

# ADDRESSING FUTURE TALENT MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES FOR IRISH HOTELS

Insights from middle manager interpretations of  
servant leadership intervention

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## Abstract

Challenges in acquiring, retaining and developing talent in the hotel sector require innovative talent management strategies (Liu-Lastres et al., 2024). Approaches to future-oriented talent management strategies focus at the level of the individual, team, and organisation (Manfreda et al., 2025). Driving future talent management re-configuration past mere integration and acquisition, middle managers seek to cultivate the talent eco-system so as to pivot with hotel strategy (Abid & Loufrani, 2024). The current conceptual paper focuses at the organisational level of middle management (MM), building on the recent call for research which focuses on the need to unpack how middle managers interpret and make sense of strategic-led initiatives to innovate talent management (TM) (Jooss et al., 2024). Findings indicate that MM sense-making of initiatives supports innovative TM through creating shared understandings and supporting targeted employee wellbeing, with continual improvement of TM emerging as MM reflect on feedback.

**Key Words** Talent, Servant-leader, Middle-Management, Sensemaking, Hospitality

**Track** Special Track 1: The Future of Talent Management

**Focus of Paper** Theoretical/Academic

## Introduction

The hotel industry across many regions has been shown to struggle in efforts to attract and retain workers (Chon & Zoltan, 2019; Ghani et al., 2022). Various factors are argued to contribute to a poor sectoral perception including, hard work, long hours and low levels of pay (Baquero, 2023). Where aspects of these concerns present as reality to hospitality workers and lead to poor performance outcomes from those employees, studies such as Liu-Lastres et al. (2024) suggest the benefits of organisational level strategies focusing on employee well-being, as part of their overall talent management approach. Talent management (TM) in a hospitality context may differ in comparison to other industries and Marinakou and Giousmpasoglou (2019) contend that inclusiveness and openness in managing talent may have increased importance in this unique service setting. Organisations and HRMs functions within hospitality therefore can benefit from developing innovative talent management strategies that are fit for purpose (Baum, 2008; Marinakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2019). The necessity for the prioritization of TM evolution, for hotel HRM departments is also accentuated by the change in the generational demands that have been highlighted among generation Z and late millennial workers (Goh & Lee, 2018). Hotels have traditionally been dependent on attracting younger cohorts as their primary employee base, workers who see these roles as short term and undesirable, due to the previously stated poor perceptions of the industry (Goh & Baum, 2021). Changing TM process to more humane, employee progression focused pursuits (Hassan et al., 2022), could therefore enhance employer branding opportunities (Gehrels & De Looij, 2011), as well as crucially improving retention levels, for the new more demanding generation of workers (Graczyk-Kucharska & Erickson, 2020).

Multiple unique TM approaches have been developed at the individual, team and organisational level (Manfreda et al., 2025). With a focus on the organisational level, this paper addresses the role of middle managers and their sensemaking activities (Weick, 1995), as they interpret the innovations necessary for innovative TM, as a strategic level initiative (Jooss et al., 2024). The pivotal role of middle management (MM) as a communication hub between overall strategic vision and practical operational level performance (Besson & Mahieu, 2011; Darkow, 2015; Lampaki & Papadakis, 2018), presents the possibility to run such dynamic TM functions, in a complex environment such as hotels (Köseoglu et al., 2019). Middle managers are often portrayed as the lynchpin in organisational structures (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Balogun & Rouleau, 2017; Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016), utilising their proximity to strategy development in combination with their experience and knowledge of the practical application of procedures, to deliver on this key position (Darkow, 2015; Mintzberg et al., 1995). This critical role of a lynchpin played by MM is not without challenges. Jooss et al. (2023) articulate complicating paradoxes where, MM are required to balance short term operational demands and long term vision, as well as departmental necessity, with overall organisational strategic outlook. Burgess et al. (2015) titles MM level work, where they are expected to satisfy competing demands, as, facilitating organisational ambidexterity. However, the responsibility for achieving dual purposes simultaneously could threaten middle manager's ambidextrous performance limits. These potential stresses, in an already demanding environment such as hospitality (Baquero, 2023) underline the importance of having a coherent TM strategy that is aligns with a complete supportive organisation (Elche et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2016; Ling et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2013).

The opportunity to leverage the critical role of MM in strategic change (Kieran et al., 2020) can support hotels integration of novel leadership approaches such as servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), to inform their organisational TM approach. Having organisational alignment based on constantly changing guest needs is shown by Reilly (2018) to influence TM design and tie it together with overall management philosophy. Therefore, decisions made in recruitment and internal promotion can enhance all areas of service delivery in a hospitality setting. Hotels have been portrayed as organisations constantly looking to enhance their market image by delivering customer service excellence (Lin et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2019). Critical to this paper's conceptual framework (Figure 1) and research ambition is the work of Ling et al. (2016), who find that strategic level SL can trickle-down throughout an organisation. Emerging from the trickle-down of SL is an enhanced customer service climate and an alignment with employee development, supporting TM strategy. SL is a promising underlying philosophy in this regard with evidence of practical service outputs (Chen et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2016; Linuesa-Langreo et al., 2017; Qiu et al., 2020; Ye et al., 2019), as well as proven outcomes in meeting the developmental needs of hospitality workers (Huertas-Valdivia et al., 2019; Hunter et al., 2013; Kauppila et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2013). Finally, SL has been identified as potentially benefiting greatest, newer generations of workers, that make up a large percentage of the hospitality employee base (Hassan et al., 2022; Linuesa-Langreo et al., 2017). This confluence of factors gives rise to this paper's guiding research question:

**RQ. How do hotel middle managers interpret a SL intervention from the perspective of TM?**

### **Future talent management challenges in hotels**

Contemplating the future of talent management in hospitality back in 2008 Barron (2008) was already noticing a generational shift, as those workers who would later be called millennials, had higher expectations for how they should be treated in the workplace, than previous generations. It was then seen as novel that the millennial generation would expect to experience joy from their employment, and to inhabit a workplace where there were representations of fairness, equality and tolerance (Szamosi, 2006). In retrospect this viewpoint does appear prescient, if anything the literature points to late millennials and generation Z workers being even more expectant that their needs will be a priority for employers (Barbuto Jr & Gottfredson, 2016; Goh & Baum, 2021; Goh & Lee, 2018; Graczyk-Kucharska & Erickson, 2020; Hassan et al., 2022). Hotels are often at the forefront of adapting to the needs of the newest workforce generations, the perception being that they need to constantly adapt and innovate to attract and retain these workers (Goh & Okumus, 2020). If a TM approach therefore is to

be relevant as a strategy for contemporary HRM considerations, as well as being adaptive to the needs of new generations of workers, it would seem that tailoring solutions to meet generalized generational expectations is a relevant pursuit (Marinakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2019). Having an overall alignment of TM policy (Baum, 2008) and organisational strategic approach (Linuesa-Langreo et al., 2017) could give authenticity to managerial philosophy prioritising the needs of workers (Dawson et al., 2011).

There exists a possibility that integrating TM approaches with an, “other oriented” managerial philosophy, such as SL (Eva et al., 2019)(p.114), which could allow hotels to put their employees and their professional well-being at the forefront of their organisational strategy (Hassan et al., 2022). Davern (2021)’s investigation of TM, retention and employer brand in Irish hotels found that while many hotels are aware of the importance of retaining workers for their competitive advantage, they do not have the formalized TM strategies to allow for the employer branding needed to both attract and retain workers. Sivertzen et al. (2013) state that employer branding “focuses on developing the image of organisations as potential employers” (p.473). If employers invest the necessary resources into a TM strategy that enhances their brand or image, then the process in itself can have a positive impact on employee retention (Gilani & Cunningham, 2017). In an industry such as hospitality which has suffered with negative perceptions of employee well-being and long term career prospects (Baquero, 2023; Manfreda et al., 2025), having a holistic approach that aligns TM, employer brand and corporate level branding may prove essential in changing the way hospitality organisations are viewed (Gehrels & De Looij, 2011). Indeed research by Davern (2021) suggests that hospitality employers that put TM systems in place that serve to enhance their reputation as good employee focused organisations, gain not only in terms of their branding for recruitment but then decrease their retention issues, thanks to the positive disposition of their current employees to the overall process.

When SL philosophy has been introduced to organisations and the process of implementation documented, these studies have produced positive employee outcomes in terms of employee engagement (Canavesi & Minelli, 2021), organizational citizenship behaviour (Elche et al., 2020), employee creativity and performance (Zada et al., 2023), as well as crucially job satisfaction (Hassan et al., 2022; Kauppila et al., 2021). Therefore, SL shows promise as an overarching philosophy that could tie a TM approach in with overall organisational strategy, to achieve the desired TM outputs of satisfied employees intention to remain in their role (Liu-Lastres et al., 2024; Marinakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2019), and to build organisational reputation to attract new talent (Davern, 2021; Goh & Okumus, 2020). If formalised structures of TM continue to develop as a crucial HRM function for hotels (Davern, 2021), and SL presents itself as a solution by which effective processes can be guided, then finding the appropriate mechanism to introduce SL principles to an organisation may be crucial to the success of these talent management initiatives.

### **Middle Managers: Supporting innovative TM through sensemaking**

A substantial literature identifies MM as the lynchpin or central function of strategic change initiatives (Balogun & Rouleau, 2017; Besson & Mahieu, 2011; Heyden et al., 2017; Kieran et al., 2020; Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016). This is oftentimes associated with their unique access to strategic planning from senior level and first hand feedback from frontline workers (Darkow, 2015; Falls & Allen, 2020). Managers that are characterised as operating in this middle tier of the organisational hierarchy are often tasked with converting aspirational strategic vision into practical operational outputs, with the conversion process framed by sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995). The sensemaking process as envisioned in this papers framework allows the managers to gain understanding of SL theory through the prism of their own knowledge and experience (Kieran et al., 2020). MM are anticipated to go through the sensemaking activities of dialogue and conversation, context setting, as they struggle with the implied meaning (Rydland, 2018), finally emotionally recalibrating themselves to the novel motivation of leading as a servant (Bavik, 2020; Van Dierendonck, 2011). The philosophy implied in servant leadership which can be manifestly contradictory to previous long held ideas of leadership (Van Dierendonck et al., 2014), could prove challenging for MM. Strengthening the case for the allocation of resources to managers as they comprehend and sense make exactly what is being asked of them (Teulier & Rouleau, 2013). If the sensemaking process is not given the care and attention needed for

participants to truly gain understanding, initial purpose can be lost and new procedures developed, may be more likely to produce unintended consequences (Kieran et al., 2020). Therefore completing all stages needed for sensemaking activities, may be pivotal to MM fulfilling their envisioned role in strategic change initiatives (Besson & Mahieu, 2011; Kieran et al., 2020; Rouleau, 2005; van Niekerk & Jansen van Rensburg, 2022).

When senior leaders in the organisation believe that the sensemaking of MM aligns with their strategic goals (Sharma & Good, 2013), then they may encourage the social interactions between MM and workers (Balogun & Johnson, 2005), in a process often described as sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Giuliani, 2016; Kroon & Reif, 2021). Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) defines sensegiving as “attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (p.442). Having been adjudged to have gone through the sensemaking process MM should then meet the established definition of sensegiving by influencing the workers to adapt to the new SL focused organisational strategy. Sensegiving involves activities that are also fundamental to the current framework including, using the combination of managers SL understanding and their own experience to, connect, build, protect and ultimately legitimize the new organisational operating procedures for workers (Rydland, 2018). It is another factor that supports the need for a service climate that allows the trickle down of servant leadership to give alignment of purpose throughout an organisation (Ling et al., 2016). If leadership can “fuel the fire” of service (Chen et al., 2015), then SL principles could potentially flow down to every level as Ling et al. (2016) suggests. This could help ensure that MM truly know what the SL mission of their leaders is and in turn understand their place in the TM process (Jooss et al., 2023).

While sensemaking can be viewed as having many intangible elements (Giuliani, 2016), Kieran et al. (2020) posits that communication and in particular very specific types of discourse practices are necessary to give a real structure to the targeted sensemaking. Without this level of communication leadership’s instruction to MM may lack clarity, for frontline workers (Weber et al., 2015). This is not therefore a case of leadership hoping that their SL intentions are understood and accepted at all levels of the organisation. The process of enabling MM use their ambidextrous skills (Burgess et al., 2015) needs to be driven first and foremost from the senior level, before MM can use their unique proximity to workers, making acceptance of new strategy more likely to be accepted on the frontline (Heyden et al., 2017). The practices that Kieran et al. (2020) suggest could be most pertinent for the purpose of legitimizing change through MM, is that the middle managers do not take a passive approach to the process, that they engage in cyclical dialogue with the workers, continuously attempting to improve their understanding of SL principles and adjusting the new procedures until they find a correct fit.

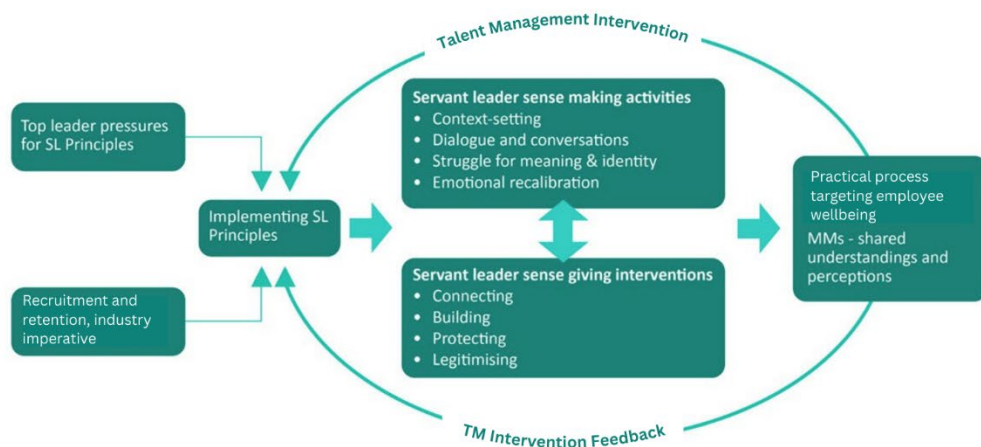
### **Servant leadership and talent management alignment**

SL has been offered as a managerial practice that can have positive outcomes in multiple areas of hospitality practice (Bavik, 2020; Elche et al., 2020; Qiu et al., 2020). Chon and Zoltan (2019) perform a wide-ranging examination of the available literature and identify both talent shortage and the struggle to retain hospitality graduates, as serious industry concerns that may be alleviated to some extent by SL adoption. The authors use the idea of treating staff like customers as an SL output that delivers on the expectations of Eva et al. (2019) in concentrating above all on follower outcomes. This offers a starting point for SL in terms of how it can anchor a TM approach, how true adoption of SL in leadership can foster servant followers (Hunter et al., 2013), or to rephrase it, the positive intentions of servant leaders inspires reciprocal intentions to act as servants by followers. This outcome which has been identified as a social exchange in practice (Kauppila et al., 2021), has been recognised in SL literature along with the moderating effect of service climate (Ling et al., 2016; Linuesa-Langreo et al., 2017; Linuesa-Langreo et al., 2016; Walumbwa et al., 2010). This once again aligns SL with the desired output of TM initiatives.

The framework produced in this paper offers a potential pathway for an intervention that can initiate the flow or trickle-down effect of SL in a hospitality context (Ling et al., 2016). Hotels are observed as needing a TM approach that tackles poor industry perceptions (Marinakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2019).

Introducing SL as a solution that raises standards in how employees are treated (Hunter et al., 2013; Kauppila et al., 2021; Linuesa-Langreo et al., 2017), is the rationale underpinning the framework design. Middle managers are the central participants in the design having been identified as holding a powerful position to influence all levels of the organisation (Azambuja et al., 2022; Burgess et al., 2015; Heyden et al., 2017), the lynchpin to turn strategy into procedure (Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016). The process for MM performing this critical role is supported by sensemaking theory, as they combine their experience of hospitality with the principles of SL (Kieran et al., 2020). The framework is designed as a mechanism of continuous improvement, using the following definition of continuous improvement “a gradual never-ending change which is: ... focussed on increasing the effectiveness and/or efficiency of an organisation to fulfil its policy and objectives”. (Fryer et al., 2007)(p.498). If this TM approach is going to become an ingrained organisational perception with the potential to improve the hotels reputation in such a way that it can be branded (Gehrels & De Looij, 2011; Gilani & Cunningham, 2017), it needs to be never ending and constantly reconstructed to meet changing employee needs (Goh & Baum, 2021; Goh & Lee, 2018; Graczyk-Kucharska & Erickson, 2020).

**Figure 1 Theoretical framework for TM Intervention**



Outline research conceptualisation for the study (adapted from Rydland, 2018)

## **Conclusion**

Contributing to the emerging literature on innovative approaches to TM in the hotel sector (Abid & Loufrani, 2024; Liu-Lastres et al., 2024; Manfreda et al., 2025), this paper reports on how middle manager interpretations of a SL intervention impacts on TM in context (Jooss et al., 2024). From the perspective of hotel management practice, the framework positions hotel middle managers role as lynchpins in interpreting the SL intervention. Premised on occupying this lynchpin role, it is suggested that innovating TM can emerge where strategic level servant leadership, filters down to MM (Ling et al., 2016), and supports MM engagement with and development of operational employees. The present paper is limited to developing a conceptual framework of how hotel middle managers interpret a SL intervention from the perspective of TM, and therefore future empirical research is suggested. Specifically, and given that the framework indicates dynamic opportunities for continuous improvement in how MM filter the SL intervention, the suitability of a longitudinal case study is indicated.

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