

# ENSURING PROJECT SUCCESS THROUGH HR MANAGER’S LEADERSHIP STYLE: ROLE OF ETHICAL WORK CLIMATE AND INTERPERSONAL TRUST

**ABSTRACT:** Construction enterprises are widely acknowledged as pivotal drivers of economic development in emerging nations due to their integral role in infrastructure advancement. Within this sector, the cornerstone of construction firms lies in their workforce, whose diligent endeavours contribute substantially to the successful execution of projects, notwithstanding their diverse skill levels. Effective alignment of employees with overarching project objectives hinges significantly upon human resource (HR) management practices and tailored organizational strategies. In pursuit of empirically assessing this premise, this research endeavour sought to scrutinize the influence of servant leadership exhibited by HR managers on project outcomes, with a moderated mediation model involving project governance, ethical work climate, and interpersonal trust. Situated within the socio-economic context of Bahrain, the study utilized a quantitative survey methodology to gauge the perceptions of employees within construction enterprises. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) served as the analytical framework to ascertain the statistical significance of formulated hypotheses, which were underpinned by the tenets of social exchange theory. The findings of the data analysis substantiated the hypothesized relationships, indicating a pronounced emphasis within Bahrain’s construction industry on nurturing a workforce-centric ethos. This involves cultivating an ethical work climate characterized by robust interpersonal trust, underpinned by the adoption of positive servant leadership practices and effective project governance mechanisms, ultimately culminating in enhanced project success.

**Keywords:** Project Manager Success, Leadership, Ethical Work Climate, Interpersonal Trust, and Servant Leadership.

### 1. Introduction

The swift evolution of technology has led to a proliferation of complexities in projects, attributed to various factors including inadequate stakeholder engagement, consequently elevating the incidence of project failures (Floris & Cuganesan, 2019). Consequently, the effective management and manoeuvring of projects necessitate more than conventional managerial approaches. Consequently, leadership emerges as a pivotal determinant in contemporary projects characterized

by intricacies and volatility (Oh, Lee, & Zo, 2021; Podgórska & Pichlak, 2019). Similarly, within the realm of construction projects, the role of leadership has garnered significant scholarly attention (Sadikoglu et al., 2024). This study delves into the construction industry of Bahrain, an indispensable sector of the nation’s economy. Notably, the GDP contribution from the construction sector in Bahrain witnessed an uptick from 239.37 BHD Million to 240.26 BHD Million during the latter portion of 2023, as depicted in Figure 1.1.

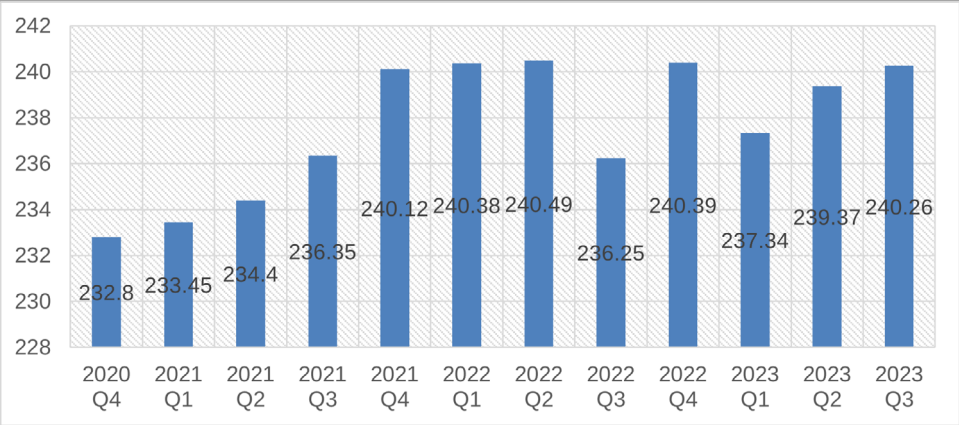


Figure 1.1: “Bahrain GDP from Construction” Source: (TE, 2023).  
Note: The GDP of Bahrain has been represented in BHD

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Moreover, the construction market size in Bahrain is projected to have reached USD 3.04 billion in 2024, with expectations of surpassing USD 3.73 billion by 2029, reflecting a CAGR of 4.18 percent. This anticipated growth is attributable to governmental endeavours aimed at substantial investments in various large-scale

construction undertakings. Aligned with the economic expansion strategy outlined in the Kingdom's Vision 2030, the government has initiated 22 pivotal infrastructure projects, collectively valued at over USD 30 billion (MI, 2024). Figure 1.2 delineates several notable construction projects launched in Bahrain in 2022.

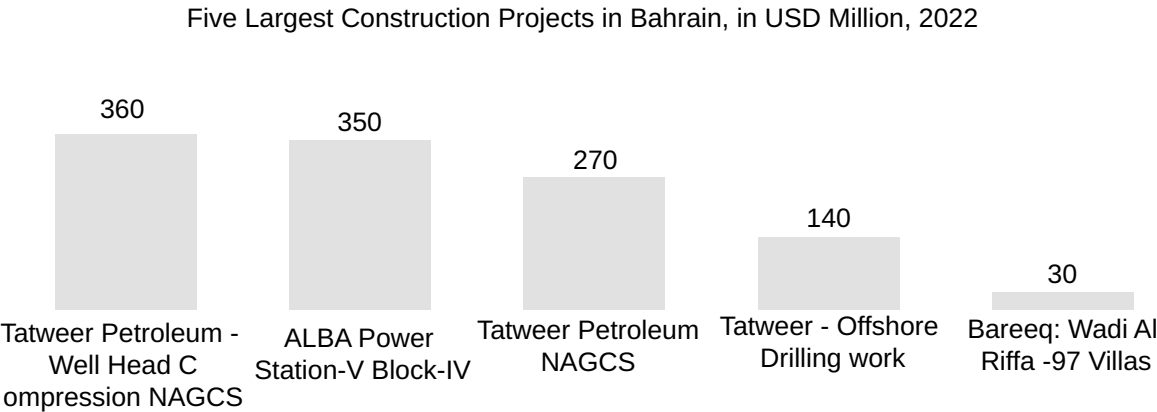


Figure 1.2: Largest Construction Projects in Bahrain in 2022 (MI, 2024).

Hence, Bahrain offers an intriguing milieu for scrutinizing the determinants influencing project success (Darwish, Shah, & Ahmed, 2021). Recent studies have unveiled the positive impact of servant leadership (SL) on project team performance (Nauman et al., 2022). Nonetheless, further investigation is warranted to elucidate the implications of project success within Bahrain's construction sector. Additionally, a notable research gap exists concerning the role of SL in project management, particularly concerning large-scale projects (Nauman et al., 2023). Furthermore, Ruijter et al. (2021) have underscored the pivotal role of trust development in the success of megaprojects. Consequently, this research endeavours to examine the influence of HR managers' SL on project success (PS) in Bahrain's construction industry, with a particular focus on the mediating role of interpersonal trust (IT) and the moderating influence of project governance (PG) and ethical work climate (EWC). Grounded in Blau's (1968) Social Exchange Theory (SET), this study seeks to probe the proposed relationships among the designated variables. Expected to make significant contributions to project management literature, this research aims to elucidate (a) the link between HR managers' SL and PS, enriching the PS research framework by considering seldom-explored variables; (b) provide valuable insights into project management literature by introducing SET to elucidate the proposed research framework; and (c) present a

research framework to scrutinize the mediation and moderation effects on the correlation between SL and PS within Bahrain's construction sector.

2. Literature Review  
Social Exchange Theory (SET)

Blau's Social Exchange Theory (1968) posits that social relationships are formed based on the benefits or costs derived from social exchanges. According to this theory, individuals make rational choices regarding engaging in social relationships by conducting a cost-benefit analysis. An integral component of this theory is knowledge-based trust, which suggests that trust developed through consistent social exchanges enables individuals to gather pertinent information about others and establish expectations regarding their behaviour. The theory asserts that social interactions and exchanges are shaped by the reciprocal exchange of rewards between social actors. Each social exchange entails a cost, whether in terms of time, energy, or other resources. However, social actors strive to optimize their social exchanges by ensuring that the costs are lower than the rewards (Blau, 1968). This study employs the Social Exchange Theory to explore the proposed relationships between SL, IT, PS, EWC, & PG.

Servant Leadership and Project Success

The emergence of SL within leadership literature signifies a scholarly response to the conventional

approach of delineating leadership as synonymous with maintaining authority and supremacy among leaders (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). SL fosters an environment where leaders empower their teams in decision-making processes and facilitate skill enrichment, thereby augmenting overall organizational performance (Eva et al., 2019). In the realm of project management, SL enables team leaders to prioritize the needs of their team members over their own, fostering an environment of collective efficacy (Nauman et al., 2022). According to Ellahi et al. (2022), SL contributes significantly to project success by motivating teams and enhancing their effectiveness. Similarly, Harwardt (2020) reported a positive and substantial influence of SL on project success. Theoretically, SET offers a framework to explore the reciprocal exchange between the servant leadership of an HR manager and their team members. Within this theory, when a servant leader benefits their team members, it is perceived as a reciprocal obligation, thus forming the basis for the following hypothesis formulation:

Hypothesis 1: Servant leadership of the HR manager is positively related to project success.

Interpersonal trust Role as a Mediator

Studies examining the adoption of SET to analyse workplace interactions have highlighted IT between leaders and subordinates as a pertinent example of social exchange (Francisco de Oliveira & Rabechini Jr, 2019). Nauman et al. (2023) previously contended that the cultivation of IT among subordinates serves as a pivotal determinant of the impact of SL on PS. Rooted in Blau's (1968) assertion that individuals engage in social exchanges based on rational decision-making processes, the cultivation of IT assumes significance within this theoretical framework. According to Nauman et al. (2023), servant leaders demonstrate empathetic and supportive behaviours, reflecting a people-oriented approach to project management, thereby fostering the development of IT between leaders and project teams. Greenleaf (2002) similarly posits trust as an outcome of SL, a perspective also echoed by Qiu and Dooley (2022). Zhang and Guo (2022) have additionally documented a positive association between SL and IT. Furthermore, existing research provides evidence supporting the direct impact of IT on PS (Castro et al., 2023). Nauman et al. (2023) identified a significant mediating effect of IT on the relationship between SL and PS. Thus, based on the aforementioned rationale, the following hypothesis is formulated:

Hypothesis 2: Interpersonal trust mediates the relationship between servant leadership of the HR manager and project success.

Moderating Function of Ethical Work Climate

Ethical work climate (Library Guides, 2023) denotes the adherence to ethical principles and protocols in managerial decision-making processes (Tehranineshat, Torabizadeh, & Bijani, 2020). As articulated by Fein, Tziner and Vasiliu (2023), an EWC signifies the prevalence of ethical standards throughout workplace operations. Given the limited attention to its influence on IT within project management literature, there arises a compelling imperative to scrutinize the moderating role of EWC. Consequently, this study posits a significant impact of EWC on the relationship between the SL exhibited by an HR manager & PS, thereby prompting the formulation of the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Ethical work climate moderates the relationship between servant leadership of the HR manager and interpersonal trust such that the correlation will be stronger when EWC is high than when it is low.

Moderating Role of Project Governance

In the realm of project management literature, PG encompasses a structured framework for assuming control of the project and aligning its objectives with stakeholder interests (Musawir, Abd-Karim, & Mohd-Danuri, 2020). Nauman et al. (2023) postulated that PG plays a pivotal moderating role, influencing the extent to which SL fosters IT among team members to attain project success. PG ensures equity throughout various stages of the project lifecycle, thereby nurturing trust between team members and their leader (Unterhitzenberger & Moeller, 2021). Empirical evidence corroborates the significant and positive impact of PG on project success. For instance, Waseem, Iqbal and Khan (2022) have documented the favourable influence of PG on project success. Consequently, this study proposes that,

Hypothesis 4: Project governance moderates the relationship between HR manager servant leadership and interpersonal trust, with a stronger correlation observed under high PG compared to low project governance.

Figure 2.1 illustrates the research framework employed in this study.

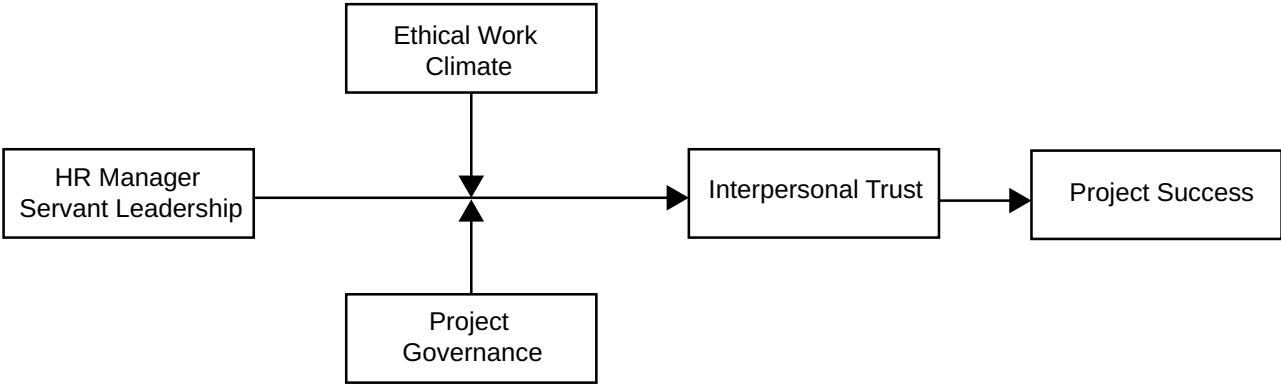


Figure 2.1: Research Framework.

3. Methods and Materials  
Sample and Procedure

This study examines the impact of SL on PS, considering IT as a mediator and EWC and PG as moderators. Quantitative data were collected from employees involved in various construction projects across companies in Bahrain through online questionnaires. Firms with a history of at least three mega construction projects in the past three years were selected using purposive sampling. The sample included contractors, project team members, and managers, ensuring confidentiality. A sample size of 336 was retained after data cleaning, adhering to the “ten times rule” proposed by Hair Jr et al. (2019) for adequate sample size relative to construct measurement items. SEM was employed for data analysis.

Measures

The SL of HR managers was assessed using a 3-item scale adapted from Kumar, Jin and Liu (2024), while PG was measured with a 9-item scale from Nauman et al. (2023). IT was gauged using a 7-item scale developed by Cook and Wall (1980), and EWC was measured using a 5-item scale adapted from Yang, Luu and Hoang (2023). PS was evaluated using a 9-item scale drawn from previous studies (Nauman et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2019). The questionnaire utilized a five-point Likert-type scale, 5=strongly agree, and 1=strongly disagree, to assess the research constructs. Additionally, demographic information such as age, gender, and work experience was collected from respondents. Table 3.1 lists each variable along with its measurement scale and its source.

Table 3.1: Measures Used for the Constructs.

Variable	Number of Items	Source
Servant Leadership of HR Manager	(Kumar et al., 2024))	3
Interpersonal Trust	(Cook & Wall, 1980; Nauman et al., 2023)	7
Ethical Work Climate	(Yang et al., 2023)	5
Project Governance	(Nauman et al., 2023)	9
Project Success	(Nauman et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2019)	9

4. Analysis and Data Findings  
Sample Profile

The study achieved a robust response rate, surpassing the requisite sample size determined by the guideline of ten responses per item. Within the collected responses, the study included inquiries concerning respondents’ demographic particulars, as depicted in Table 4.1. This table presents trends pertaining to respondents’ age, gender, educational attainment, organizational affiliation, project type, and project budget, alongside various options provided in the questionnaire. The

frequency analysis of the sample profile reveals a predominance of male participants within the targeted sector, particularly concentrated in the age bracket of 31-40 years. Furthermore, the sample profile underscores the presence of highly educated individuals within the construction sector projects, primarily holding master’s level qualifications. Notably, the study primarily engaged respondents from private sector organizations involved in diverse construction projects with budgets ranging from 1 to 5 billion USD.

Table 4.1: Sample Profile.

Demographic	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Female	155	46.1
Male	181	53.9
Age		
21-30	94	28.0
31-40	141	42.0
41-50	86	25.6
50 and above	15	4.5
Educational Background		
PhD	16	4.8
Masters (18 Years)	54	16.1
Masters (16 Years)	257	76.5
Bachelors	9	2.7
Construction Project Types		
Construction	235	69.9
Education	96	28.6
Information Technology	5	1.5
Organization		
Private	298	88.7
Government	38	11.3
Project Budget		
Above 20 Billion USD	11	3.3
16 -20 Billion USD	15	4.5
11 -15 Billion USD	13	3.9
6-10 Billion USD	58	17.3
1-5 Billion USD	239	71.1

Data Profile

A basic descriptive statistical analysis was employed to assess the profile of the collected data across the variables. The results of this descriptive analysis are presented in Table 4.2, showcasing the data quality by identifying the absence of outliers and missing values through the reporting of minimum and maximum values. Furthermore, the analysis also determined the level of

respondents’ agreement by calculating mean values exceeding 3.5, indicating a prevailing trend of agreement with the survey questions. Lastly, skewness values were computed for all variables to demonstrate that the collected data exhibits non-skewed distributions, reflecting uniform trends across the response scale (Demir, 2022; Groeneveld & Meeden, 2018).

Table 4.2: Mean, Standard Deviation, and Normality of the Variables.

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	St. D	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	St. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
PSS	336	1.00	5.00	3.8522	1.16297	-.673	.133	-.763	.265
PGR	336	1.00	5.00	3.6614	1.28128	-.473	.133	-1.097	.265
INT	336	1.00	5.00	3.6441	1.26578	-.239	.133	-1.442	.265
EWCL	336	1.00	5.00	3.5869	1.32865	-.413	.133	-1.155	.265
SLD	336	1.00	5.00	3.8631	1.31899	-.759	.133	-.828	.265

PSS: Project Success; PGR: Project Governance; INT: Interpersonal Trust; EWCL: Ethical Work Climate; SLD: Servant Leadership; ST. D: Standard Deviation.

Measurement Model Assessment

In the measurement model, various statistical techniques and advanced plugins were employed to assess reliability, validity, and model fit. Initially, the internal consistency of latent measures, i.e., items, was examined through simple factor loading analysis. The

results indicated highly satisfactory outcomes, with no instances of missing, double, or cross-loadings, and all factor loadings surpassing 0.6 (Jani et al., 2023). Subsequently, the items’ contribution to their respective latent variables was determined using the composite reliability indicator, meeting the requirement for data



reliability, as all composite reliability values exceeded 0.7 and were less than 1. Additionally, the AVE values, notably higher than 0.5, affirmed construct validity in the dataset (Cheung & Wang, 2017). Following this, discriminant validity was assessed through HTMT analysis, confirming the absence of multicollinearity issues and indicating the presence of uniqueness or

high self-correlation in the data (Ab Hamid, Sami, & Mohmad Sidek, 2017). Finally, model fit indicators, including CMIN, Df, Chi-square/df ratio, CFI, GFI, TLI, and RMSEA, collectively demonstrated that the measurement model of this study is highly reliable, valid, distinctive, and significant. Consequently, the data was deemed suitable for further hypothesis testing.

Table 4.3: Measurement Model.

Construct	Item	Factor Loadings	CR	AVE
Project Success (PS)	PS1	.852	0.970	0.783
	PS2	.823		
	PS3	.829		
	PS4	.845		
	PS5	.852		
	PS6	.814		
	PS7	.791		
	PS8	.796		
	PS9	.774		
Project Governance (PG)	PG1	.799	0.968	0.772
	PG2	.774		
	PG3	.798		
	PG4	.762		
	PG5	.805		
	PG6	.756		
	PG7	.775		
	PG8	.715		
	PG9	.808		
Interpersonal Trust (INT)	INT1	.808	0.941	0.697
	INT2	.682		
	INT3	.699		
	INT4	.793		
	INT5	.766		
	IN6	.717		
	INT7	.694		
Ethical Work Climate (EWCC)	EWC1	.729	0.966	0.852
	EWC2	.728		
	EWC3	.739		
	EWC4	.697		
	EWC5	.697		
Servant Leadership (SL)	SL1	.793	0.955	0.877
	SL2	.783		
	SL3	.776		

Table 4.4: HTMT Analysis for Discriminant Validity.

	PS	PG	INTR	EWC	SL
PS					
PG	0.618				
INTR	0.667	0.708			
EWC	0.598	0.792	0.776		
SL	0.621	0.658	0.679	0.667	

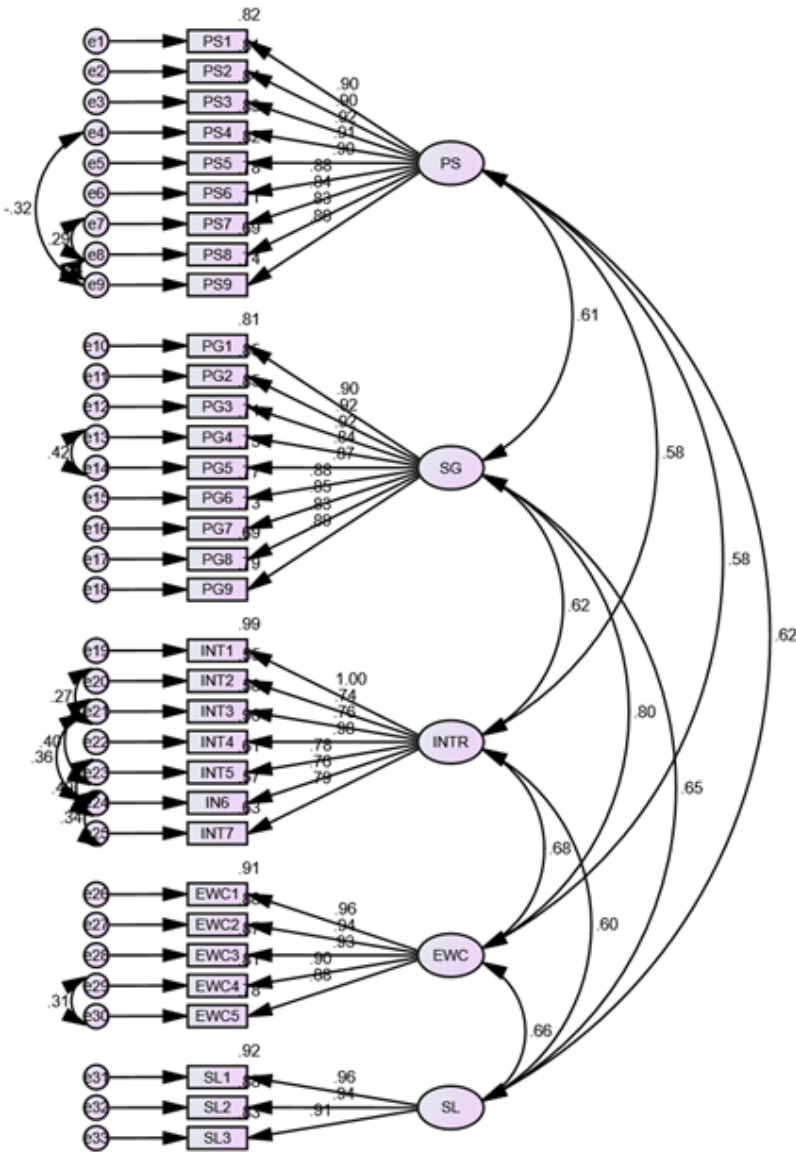


Figure 4.1: Measurement Model.

Structural Model Assessment

The study applied SEM to ascertain the variance of the exogenous variables on the endogenous variable. Both graphical and numerical results of the SEM analysis are presented in Figure 4.2 and Table 4.5, respectively. The table displays estimated beta values alongside their significance levels for all predetermined relationships between the variables. Notably, the results indicate

that all hypothesized relationships in this study were validated, as evidenced by their significance. Servant leadership directly impacts project success, while interpersonal trust mediates this relationship. Ethical work climate and project governance also moderate these effects, significantly influencing project success and interpersonal trust.

Table 4.5: SEM Hypotheses Testing.

Designed Paths	Estimated Beta	P-Value	Status
SL→PS	.313	.005	Accepted
SL→IT→PS	0.285	.001	Accepted
SL*EWC→ITS	.196	.001	Accepted
Leadership*PG→IT	.447	.001	Accepted

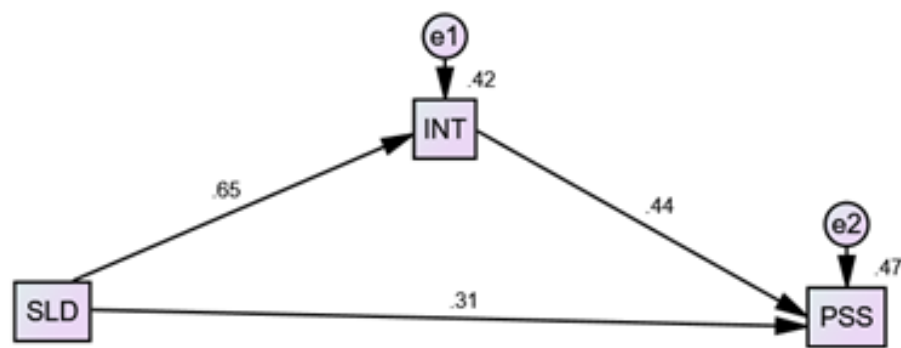


Figure 4.2: Structural Model SEM.

5. Discussion

The study successfully examined the impact of servant leadership on project success, moderated by interpersonal trust, project governance, and ethical work climate using SEM. Significant outcomes were obtained, indicating that construction companies effectively employ strong leadership strategies and supportive work environments to enhance employee performance and project success. The findings support the efficacy of servant leadership in achieving successful project outcomes, consistent with prior literature (Ellahi et al., 2022; Nauman et al., 2022). Additionally, the study revealed the development of robust interpersonal trust within Bahraini construction companies, which serves as a crucial factor in enhancing project success. This finding aligns with existing research validating the mediating role of interpersonal trust between servant leadership and project success, further corroborating the study's outcomes (Nauman et al., 2023).

Moreover, beyond its mediating function, the study has introduced a novel framework of moderated mediation, wherein project governance and ethical work climate serve as moderators between the independent variable, servant leadership, and the mediator, interpersonal trust. Upon analysing these associations, the study yielded significant and favourable outcomes. Primarily, the findings underscored the pivotal role of HR managers in construction companies, who offer supportive and dependable project governance. They guide subordinates through every project challenge, fostering an environment of dependence, trust, courage, and encouragement. This dynamic fosters sustainable trust development among team members, unifying them toward project success. This finding resonates with prior research (Nauman et al.,

2023; Unterhitzenger & Moeller, 2021; Waseem et al., 2022).

Additionally, the study revealed a strong emphasis on ethical work climates within Bahraini construction companies. These climates are characterized by the strict implementation of organizational rules and regulations, as well as adherence to fundamental moral values. HR managers play a prominent role in upholding these ethical standards, providing employees with a sense of security and support. Consequently, such climates cultivate a high-trust interpersonal environment within construction companies. This conclusion is empirically supported by existing literature, which highlights the significance of ethical work environments in nurturing trustworthy interpersonal relationships.

6. Conclusion

The investigation was grounded in the theoretical framework of SET. Quantitative data were collected from employees of construction companies using survey methodology, and the sample size was set at 330. Sufficient responses were obtained and analysed using SEM. The findings suggested that construction companies in Bahrain prioritize employee well-being and cultivate an ethical work climate characterized by high levels of interpersonal trust. Positive servant leadership practices and effective project governance were also identified as contributing factors to project success.

Implications, Contributions and Significance

The study has unveiled several noteworthy observations concerning construction companies in Bahrain, shedding light on distinctive organizational characteristics. Primarily, it underscores the heightened sensitivity of Bahraini construction

companies toward project success, indicating their concerted endeavours to maintain optimal employee performance through supportive organizational environments. Recognizing the collaborative nature of construction projects, these companies have harmonized their management leadership styles with employee trust, integrating supplementary organizational elements such as project governance and ethical work climate.

The study advances social exchange theory by revealing that Bahraini construction companies foster robust relationships with project team. In return, employees demonstrate exceptional performance, driving projects to high levels of success. Additionally, the study innovatively investigates and underscores the mediating role of interpersonal trust, project governance, and ethical work climate as collective moderators within a single empirical model.

Limitations and Suggestions

The study has contributed significantly to the literature, yet it is not without limitations, which serve as valuable avenues for future research. Firstly, there exists a contextual limitation as the focus primarily lies within the construction industry. Future studies may explore similar variables within alternative sectors such as education, service industries, manufacturing, hospitality, and banking. Additionally, while this study concentrates on servant leadership, various other leadership styles such as transformational, transactional, and ethical leadership, as well as negative styles like abusive leadership, remain unexplored avenues within the literature. Moreover, beyond organizational and environmental factors, individual-level variables such as employee engagement, motivation, and job expertise merit further investigation for their impact on project success. Lastly, employing a qualitative approach and examining perspectives from managerial or higher authority figures could offer valuable insights for subsequent research endeavours.

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