their self-focus makes them less likely to translate perceptions of top management BLM into responsibilities that ultimately serve others.

Perspective-taking also affects how individuals handle role-related expectations (Kamdar et al., 2006). Research suggests that intense work situations can cause employees low in perspective-taking to behave less appropriately and adopt a narrower perspective of what activities warrant resource consumption (e.g., Liao et al., 2021; Rupp, McCance, Spencer, & Sonntag, 2008). Accordingly, low perspective-taking may exacerbate the extent to which perceived top management BLM results in reduced SL role conceptualization. Additionally, supervisors low in perspective-taking are less likely to consider a fuller range of stakeholders (i.e., their subordinates) when responding to their perceptions of top management BLM, choosing not to extract themselves from their internal and often biased frames of reference (Grant & Berry, 2011; Galinsky, Maddux, Gilin, & White, 2008). Instead, these supervisors will take a narrower interpretation of their roles, focusing only on profitability for top management, given inherent pressure in their work environment (e.g., Babalola, Ren, Ogbonnaya, Riisla, Soetan, & Gok, 2022). As they interpret perceptions of top management BLM as a normative expectation without considering the “people” related to their roles, these supervisors are less likely to view serving others and prioritizing subordinates as an *essential* part of their role conceptualization.

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

*Hypothesis 3: Supervisor perspective-taking moderates the negative relationship between perceived top management BLM and supervisor SL role conceptualization, such that the relationship is stronger (vs. weaker) for supervisors with low (vs. high) perspective-taking.*

Because low perspective-taking exacerbates the relationship between perceived top management BLM and supervisor SL role conceptualization, we also expect it to influence the indirect relationship between perceived top management BLM and supervisor SL behavior. Compared to those higher in perspective-taking, supervisors lower in perspective-taking have a narrower focus, emphasizing self-interested desires over the needs of others (Grant & Berry, 2011). As such, low perspective-taking supervisors will interpret the presence of top management BLM as being un conducive to prioritizing others in their leadership role and, therefore, will respond to their perceptions of top management BLM with reduced SL role conceptualization. This reduced SL role conceptualization subsequently lessens the likelihood of engaging in SL behavior. Thus, low (versus high) perspective-taking likely strengthens the negative relationship between perceived top management BLM and supervisor SL role conceptualization, inhibiting supervisor SL behavior.

*Hypothesis 4: Supervisor perspective-taking moderates the indirect relationship between perceived top management BLM and supervisor SL behavior through supervisor SL role conceptualization, such that the mediated relationship is stronger for supervisors with low (rather than high) perspective-taking.*

### **PLAN OF THE RESEARCH**

We tested our hypotheses using two field studies. In Study 1, we conducted a three-wave field study involving supervisors and their direct reports in China. In Study 2, we conducted another three-wave study in the United Kingdom to determine whether our results were generalizable to a non-Asian context. This multi-study approach, which demonstrates

replication of results across studies, increases the generalizability of our research findings (Hochwarter, Ferris, & Hanes, 2011; Lykken, 1968).

### STUDY 1: METHODS

#### Sample and Procedure

We conducted a field study with data from Chinese supervisor-subordinate dyads working as professionals from various industries. We contacted workers through a Chinese training school as part of our research project. All supervisors held a middle-management role in their organizations. Participation was voluntary, and we communicated that information would be used for research purposes only. Supervisors completed the surveys over two time points (separated by three weeks), while subordinates rated their supervisors at Time 3. We assigned unique codes to match dyads across the three time points. All survey items were translated from English to Chinese, using recommended back translation techniques (Brislin, 1970). To ensure the quality of our data and prevent careless responses (Meade & Craig, 2012), we included several attention check items (e.g., “I sleep for only twenty minutes daily” and “Please select strongly agree if you are paying attention”) in each survey. Of the 337 survey invitations at Time 1, 309 supervisors completed the surveys and rated their perceptions of top management’s BLM and top management SL behavior (92% retention rate from recruitment and Time 1). At Time 2, 273 of the original supervisors rated their SL role conceptualization, BLM, and empathy (88% retention rate from Time 1 and Time 2). At Time 3, one direct report for these 273 participants rated their supervisor’s SL behavior. To ensure direct reports sufficiently observe the focal supervisor’s SL behavior, we only included direct reports who worked with focal participants for at least one year.

After removing eight respondents who failed our attention checks, as well as unmatched supervisor—direct report responses, our final sample included 259 dyads (representing a 95% complete dyad response rate from Time 2 and Time 3). We then

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

performed wave analysis to determine whether the data were affected by nonresponse bias (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007). Following Armstrong and Overton (1977), we used a one-way ANOVA to compare data from 100 randomly selected respondents who returned our first survey early and another 100 randomly selected respondents who returned the third survey late. We found no significant differences in group means for key study variables, including age ( $F(1, 198) = 3.599, p = .059$ ), perceived top management BLM ( $F(1, 198) = .396, p = .530$ ), SL role conceptualization ( $F(1, 198) = .091, p = .764$ ), SL behavior ( $F(1, 198) = .577, p = .448$ ), supervisor BLM ( $F(1, 198) = 2.355, p = .127$ ), and supervisor empathy ( $F(1, 198) = .385, p = .536$ ). Of the supervisor respondents, 58.3% were female and supervisors were, on average, 35.66 years old ( $SD = 5.85$ ).

### Measures

Unless otherwise noted, all survey items were rated with 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

***Perceived top management BLM.*** At Time 1, supervisors rated their perceptions of top management's BLM based on Greenbaum et al.'s (2012) four-item scale and using "Top Management" as the referent (Babalola et al., 2020). A sample item is "In this organization, top management is solely concerned with meeting the bottom line" ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

***Supervisor perspective-taking.*** Supervisor perspective-taking was measured at Time 1 using the four-item measure from Davis et al. (1996). A sample item is "I regularly seek to understand others' viewpoint" ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

***Supervisor servant leadership (SL) role conceptualization.*** At Time 2, we followed previous research on role conceptualization (e.g., Tangirala et al., 2013; Van Dyne, Kamdar, & Joireman, 2008) and asked supervisors to report the extent to which they viewed each of the seven items from Liden et al.'s (2015) SL scale as part of their responsibility on the job (1

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

= Definitely not part of my job to 7 = Definitely part of my job). A sample item is “Making subordinates career development a priority” ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

**Supervisor BLM.** At Time 2, supervisors rated their BLM using Greenbaum et al.’s (2012) four-item scale. A sample item is “I am solely concerned with meeting the bottom line” ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

**Supervisor empathy.** At Time 2, supervisors rated their feelings of empathy using a seven-item scale (Arnaud & Schminke, 2012). A sample item is “At work, I feel sorry for someone who is having problems” ( $\alpha = .96$ ).

**Supervisor servant leadership (SL) behavior.** At Time 3, we asked direct reports of focal supervisors to rate supervisors’ SL behavior using a seven-item scale (Liden et al., 2015). A sample item is “My manager puts my best interests ahead of his/her own” ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

**Control variables.** We controlled for leaders’ age and gender in light of prior research on SL (e.g., Beck, 2014). We also controlled for perceived top management SL measured at Time 1 ( $\alpha = .94$ ) using “Top Management” as the referent to Liden et al.’s (2015) seven-item scale. This control variable was necessary to rule out potential confounds due to top management’s SL resulting in social learning, empathy, or role conception effects. Results for our hypotheses tests remain unchanged when we remove control variables from the analyses.

### STUDY 1: DATA ANALYSES AND RESULTS

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and inter-correlations among Study 1 variables. Before testing our hypotheses, we conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) using *Mplus Version 7* (Muthén & Muthén, 2007) to examine the fit of our proposed seven-factor model. Considering our sample size, we accounted for the indicator-to-sample ratio (viz., reducing the number of parameter estimates relative to the sample size: Little, Rhemtulla, Gibson, & Schoemann, 2013) by creating three parcels for each construct

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

with up to seven items (i.e., supervisor SL role conceptualization, perceived top management SL, and supervisor empathy).<sup>1</sup> For example, we applied the single factor method (SFA: Landis et al., 2000, p. 190), such that two of the three parcels contained pairs of items with lower and higher factor loadings, respectively. In contrast, the third parcel contained the remaining three items. Other constructs with fewer than seven items (e.g., perceived top management BLM) were not parceled. Our seven-factor measurement model (including perceived top management BLM, supervisor SL role conceptualization, supervisor SL behavior, perceived top management SL, supervisor BLM, supervisor empathy, and supervisor perspective-taking) demonstrated good fit with the data:  $\chi^2 = 492.85$ ,  $df = 230$ ,  $CFI = .94$ ,  $TLI = .93$ ,  $RMSEA = .07$ ,  $SRMR = .06$ . This CFA model also performed better than alternative measurement models (see Table 2).

We then tested our hypotheses by conducting path analysis in *Mplus*. We estimated all hypothesized direct and indirect relationships simultaneously (Wo, Ambrose, & Schminke, 2015). As summarized in Figure 1 and Table 3, the results support our hypothesized relationships. Specifically, perceived top management BLM was negatively associated with supervisor SL role conceptualization ( $B = -.238$ ,  $SE = .081$ ,  $p = .003$ ), whereas the latter was positively associated with supervisor SL behavior ( $B = .243$ ,  $SE = .035$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Hypothesis 1 proposed that perceived top management BLM is indirectly associated with supervisor SL behavior via SL role conceptualization. This indirect relationship was significant (indirect effect =  $-.058$ ,  $SE = .023$ ,  $p = .011$ , 95% CI =  $[-.102, -.013]$ ); thus, indicating full support for Hypothesis 1.

To determine whether SL role conceptualization was a stronger mediator relative to supervisor BLM (Hypothesis 2a) and empathy as alternative mediators (Hypothesis 2b), we compared the magnitude of their total indirect effects. As shown in Table 3, the total indirect

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<sup>1</sup> Results of the measurement model with no parceling are available upon request.

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

effect was stronger through SL role conceptualization (total indirect effect =  $-.061$ ,  $SE = .024$ ,  $p = .010$ , 95% CI =  $[-.107, -.014]$ ) than through supervisor BLM (difference =  $-.016$ , 95% CI =  $[-.029, -.003]$ ) and supervisor empathy (difference =  $-.038$ , 95% CI =  $[-.064, -.012]$ ). These results highlight the value of a role theory perspective on perceived top management BLM compared to the SLT and human adaptation standpoints.

Following Mawritz, Greenbaum, Butts, and Graham (2017), we further compared the strength of the differences between these three mediation processes (i.e., the beta coefficient via SL role conceptualization was compared to the beta coefficients via supervisor BLM and empathy, respectively). The results showed no statistically significant difference in strength between SL role conceptualization and the other two mediators: supervisor BLM (difference =  $-.027$ , 95% CI =  $[-.073, .019]$ ) and supervisor empathy (difference =  $-.031$ , 95% CI =  $[-.082, .019]$ ). This finding demonstrates that, while SL role conceptualization has incremental validity over the other mediators, this process is not necessarily stronger to a significant degree. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is not supported.

The results of our moderated effects<sup>2</sup> are presented in the lower portion of Table 3. The table shows full support for Hypothesis 3 as the interaction between perceived top management BLM and supervisor perspective-taking had a significant influence on SL role conceptualization ( $B = .141$ ,  $SE = .060$ ,  $p = .020$ , 95% CI =  $[.022, .259]$ ). The interaction plot and simple slopes in Figure 2 (+/- one standard deviation from mean) revealed that the negative relationship between perceived top management BLM and SL role conceptualization is stronger when supervisor perspective-taking was lower ( $B = -.379$ ,  $p = .000$ , 95% CI =  $[-.571, -.188]$ ) rather than higher ( $B = -.035$ ,  $p = .761$ , 95% CI =  $[-.264, .193]$ ). Our analysis

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<sup>2</sup> Based on a comment from an anonymous reviewer, we examined whether the interaction between perceived top management BLM and supervisor perspective-taking had a significant influence on supervisor BLM and observed no significant result ( $B = -.082$ ,  $SE = .072$ ,  $p = .253$ , 95% CI =  $[-.223, .059]$ ). Our analysis also revealed no significant result for the moderated mediation relationship between perceived top management BLM and supervisor SL behavior via supervisor BLM ( $B = .008$ ,  $SE = .007$ ,  $p = .288$ , 95% CI =  $[-.006, .021]$ ).

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

also reveals support for Hypothesis 4, because the moderated mediation relationship between perceived top management BLM and supervisor SL behavior via SL role conceptualization was also supported ( $B = .034$ ,  $SE = .015$ ,  $p = .020$ , 95% CI = [.005, .063]). To substantiate this, the indirect relationship via SL role conceptualization was stronger when supervisor perspective-taking was lower ( $B = -.092$ ,  $SE = .027$ , 95% CI = [-.145, -.039]) rather than higher ( $B = -.009$ ,  $SE = .029$ , 95% CI = [-.065, .047]).

### STUDY 2: METHODS

#### Sample and Procedure

We collected data over three rounds (two weeks apart) through Prolific Academic, a crowdsourcing platform designed specifically for research purposes (Palan & Schitter, 2018). To be eligible for our study, respondents had to be residents of the United Kingdom and employed with substantial supervisory responsibilities, either as leaders or managers with authority to instruct subordinates. Respondents also provided informed consent and agreed to the research team's ethics protocols (e.g., confidentiality, data protection, and right to withdraw) before taking part in the survey.

We set out to recruit 350 participants and offered a £1.50 payment for participation. At Time 1, a total of 350 participants provided data on their perceptions of top management BLM and their assessments of perspective-taking. We also collected data on a range of control variables, including age, gender, perceived top management SL, and participants' neuroticism. Of these participants, 335 responded two weeks later at Time 2 (96% retention rate), providing data on their SL role conceptualization, BLM, and empathy. At Time 3, 329 of the Time 2 participants (98% retention rate) reported on their servant leadership behavior. In addition to other quality control measures (e.g., the reverse scaling of survey items), we excluded seventeen participants who failed our attention checks.



## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

We used the same attention checks as in Study 1 and placed them randomly across the data collection rounds. Next, to address attrition and drop-out bias issues, we used unique respondent identifiers to match and merge the data from those participants with complete information across all three rounds. After matching the data, our final sample size was 287 (representing an 82% complete response rate). Approximately 70% of participants were 35 years or younger and 71.1% had been in their present jobs for up to five years. The respondents also varied in terms of ethnicity: White (46%), Asian (28%), Black (approximately 11%), Mixed (approximately 9%), and other ethnic backgrounds (approximately 6%). We applied the same wave analysis from Study 1 (Armstrong & Overton, 1977; Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007), which showed no significant differences in group means (excluding age) between 100 randomly selected respondents who returned our first survey early and 100 randomly selected respondents who returned the third survey late: age ( $F(1, 198) = 10.761, p = .001$ ), perceived top management BLM ( $F(1, 198) = .034, p = .854$ ), SL role conceptualization ( $F(1, 198) = 2.162, p = .143$ ), SL behavior ( $F(1, 198) = 1.234, p = .268$ ), supervisor BLM ( $F(1, 198) = .053, p = .817$ ), and supervisor empathy ( $F(1, 198) = .064, p = .801$ ).

### Measures

We used the same set of Likert scales and items from Study 1 to measure perceived top management BLM ( $\alpha = .86$ ), supervisor perspective-taking ( $\alpha = .87$ ), SL role conceptualization ( $\alpha = .86$ ), supervisor BLM ( $\alpha = .85$ ), supervisor empathy ( $\alpha = .89$ ), and supervisor SL behavior ( $\alpha = .89$ ). Compared to Study 1, where supervisors' SL behavior data were collected from subordinates, Study 2 included self-reported supervisor SL data because Prolific does not allow third-party assessment. However, research has shown that self-reported measures of leadership behaviors yield similar relationships as other-reported

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

measures (Courtright, Gardner, Smith, McCormick, & Colbert, 2016; Lin, Ma, & Johnson, 2016). See also Liao et al. (2021) for more recent research using self-reports of SL.

**Control variables.** We included the same demographic control variables from Study 1 and perceived top management SL ( $\alpha = .82$ ). Considering the ethnic diversity of the United Kingdom, given the visible cultural differences in most of the country's large cities (e.g., London), we controlled for ethnicity. We categorized this variable into five groups: White, Asian, Black, Mixed, and other ethnicities. In addition, we controlled for neuroticism as research has shown that it may account for biases associated with self-reported data and common method variance (Hughes & Parkes, 2007; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). We measured neuroticism at Time 1 using four items from the *Mini-International Personality Pool (Mini-IPIP)* scale; Donnellan, Oswald, Baird, & Lucas, 2006). A sample item is "I have frequent mood swings" ( $\alpha = .83$ ). Results remained unchanged when we removed control variables from the analyses.

### STUDY 2: DATA ANALYSES AND RESULTS

We present the descriptive statistics and inter-correlations among Study 2 variables below the diagonal in Table 1. Before testing our hypotheses, we conducted a series of CFAs in *Mplus* to verify the distinctiveness of our study variables. Using the same method as in Study 1, we created three parcels for each construct with up to seven items. Our hypothesized eight-factor CFA model, including perceived top management BLM, SL role conceptualization, supervisor SL behavior, perceived top management SL, supervisor BLM, supervisor empathy, supervisor perspective-taking, and neuroticism showed adequate fit:  $\chi^2 = 517.01$ ,  $df = 319$ ,  $CFI = .95$ ,  $TLI = .94$ ,  $RMSEA = .05$ ,  $SRMR = .04$ . This CFA model performed better than all alternative CFA models, confirming the discriminant validity of our constructs (see Table 2).

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Similar to Study 1, we tested Hypotheses 1 to 4 by estimating all direct and indirect relationships simultaneously using path analysis in *Mplus*. As summarized in Figure 1 and Table 4, the results show that perceived top management BLM was negatively associated with supervisor SL role conceptualization ( $B = -.136, SE = .038, p = .000$ ), whereas the latter was positively associated with supervisor SL ( $B = .304, SE = .083, p = .000$ ). Our prediction for Hypothesis 1 was supported as the negative indirect relationship between perceived top management BLM and supervisor SL behavior via SL role conceptualization was significant (indirect effect =  $-.041, SE = .017, p = .018, 95\% CI = [-.075, -.007]$ ).

Like Study 1, we compared the magnitude of their total indirect effects to determine whether SL role conceptualization was a stronger mediator than supervisor BLM (Hypothesis 2a) and empathy as alternative mediators (Hypothesis 2b). The total indirect effect coefficient was greater through SL role conceptualization (total indirect effect =  $-.060, SE = .021, p = .004, 95\% CI = [-.101, -.020]$ ) than through supervisor BLM (difference =  $-.007, 95\% CI = [-.014, -.000]$ ) and supervisor empathy (difference =  $-.018, 95\% CI = [-.025, -.011]$ ). These findings further highlight the value of a role theory perspective on perceived top management BLM relative to the social learning and human adaptation perspectives. However, when we tested the strength of the differences between these three mediation processes, we found no statistically significant differences between SL role conceptualization and the other two mediators: supervisor BLM (difference =  $-.005, 95\% CI = [-.048, .039]$ ) and supervisor empathy (difference =  $-.015, 95\% CI = [-.057, .026]$ ). As with Study 1, the results indicate that the mediation path involving SL role conceptualization was not statistically stronger than other mediators, even though the betas show it was a robust process. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is not supported.

The lower portion of Table 4 shows Hypothesis 3 was fully supported as the negative relationship between perceived top management BLM and SL role conceptualization was

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

moderated<sup>3</sup> by supervisor perspective-taking ( $B = .137$ ,  $SE = .031$ ,  $p = .000$ , 95% CI = [.076, .198]). The interaction plot and simple slopes in Figure 3 (+/- one standard deviation from mean) show that the negative relationship was stronger when supervisor perspective-taking was lower ( $B = -.426$ ,  $p = .000$ , 95% CI = [-.524, -.327]) rather than higher ( $B = -.088$ ,  $p = .081$ , 95% CI = [-.188, .011]). Hypothesis 4, involving the moderated mediation relationship between perceived top management BLM and supervisor SL behavior via SL role conceptualization was also supported ( $B = .042$ ,  $SE = .013$ ,  $p = .001$ , 95% CI = [.017, .067]). To substantiate this, the indirect effect via SL role conceptualization was stronger when supervisor perspective-taking was lower ( $B = -.129$ ,  $SE = .037$ , 95% CI = [-.202, -.057]) rather than higher ( $B = -.027$ ,  $SE = .019$ , 95% CI = [-.064, .010]).

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

The primary goal of our research was to enrich understanding of the relationship between perceived top management BLM and supervisor SL behavior by using role theory to offer a new explanation to complement existing theoretical perspectives. Consistent across two field studies, we found that supervisor SL role conceptualization mediated the negative relationship between perceived top management BLM and supervisor SL behavior. Further, this role-based mechanism (i.e., supervisor SL role conceptualization) demonstrated incremental validity above and beyond social learning-based and human adaptive capacity-based mechanisms (i.e., supervisor BLM and empathy, respectively) but was not statistically stronger than these other mechanisms in terms of strength. We further showed that the indirect effect of perceived top management BLM via supervisor SL role conceptualization is stronger for supervisors who were low (vs. high) on perspective-taking.

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<sup>3</sup> Our analysis of whether the interaction between perceived top management BLM and supervisor perspective-taking had a significant influence on supervisor BLM revealed no significant result ( $B = -.018$ ,  $SE = .045$ ,  $p = .689$ , 95% CI = [-.107, .070]). The analysis further revealed no significant result for the moderated mediation relationship between perceived top management BLM and supervisor SL behavior via supervisor BLM ( $B = .004$ ,  $SE = .009$ ,  $p = .686$ , 95% CI = [-.015, .022]).

### Theoretical Contributions

Our research makes several significant contributions. First, we extend BLM research by elaborating on the relationship between perceptions of top management BLM and supervisors' leadership styles (Greenbaum et al., 2021). To date, much of the burgeoning BLM work has focused on the implications of supervisor (e.g., Babalola et al., 2022; Greenbaum et al., 2012; Mawritz et al., 2017; Quade et al., 2021) and, more recently, group BLM (Greenbaum, Bonner, Mawritz, Butts, & Smith, 2020). Given that workgroups and their supervisors rely on guidance from top-level managers (Mayer et al., 2009), research has started to uncover the link between perceived top management BLM and supervisors' leadership behavior (e.g., ethical leadership; Greenbaum et al., 2021). However, limited research has addressed leadership behaviors (e.g., SL) that directly speak to the tension inherent in the BLM phenomena (i.e., prioritizing profits over subordinates' well-being).

Unlike ethical leadership, which primarily focuses on normatively appropriate behavior (Brown & Treviño, 2006), SL's principal focus is on subordinates' well-being and development (Liao et al., 2021). Nevertheless, although its other-oriented focus is not at the center of bottom-line pursuits, SL contributes to an organization's bottom-line by influencing favorable employee attitudes and performance (Hoch et al., 2018). Thus, it is essential to study how perceived top management BLM relates to supervisors' SL behavior to better understand this seemingly contradictory agenda. In this respect, we advance the current understanding of perceived top management BLM by showing that perceived top management BLM can *harm* rather than *help* organizations, as initially intended, by reducing supervisor SL behavior.

Our work also offers an additional theoretical lens to view the relationship between perceived top management BLM and supervisor SL behavior. Although past research has offered different theoretical accounts for BLM effects (e.g., social learning and exchange,

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

business frames, adaptive capacity; Babalola et al., 2020; Greenbaum et al., 2012; Greenbaum et al., 2021; Quade et al., 2020), these perspectives overlook a necessary role-based explanation (i.e., role definition) that drives human behavior (Biddle, 2013). In this regard, we enrich BLM theorizing by drawing insights from role theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978). This contribution is meaningful because it suggests that perceptions of top management BLM can shape supervisors' role perceptions (viz., reduced SL role conceptualization), which, in turn, reduces SL behavior. In this vein, by informing behavioral expectations and role conceptualizations, role theory provides a unique perspective for explaining the consequences of BLM (Mead, 1934).

We make another key contribution by demonstrating the incremental validity of role theory in explaining perceived top management BLM effects above and beyond a common theoretical perspective (viz., social learning, operationalized as supervisor BLM; Greenbaum et al., 2012) and a recently tested theoretical perspective (viz., adaptive capacity, operationalized as empathy; Greenbaum et al., 2021). Specifically, we demonstrate that supervisor SL role conceptualization is a robust explanation for why perceived top management BLM inhibits supervisor SL behavior. SLT explains how individuals learn from their environment (Bandura, 1977), whereas the human adaptive capacity perspective argues that people adapt to environmental cues to enhance their survival (Shepard, 1965). However, these perspectives do not fully capture the role perception element that often emerges from environmental cues (Biddle, 2013). As Wo et al. (2015: 1862) noted, the “pitting of one theory against another to explain a phenomenon or an effect is important to the advancement of knowledge.” In this regard, our findings provide empirical evidence that SL role conceptualization, as a role theory-based mechanism, serves as a robust theoretical explanation above social learning and human adaptive capacity mechanisms. This suggests that supervisors' reduced SL behavior in response to perceptions of top management BLM is

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

more about how they define their role (viz., excluding SL in their role conceptualization) than role modeling (viz, supervisor BLM) or reacting emotionally (viz, low empathy).

Nonetheless, the lack of support for Hypothesis 2 suggests that SL conceptualization is not necessarily a stronger mechanism to a significant degree. Thus, we glean a more detailed picture of how and why perceived top management BLM influences supervisor SL behavior.

Further, our research extends prior work exploring an additional moderator of BLM effects. Prior BLM research has investigated individual differences that alter or strengthen BLM effects, such as trait mindfulness (Greenbaum et al., 2021), core self-evaluation and conscientiousness (Greenbaum et al., 2012), power distance orientation (Zhang, He, Huang, & Xie, 2020), promotion focus (Babalola et al., 2021), and performance tension (Lin, Yang, Quade, & Chen, 2022). Perspective-taking is an important role-based addition to the BLM literature because this individual difference moderates the salience and activation of a role occupant's understanding of particularizing the influence of perceived environmental cues (Sluss et al., 2011). We demonstrate that an absence of perspective-taking constricts "role" thinking (Davis, 1980). Specifically, supervisors low in perspective-taking are more likely to view their role narrowly in response to perceived top management BLM. This approach promotes the exclusion of SL in their role conceptualization, and, as a result, these supervisors engage in fewer SL behaviors. In this respect, we contribute to the literature by revealing that perspective-taking can shape the magnitude of supervisors' role conceptualization when they perceive expectations that emphasize only bottom-line results.

Beyond research and theory on BLM, we also contribute to SL literature. Notably, research has mainly examined the consequences of SL behavior (Liden et al., 2008), with little attention to factors that could potentially discourage supervisors from engaging in SL. The few studies on the antecedents of SL have typically focused on supervisor trait and gender-based predictors (Eva et al., 2019). As our results suggest, supervisors' perceptions of

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

top management BLM have important implications for how supervisors approach SL. Specifically, SL behaviors can be inhibited by supervisors' perceptions of top management BLM due to the reduced extent that supervisors define their role to include SL. To this end, we advance the current understanding of SL by identifying perceived top management BLM as an essential subjective contextual factor that inhibits supervisor SL behavior in the workplace. This contribution is valuable as the effects of perceived top management BLM extend even after controlling for top management SL. Specifically, our research suggests that perceptions of top management BLM can have a more significant influence than their perceptions of a supposedly "good" leadership (viz., top management SL) with respect to influencing supervisors' SL role conceptualization and, consequently, SL behavior.

### **Practical Implications**

Our findings have important practical implications. The narrow focus on bottom-line outcomes is not uncommon in today's dynamic, competitive business environment. In as much as securing bottom-line outcomes is vital for corporate success (Friedman, 2007), our findings suggest that organizations should exercise caution when espousing their bottom-line expectations. Specifically, our results alert organizations of the negative association between perceptions of top management's BLM and SL behavior in the workplace. These findings suggest the need for top managers to continuously echo the importance of consideration for others while communicating their bottom-line expectations. Doing so is crucial as it would help lower-level managers keep track of their behaviors and ensure that they do not sacrifice people for the sole pursuits of bottom-line gains.

Using SL role conceptualization to explain why perceptions of top management BLM influence supervisors' SL behavior, our findings suggest the need for organizations to provide opportunities for SL processes to develop. Research on role making (Dansereau & Graen, 1975; Matta, Scott, Koopman, & Conlon, 2015) highlights the importance of training



## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

to help individuals view their role responsibilities more broadly. In this vein, we advise organizations to incorporate appropriate training and tools into leader development programs to help managers better conceptualize their role to include SL.

Finally, our findings concerning perspective-taking have implications for selecting and developing individuals in leadership roles. When supervisors low in perspective-taking perceive top management BLM, they are more likely to view their roles more narrowly, excluding SL from their behavioral repertoire. As a result, they are more susceptible to the adverse effects of top management BLM perceptions. In this respect, we advise organizations to consider perspective-taking as a potential criterion for selecting people into leadership or supervisory positions. Beyond selection, organizations can also benefit from designing interventions to improve perspective-taking. For instance, organizations could create awareness about the importance of incorporating perspective-taking into supervisors' routines to help them deal with perceived environmental cues (e.g., perceived top management BLM) that potentially narrow their work roles.

### **Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research Directions**

Our research has both strengths and limitations that deserve mention. For example, we replicated the Study 1 results (i.e., conducted in China) in Study 2 (i.e., conducted in the United Kingdom) (Hochwarter et al., 2011). Specifically, the establishment of constructive replication in such multi-study research packages provides greater confidence in the validity of the obtained results than single-study designs permit, which are always susceptible to reproducibility concerns.

Despite our efforts to enhance the validity and reliability of our conclusions, our work is not without some limitations. For example, we used supervisors' self-reports for all our variables in Study 2, presenting concerns related to percept-percept biases (Crampton & Wagner, 1994) and common-method variance (CMV; Podsakoff et al., 2012). Although past

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

research has shown that self-reported measures of leadership behaviors yield similar relationships as other-reported measures (Courtright et al., 2016; Liao et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2016), we took several steps to alleviate these concerns. First, we controlled for supervisor neuroticism to account for biases associated with self-reported data and CMV (Hughes & Parkes, 2007; Podsakoff et al., 2012). Second, we temporally separated our measurement across three different points in time, which helps to reduce CMV (Johnson, Rosen, & Djurdjevic, 2011). Moreover, our use of subordinate ratings of SL behavior in Study 1 alleviates these concerns. Despite these steps, future research can improve our research design by utilizing an experimental design, strengthening causality.

Furthermore, we focused on SL behavior as our dependent variable and did not include other outcome variables that might result from perceived top management BLM. Recent research suggests that working under BLM leaders can be resource-depleting (Wan, Zhang, Liu, & Jiang, 2021; Quade et al., 2021). Once resources are depleted, individuals' well-being and performance will likely suffer (Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, Westman, 2018). In this regard, future research could investigate the possibility that perceptions of top management BLM may deplete supervisors' emotional and cognitive resources, which may hurt their well-being and effectiveness both within and outside the workplace.

Another area worthy of future investigation is to track the trajectory of changes in perceptions of top management BLM. Bormann, Poethke, Cohrs, and Rowold (2018) suggested that perceptions of leadership behavior change over time. Furthermore, Jordan and Lindebaum (2015) argue that within-person variability in behavior likely exists because individuals modify their internal leadership "script" to demonstrate appropriate behaviors as work situations change. In this respect, it would be valuable to examine whether there is within-individual variability in perceptions of top management BLM over time and how those changes predict supervisors' leadership styles.

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Although we showed that perceptions of top management BLM diminish SL behaviors via reduced SL role conceptualization, supervisors may change the course of poor leadership examples by demonstrating more appropriate behaviors. For instance, Taylor, Griffith, Vadera, Folger, and Letwin (2019) argued that supervisors who perceive higher-level managers' abusive leadership might "break the cycle" by engaging in more ethical behavior toward their subordinates. Drawing from theories on self-conscious emotions (see Greenbaum, Bonner, Gray, & Mawritz, 2020; Tracy, Robins, & Tangney, 2007), for example, supervisors may also evaluate their adoption of top management's BLM as a violation of the moral norms and, as a result, feel guilty and then engage in SL behavior as a reparative action. Future work interested in empirically testing this idea would benefit from combining an experience sampling method with an experimental design and, in doing so, further enriching our understanding of BLM.

Future work could also consider additional boundary conditions of supervisors' reactions to perceptions of top management BLM. For instance, supervisors who view SL as instrumental to the bottom line should engage in more SL behaviors than their counterparts who do not view SL as instrumental to the bottom line. Thus, exploring the moderating role of supervisor perceptions of SL instrumentality may generate valuable insights.

Finally, given that BLM is an emerging construct in the management literature, it would be worthwhile to examine its antecedents. That is, why are leaders prone to a BLM? For example, future research could explore whether past firm performance or the industry in which leaders operate motivate them to espouse BLMs. Such research investigation would benefit from surveying organizational leaders directly rather than relying on others' perceptions of the focal leader's BLM.

## CONCLUSION

## BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

In the current research, we drew from role theory to suggest that perceptions of top management BLM can discourage supervisors' SL behaviors by diminishing the extent to which they view SL as an integral part of their role at work (i.e., SL role conceptualization). We found support for our theoretical model, highlighting the importance of adopting a role-based perspective to understand supervisors' responses to perceptions of top management BLM. We also demonstrated how low perspective-taking exacerbates the indirect effect of perceived top management BLM. We hope that these findings encourage future research to understand further the consequences of BLMs and the psychological processes and conditions that weaken the enactment of SL in the workplace.

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BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

**Table 1**

**Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Study Variables for Study 1 and Study 2**

<b>Variables</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age	–	-.22**	–	–	.13*	-.04	.18**	.18*	.06	-.01	.11
2. Gender	-.10	–	–	–	-.08	.11	.01	-.22**	.03	.11	-.14*
3. Neuroticism	-.13*	-.19**	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
4. Ethnicity	.05	-.05	-.02	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
5. Top management SL	-.10	.09	-.16**	-.10	–	-.23**	.20**	.21**	-.08	-.10	.35**
6. Perceived Top management BLM	.08	.04	.05	.11	-.17**	–	-.18**	-.23**	.21**	-.14*	-.41**
7. Supervisor perspective-taking	.17**	-.05	-.19**	-.08	.06	.27**	–	.06	-.09	.02	.24**
8. SL role conceptualization	.20**	-.13*	-.21**	-.09	.19**	-.25**	.29**	–	-.22**	-.09	.49**
9. Supervisor BLM	-.16**	.15*	.08	-.06	-.08	.22**	-.07	-.31**	–	-.07	-.32**
10. Supervisor Empathy	.15*	-.16**	-.20**	-.15**	.11	-.20**	.12*	.41**	-.30**	–	.15*
11. Supervisor SL Behavior	.07	-.13*	-.19**	.07	.25**	-.11	.16**	.45**	-.41**	.41**	–
Study 1 – Mean	2.63	.42	–	–	5.27	2.66	5.18	4.95	2.84	2.35	5.40
Study 1 – SD	.63	.49	–	–	1.01	.77	1.22	1.05	1.30	1.36	.70
Study 1 – Alpha reliabilities	–	–	–	–	.95	.86	.87	.92	0.91	.96	.88
Study 2 – Mean	2.10	.67	3.55	4.00	4.19	3.85	4.88	5.17	3.04	5.36	5.09
Study 2 – SD	.91	.47	1.26	1.21	1.13	1.36	1.23	.85	1.18	.91	.95
Study 2 – Alpha reliabilities	–	–	.83	–	.82	.87	.87	.86	.86	.89	.89

*Study 1 (N) = 259; Study 2 (N) = 287. Study 1 values are provided above the diagonal, while Study 2 values are provided below. BLM = Bottom-line mentality; SL = Servant leadership; SD = Standard deviation. Age: 1 = 24 years and under, 2 = 25 to 34 years, 3 = 35 to 44 years, and 4 = 45 years and over; Gender: 0 = female, 1 = male; Ethnicity: 1 = Other ethnicity, 2 = Mixed, 3 = Black, 4 = Asian, 5 = White.*

*Significance = \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01.*

**Table 2**

**Results of Confirmatory Factor Analyses for Study 1 and Study 2**

	$\chi^2$	$\Delta\chi^2$	df	$\Delta$ df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
<b>Study 1</b>								
Model 1: Hypothesized seven-factor model	492.85	–	230	–	.94	.93	.07	.06
Model 2: Six-factor model (Model 1 was adjusted with TMBLM + SBLM as a single factor)	967.31	474.46	235	05	.83	.80	.11	.12
Model 3: Five-factor model (Model 2 was adjusted with TMSL + SSL as a single factor)	1465.19	972.34	240	10	.72	.68	.14	.16
Model 4: Four-factor model (Model 3 was adjusted with SLRC + Supervisor empathy as a single factor)	2377.62	1884.77	244	14	.51	.45	.18	.18
Model 5: One-factor model	3476.13	2983.28	250	20	.27	.19	.22	.18
<b>Study 2</b>								
Model 1: Hypothesized eight-factor model	517.01	–	319	–	.95	.94	.05	.04
Model 2: Seven-factor model (Model 1 was adjusted with TMBLM + SBLM as a single factor)	873.53	356.52	326	07	.85	.82	.08	.09
Model 3: Six-factor model (Model 2 was adjusted with TMSL + SSL as a single factor)	1139.84	622.83	332	13	.78	.75	.10	.11
Model 4: Five-factor model (Model 3 was adjusted with SLRC + Supervisor empathy as a single factor)	1475.69	958.68	337	18	.68	.65	.11	.11
Model 5: One-factor model	2791.22	2274.21	347	28	.32	.26	.16	.15

*Study 1 (N) = 259; Study 2 (N) = 287.*

*TMBLM = Top management bottom-line mentality, SBLM = Supervisor bottom-line mentality, TMSL = Top management servant leadership, SSL = Supervisor servant leadership, SLRC = Servant leadership role conceptualization*

Table 3

Study 1: Unstandardized Regression Coefficients

Variables	SL role conceptualization			Supervisor BLM			Supervisor empathy			Supervisor SL behavior		
	<i>B</i> ( <i>se</i> )	<i>p</i>	<i>CI</i> (95%)	<i>B</i> ( <i>se</i> )	<i>p</i>	<i>CI</i> (95%)	<i>B</i> ( <i>se</i> )	<i>p</i>	<i>CI</i> (95%)	<i>B</i> ( <i>se</i> )	<i>p</i>	<i>CI</i> (95%)
<b>Control variables</b>												
Age	.194(.105)	.065	-.012, .400	.167(.133)	.212	-.095, .428	.058(.145)	.689	-.226, .342	.011(.045)	.799	-.076, .099
Gender	-.349(.125)	.005	-.594, -.104	.051(.163)	.753	-.269, .372	.341(.154)	.027	.039, .644	-.037(.071)	.605	-.176, .103
Perceived TM SL	.149(.074)	.043	.004, .293	-.051(.076)	.502	-.200, .098	-.173(.091)	.058	-.352, .006	.154(.051)	.003	.054, .254
<b>Independent variable</b>												
Perceived TM BLM	-.238(.081)	.003	-.397, -.078	.337(.119)	.005	.104, .570	-.312(.120)	.009	-.548, -.076	-.190(.049)	.000	-.287, -.093
<b>Mediator variables</b>												
SL role conceptualization	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.243(.035)	.000	.174, .311
Supervisor BLM	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.092(.025)	.000	-.140, -.043
Supervisor empathy	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.084(.020)	.000	.046, .122
<b>Specific indirect effects of perceived TM BLM on supervisor SL behavior (mediators estimated simultaneously)</b>												
via SL role conceptualization										-.058(.023)	.011	-.102, -.013
via supervisor BLM										-.031(.013)	.017	-.056, -.005
via supervisor empathy										-.026(.012)	.025	-.049, -.003
<b>Total indirect effects of perceived TM BLM on supervisor SL behavior (mediators estimated separately)</b>												
via SL role conceptualization										-.061(.024)	.010	-.107, -.014
via supervisor BLM										-.045(.017)	.009	-.078, -.011
via supervisor empathy										-.023(.010)	.031	-.043, -.002
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.126			.050			.050			.421	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> Change		.074			.007			.032			.047	
<b>Moderator variable</b>												
Supervisor PT	-.364(.142)	.010	-.642, -.086	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
<b>Interaction effect on SL role conceptualization</b>												
TM BLM*Supervisor PT	.141(.060)	.020	.022, .259	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
<b>The indirect moderating effect of TM BLM*supervisor PT on supervisor SL behavior</b>												
via SL role conceptualization										.034(.015)	.020	.005, .063

Sample size (*N*) = 259. *TM* = top management. *SL* = servant leadership. *BLM* = bottom-line mentality. *PT* = perspective-taking  
*R*<sup>2</sup> Change is based on a comparison between the models with and without control variables.

BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Table 4

Study 2: Unstandardized Regression Coefficients

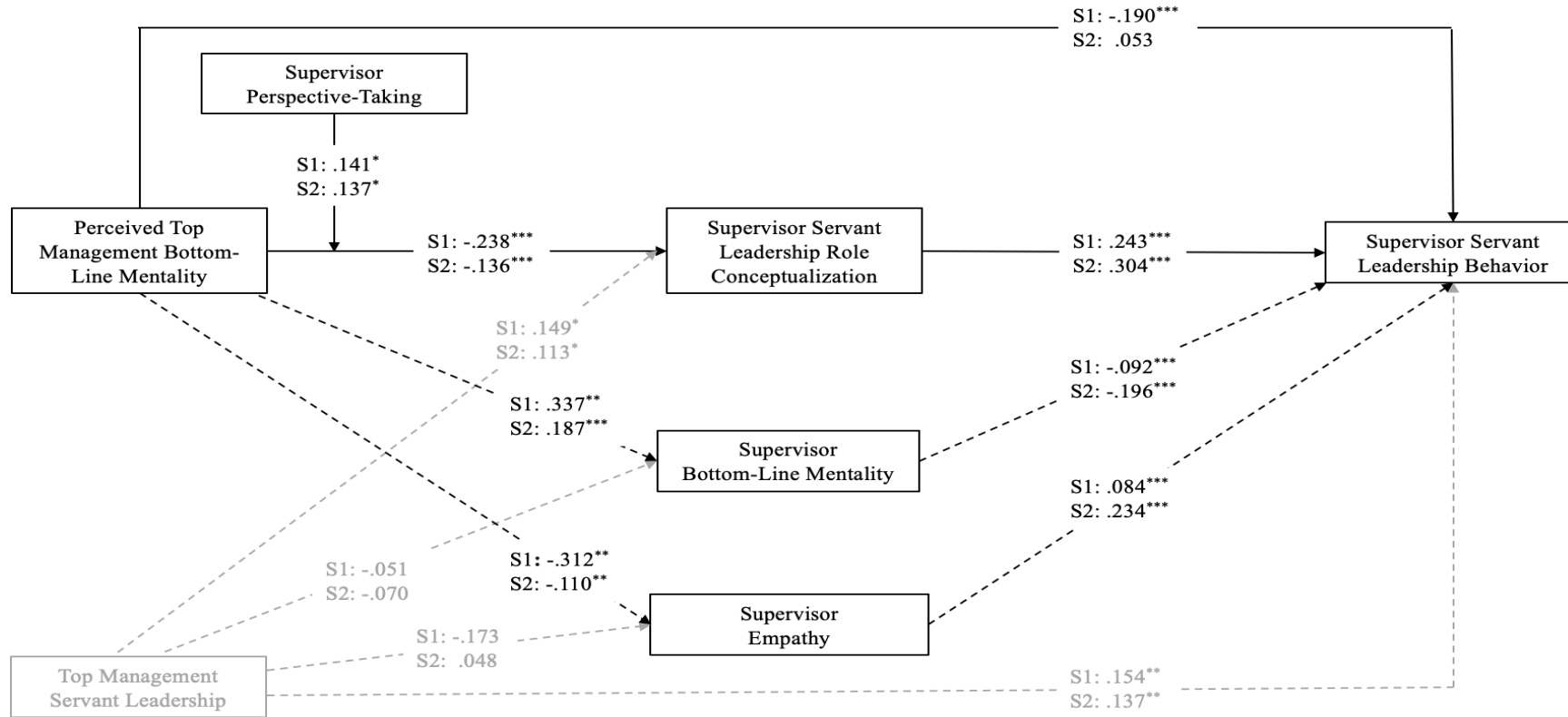
Variables	SL role conceptualization			Supervisor BLM			Supervisor empathy			Supervisor SL behavior		
	<i>B</i> ( <i>se</i> )	<i>p</i>	<i>CI</i> (95%)	<i>B</i> ( <i>se</i> )	<i>p</i>	<i>CI</i> (95%)	<i>B</i> ( <i>se</i> )	<i>p</i>	<i>CI</i> (95%)	<i>B</i> ( <i>se</i> )	<i>p</i>	<i>CI</i> (95%)
<b>Control variables</b>												
Age	.187(.052)	.000	.085,.289	-.207(.077)	.007	-.359,-.055	.127(.057)	.027	.015,.240	-.072(.053)	.181	-.176,.033
Gender	-.275(.100)	.006	-.470,-.079	.345(.139)	.013	.073,.617	-.375(.109)	.001	-.588,-.163	-.110(.087)	.203	-.280,.060
Neuroticism	-.119(.038)	.002	-.193,-.045	.061(.060)	.307	-.056,.178	-.145(.036)	.000	-.216,-.073	-.049(.040)	.225	-.128,.030
Perceived TM SL	.113(.047)	.016	.021,.204	-.070(.061)	.250	-.190,.049	.048(.047)	.306	-.044,.141	.137(.044)	.002	.051,.223
Ethnicity	-.053(.041)	.198	-.134,.028	-.072(.062)	.249	-.194,.050	-.112(.042)	.007	-.193,-.031	.097(.050)	.051	.000,.195
<b>Independent variable</b>												
Perceived TM BLM	-.136(.038)	.000	-.210,-.061	.187(.050)	.000	.089,.286	-.110(.039)	.005	-.188,-.033	.053(.035)	.128	-.015,.121
<b>Mediator variables</b>												
SL role conceptualization	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	.304(.083)	.000	.141,.467
Supervisor BLM	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	-.196(.054)	.000	-.302,-.090
Supervisor empathy	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	.234(.061)	.000	.114,.355
<b>Specific indirect effects of perceived TM BLM on supervisor SL behavior (mediators estimated simultaneously)</b>												
via SL role conceptualization										-.041(.017)	.018	-.075,-.007
via supervisor BLM										-.037(.013)	.006	-.063,-.010
via supervisor empathy										-.026(.012)	.027	-.049,-.003
<b>Total indirect effects of perceived TM BLM on supervisor SL behavior (mediators estimated separately)</b>												
via SL role conceptualization										-.060(.021)	.004	-.101,-.020
via supervisor BLM										-.053(.017)	.002	-.087,-.020
via supervisor empathy										-.042(.017)	.014	-.076,-.009
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.186			.108			.152			.315	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> Change		.123			.061			.112			.084	
<b>Moderator variable</b>												
Supervisor PT	-.204(.093)	.029	-.387,-.021	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
<b>Interaction effect on SL role conceptualization</b>												
TM BLM*Supervisor PT	.137(.031)	.000	.076,.198	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
<b>The indirect moderating effect of TM BLM*supervisor PT on supervisor SL behavior</b>												
via SL role conceptualization										.042(.013)	.001	.017,.067

Sample size (*N*) = 287. TM = top management. SL = servant leadership. BLM = bottom-line mentality. PT = perspective-taking  
*R*<sup>2</sup> Change is based on a comparison between the models with and without control variables.



BOTTOM-LINE MENTALITY AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Figure 1  
Results<sup>a</sup>

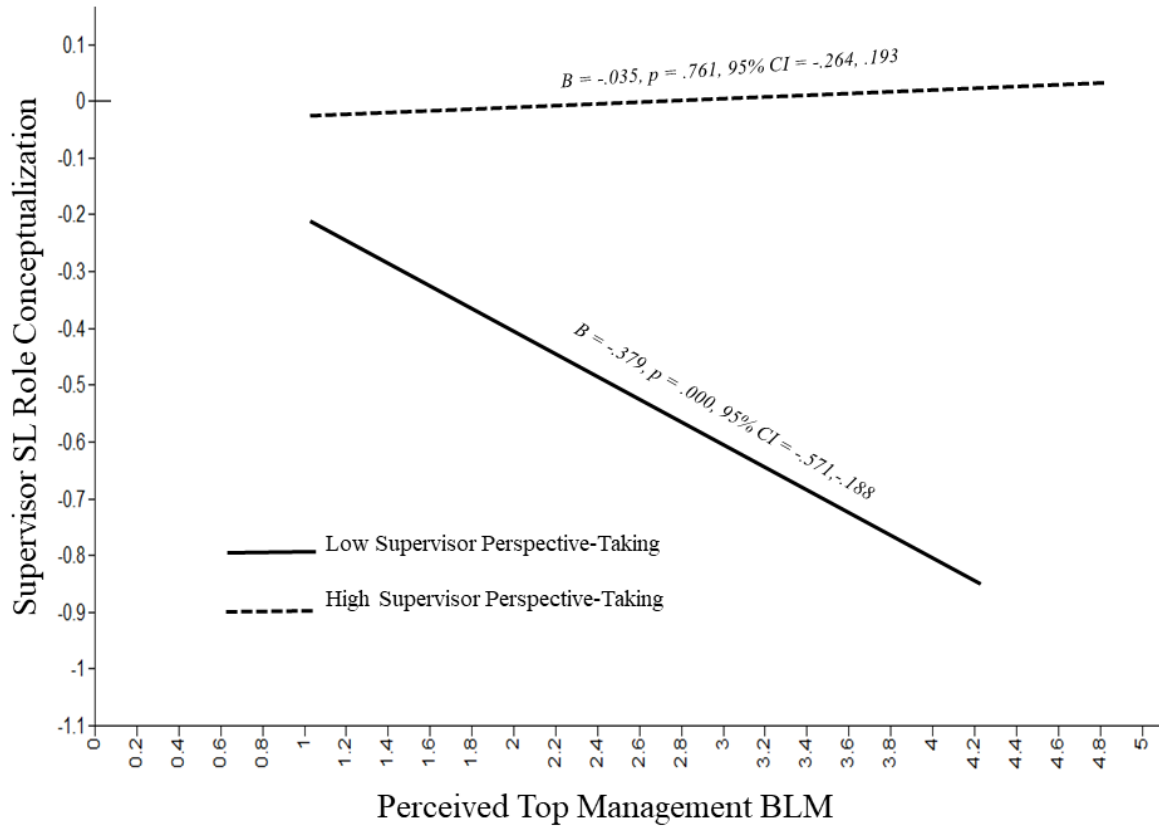


<sup>a</sup> Values shown are unstandardized regression estimates. Solid lines represent the hypothesized role-theory-based perspective, whereas dashed lines represent alternative social learning and human adaptive capacity paths accounted for in the model, as well as the control variable top management servant leadership. Although omitted from the figure for ease of interpretation, Study 1 (S1) also controlled for supervisor age and gender, and Study 2 (S2) controlled for supervisor age, gender, ethnicity, and neuroticism. Empirical support for each hypothesis is consistent both with and without the controls.

- \*  $p < .05$
- \*\*  $p < .01$
- \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Figure 2**

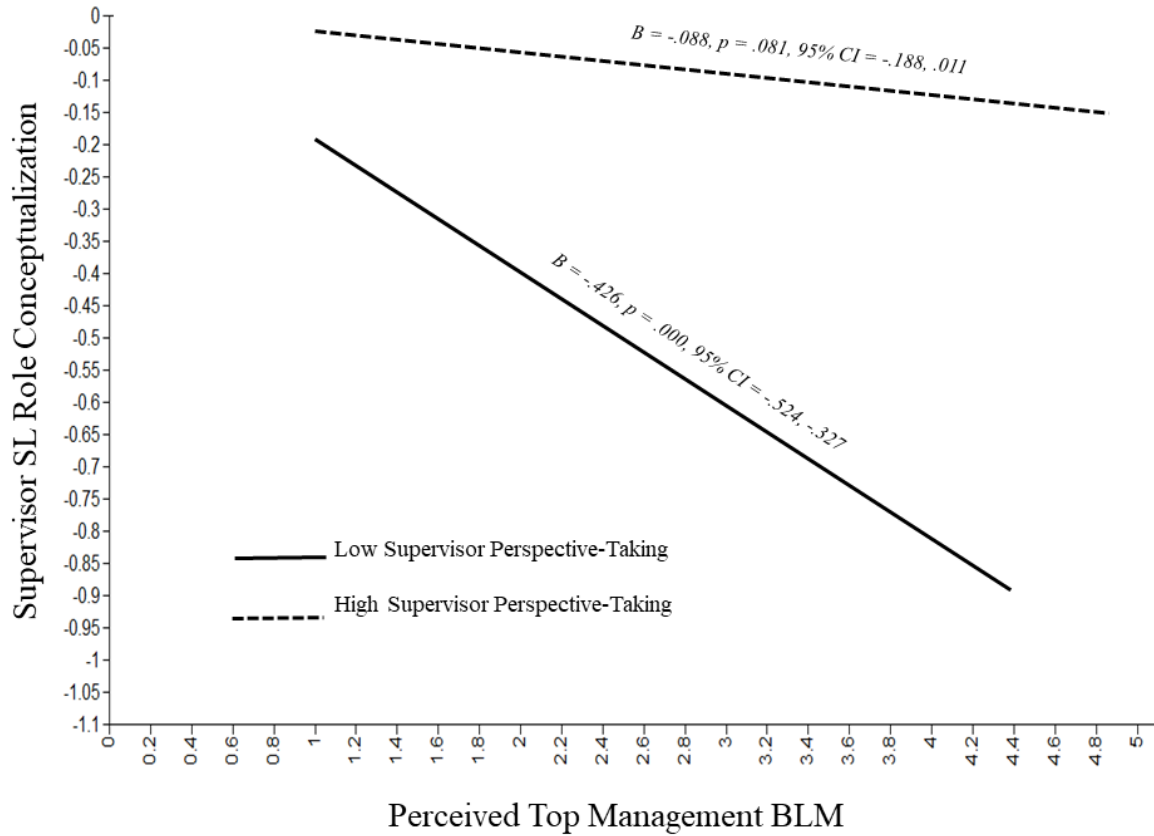
**Interaction Effect for Perceived Top Management BLM and Supervisor Perspective-Taking on Supervisor SL Role Conceptualization (Study 1)<sup>a</sup>**



<sup>a</sup> SL = Servant Leadership. BLM = Bottom-line Mentality.

**Figure 3**

**Interaction Effect for Perceived Top Management BLM and Supervisor Perspective-Taking on Supervisor SL Role Conceptualization (Study 2)<sup>a</sup>**



<sup>a</sup> SL = Servant Leadership. BLM = Bottom-line Mentality.