

Benevolent Leadership as a Relational Communication Signal: A Social Exchange Perspective on Customer Service Behavior¹

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Abstract

Leadership in organizationally precarious service environments operates not simply as a managerial function but as a communicative practice—a sustained stream of relational signals that employees receive, interpret, and respond to through their behavioral engagement with work. This study reconceptualizes benevolent leadership as a relational communication signal and examines how its motivational effects are unevenly distributed across frontline hotel employees differentiated by their organizational tenure. Drawing on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and relational communication perspectives (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014), we develop and test a moderated mediation model in which perceived obligation to reciprocate (POR) mediates the relationship between benevolent leadership and two dimensions of customer service behavior—in-role (IRB) and extra-role (ERB)—with employee tenure functioning as a reception boundary

¹ APA7th Citation: Phochadom, S. & Potipiroon, P. (2026). Benevolent Leadership as a Relational Communication Signal: A Social Exchange Perspective on Customer Service Behavior. In *Proceedings of the ICA Regional Hub Thailand 2026: Official Concurrent Event of the 76th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association (ICA)* (pp. 432-). Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University.

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condition. Survey data were collected from 586 frontline employees across 62 hotels in Songkhla Province, Thailand. Hypotheses were tested using the PROCESS macro (Model 4 and Model 7; Hayes, 2022) in SPSS with bias-corrected bootstrapping (5,000 resamples). Results confirm that POR partially mediates both service behavior relationships and the conditional indirect effects were descriptively larger among shorter-tenure employees, although the interaction and indices of moderated mediation were not statistically significant. Indirect effects were significant for both the BL–POR–IRB pathway ($b = .187$, 95% CI [.130, .247]) and the BL–POR–ERB pathway ($b = .187$, 95% CI [.132, .245]). The mediation models explained approximately 25.6% of the variance in in-role service behavior ($R^2 = .256$) and 25.9% of the variance in extra-role service behavior ($R^2 = .259$). We interpret this differential pattern as communicative inequality: structurally produced variation in the motivational returns from identical leadership communication across employee groups whose relational schemas differ by positional history. The findings carry implications for inclusive leadership communication strategy and for theoretical understandings of how supervisory authority is exercised—and received—unequally across organizational life stages.

Keywords: benevolent leadership; perceived obligation to reciprocate; social exchange theory; communicative inequality; employee tenure

Questions about how leaders move people to act have occupied organizational researchers for decades, yet the communicative architecture through which leadership exerts its motivational force has received comparatively little systematic attention. Much of this literature treats leadership as a behavioral or attitudinal phenomenon—cataloguing styles and measuring outcome correlates—while bracketing the communicative processes through which those effects are actually accomplished. This omission is consequential, since leadership, at its most fundamental level, is a communicative accomplishment enacted through relational exchanges and interpretive encounters rather than through managerial authority alone (Fairhurst, 2008; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). Understanding why some supervisory behaviors move some employees more than others therefore requires attending not only to what leaders do, but to how their relational signals are received and decoded by recipients who bring differing organizational histories to the encounter.

This paper takes that challenge seriously in Thailand's hotel industry—a sector characterized by persistently high turnover (Karatepe, 2013) and one in which frontline service quality depends critically on whether employees are motivated to contribute beyond their formal role requirements. We focus on benevolent leadership—a dimension of paternalistic leadership particularly salient in Confucian-influenced organizational contexts (Cheng et al., 2004)—which we reframe as a relational communication signal. Benevolent leaders transmit a distinctive signal: individualized care, discretionary support, and holistic concern for employee well-being that qualitatively exceeds normative supervisory expectations. When employees decode that surplus as evidence of genuine relational investment, they experience a felt moral obligation to reciprocate—what Shore et al. (2006) operationalize as perceived obligation to reciprocate (POR)—which then translates into service motivation. What has not been examined is whether this communicative-

motivational sequence operates with equal potency across all employees. We argue that it does not: employee tenure shapes the interpretive context in which leadership signals land, such that newcomers—whose relational schemas are still forming—receive benevolent signals as far more informative than do longer-serving employees who have absorbed similar care into a familiar relational baseline.

This differentiated reception—the same signal producing systematically unequal motivational returns across organizational positions—is what we term communicative inequality. It is a structural phenomenon rooted not in the leader’s intent nor in individual employee receptivity, but in the organizational conditions that govern how relational signals are decoded across different positional histories. In a conference session organized around who gets to frame authority and whose voice carries weight in troubled organizational waters, the question of who most benefits from leadership communication—and whose situation renders them less able to receive its motivational force—is both analytically pressing and practically significant.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Benevolent Leadership as a Relational Communication Signal

Benevolent leadership is conventionally defined as leader behavior expressing genuine concern for employees’ work-related and personal well-being through individualized care, tolerance of mistakes, and discretionary support that exceeds formal role obligations (Farh & Cheng, 2000). Well-established across Chinese and Southeast Asian organizational contexts, this behavioral construct has been linked to improved performance, reduced turnover, and stronger affective commitment through mechanisms broadly tied to social exchange (Cheng et al., 2004;

Shen et al., 2023). Yet the communicative logic through which benevolent leadership actually produces its motivational effects remains underspecified.

Reconceptualizing benevolent leadership as a relational communication signal opens more generative theoretical possibilities. Relational communication scholars maintain that leadership is constituted through communicative acts—the leader-follower relationship is not a pre-given social fact but something continuously produced and transformed through interaction (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). From this vantage point, the supervisory dyad is a site of ongoing semiotic exchange in which supervisory behaviors function as relational messages whose meaning is actively constructed in the encounter between sender and receiver. Benevolent leaders communicate through a distinctive signal set—personalized attention, proactive resource provision, expressions of holistic concern—that departs qualitatively from the normative expectations embedded in hierarchical role relationships.

That departure is the source of the signal’s communicative potency. We draw here on signaling theory reasoning in an interpretive rather than mathematical sense (Connelly et al., 2011) signals carry meaning to the extent that they are non-redundant, conveying something beyond what recipients already expect. We borrow only the interpretive metaphor of a “non-redundant signal” from this framework, not its mathematical apparatus: no quantity of information is calculated here in bits or entropy terms. The borrowing is deliberately qualitative—it supplies a vocabulary for describing why a supervisory act that departs from an employee’s expectations carries interpretive weight that a routine act does not, without implying that communicative meaning can be reduced to a measurable quantity of information. A supervisor operating at the transactional minimum generates little new information for employees calibrated to such behavior—the signal is

redundant with the relational baseline and carries limited communicative weight. A supervisor who extends genuine care beyond role expectations, provides discretionary support, and attends to employees as whole persons rather than merely productive inputs transmits a genuinely informative signal: one that conveys the organization's relational orientation, invites revision of the employee's existing supervisory schema, and calls forth a relational response. It is this communicative surplus—the difference between what is expected and what is received—that activates the norm of reciprocity and translates leadership communication into behavioral motivation.

Perceived Obligation to Reciprocate as the Proximal Mediating Mechanism

Social exchange theory, as formulated by Blau (1964) and elaborated through Gouldner (1960) norm of reciprocity, holds that the receipt of valued resources from a trusted organizational agent generates a moral obligation in the recipient to return resources in kind. This norm carries genuine moral weight as an internalized social obligation that motivates behavior beyond mere strategic calculation (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Within organizational settings, the relevance of this norm to leadership-behavior relationships has been widely presumed but infrequently measured directly; most studies have relied on proxy constructs such as trust or organizational commitment (Eisenberger et al., 1986) that are multiply determined and only loosely connected to the reciprocity norm at the theoretical core of social exchange (Colquitt et al., 2014).

POR, as operationalized by Shore et al. (2006), represents a more theoretically faithful measurement of the reciprocity norm. Rather than inferring exchange dynamics from attitudinal intermediaries, POR captures the employee's subjectively felt duty to contribute beneficial effort to an organization whose leadership has invested in their welfare. When employees perceive

supervisory behavior as conveying genuine relational investment—as going beyond what the normative employment relationship minimally requires—POR is activated as the psychological precipitate of that communicative encounter. This felt obligation then motivates behavioral effort in the service domain, producing both in-role service behavior (IRB: deliberate performance of formally specified service standards) and extra- role service behavior (ERB: voluntary contributions to service quality extending beyond role requirements). We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: POR mediates the positive relationship between benevolent leadership and in-role customer service behavior.

Hypothesis 2: POR mediates the positive relationship between benevolent leadership and extra-role customer service behavior.

Employee Tenure as a Signal Reception Boundary Condition

If the communicative potency of benevolent leadership derives from the informational surplus of its signals—from their capacity to exceed the relational baseline and thereby convey meaning—then the nature of that baseline becomes theoretically central. Employees who are new to an organization bring few accumulated expectations of supervisory behavior; their relational schemas are sparse and malleable, structured more by anticipation than by experience. As tenure accumulates, however, the baseline thickens: employees develop a richer and more stable model of their supervisor and organization, built from months or years of relational exchange. Against this denser experiential backdrop, the marginal informational value of any given benevolent act diminishes.

Research on psychological contracts (Rousseau, 1989) and organizational socialization research—from foundational work (Major et al., 1995) to recent meta-analytic evidence (Bauer et

al., 2025) converges on the insight that newcomers occupy a distinctively uncertain relational position. Questions about whether the organization can be trusted, whether the supervisor genuinely cares, and what kind of relational culture governs organizational life are, for newcomers, genuinely open. Benevolent leadership answers these questions decisively and favorably, generating a correspondingly strong sense of felt obligation to reciprocate. Wayne et al. (1997) document that exchanges early in organizational membership carry disproportionate weight in shaping relational orientations—a pattern consistent with the hypothesis that newcomers' POR is more powerfully activated by leadership signals than that of veterans.

For longer-tenure employees, the same benevolent acts may be assimilated into a familiar relational pattern rather than decoded as relational departures. The signal that once communicated something important about the organization's commitment to employee welfare may now simply confirm what the employee already knows. The felt obligation to reciprocate—while not absent—is consequently attenuated, not because the leader has changed but because the employee's interpretive context has. We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3: Employee tenure negatively moderates the positive relationship between benevolent leadership and POR, such that the BL–POR relationship is stronger among shorter-tenure employees.

Hypothesis 4: Employee tenure negatively moderates the indirect effect of benevolent leadership on in-role service behavior through POR, such that the indirect effect is stronger among shorter-tenure employees.

Hypothesis 5: Employee tenure negatively moderates the indirect effect of benevolent leadership on extra-role service behavior through POR, such that the indirect effect is stronger among shorter-tenure employees.

Communicative Inequality as Theoretical Frame

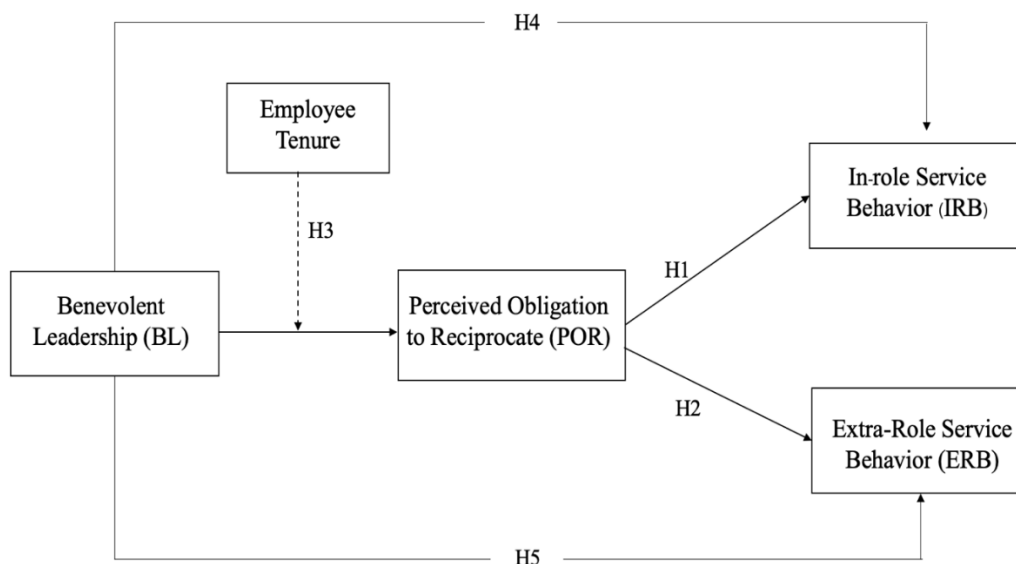
The moderated mediation structure articulated above describes a structural phenomenon that organizational communication scholarship is only beginning to theorize: the production of unequal motivational outcomes from identical communicative inputs, by virtue of recipients' structural positions within the organization. We propose the concept of communicative inequality to name this phenomenon.

As we use the term, communicative inequality does not denote differential access to communication channels or unequal opportunities to participate in organizational discourse—though these remain real and important organizational inequities in their own right. It refers, rather, to structurally generated variation in the motivational returns from leadership communication across employee groups whose interpretive contexts differ by positional history. When the same relational signals from the same leaders produce systematically larger motivational effects for newcomers than for veterans—not because the signal differs but because the reception context differs—we are observing an inequality rooted in organizational structure. The same supervisory care is transmitted; it is decoded differently, and translated into service motivation differently, across structural positions in the organization. This framing challenges organizations committed to equitable workforce management to move beyond the assumption that uniform relational investment produces uniform motivational benefit across all employee groups.

It is worth distinguishing this account from the way moderation is typically framed within social exchange research, where tenure or similar variables are treated principally as statistical interaction terms whose function is to condition the strength of an association. Communicative inequality, as conceptualized here, is not reducible to a tenure $\times$ leadership interaction coefficient. It refers to a difference in reception—in how a signal bearing identical content is decoded differently depending on the relational schema an employee has accumulated over their positional history. The interaction term is the statistical signature of this phenomenon, not its theoretical substance; the substance lies in the proposition that organizational position systematically shapes what a communicative act is able to mean for the person who receives it.

Figure 1.

Conceptual Model



Methodology

Research Design and Sample

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design. Data were collected from full-time frontline hotel employees in Songkhla Province, Thailand, between August and September 2025. Songkhla represents a significant regional hub for Thai hospitality and tourism, encompassing hotels across several districts—Hat Yai, Songkhla city, and Sadao—and serving both domestic and international visitors. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure variation in geographic location, hotel star rating, and organizational scale.

Paper-based questionnaires were distributed to 70 hotels, with approximately ten employees per hotel invited to participate voluntarily (anticipated $N = 700$). The study received ethical approval from the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education Research Ethics Committee of Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus (Approval No. AF/20-04-v.01.0, approved 22 July 2025). All participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study without penalty, and all data were collected anonymously.

Completed responses were returned from 64 hotels, yielding 599 questionnaires for an employee-level response rate of 85.6% and a hotel-level rate of 91.4%. After removing cases with missing values or failed data-quality checks, the final analytical sample comprised 586 employees nested within 62 hotels. The sample was predominantly female (81.4%), with respondents distributed across hotel departments—accommodation, food and beverage, and front office representing the largest clusters—and across hotel star categories, with lower-rated and unclassified hotels constituting the majority of the sample, reflecting the composition of Songkhla's hospitality sector. Approximately 69% of respondents were local residents of Songkhla Province.

Measures

All instruments were originally formulated in English and translated into Thai using systematic back-translation procedures to ensure linguistic equivalence (Brislin, 1980).

Benevolent Leadership (BL) was measured using eleven items drawn from the Benevolent Leadership subscale of the paternalistic leadership instrument developed by Cheng et al. (2004), rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Items capture the supervisor's individualized care, discretionary material and emotional support, and holistic concern for the employee's well-being. A representative item reads: "My supervisor devotes all his/her energy to taking care of me."

Perceived Obligation to Reciprocate (POR) was assessed using six items adapted from Shore et al. (2006) social and economic exchange scale, rated on the same five-point scale. Items capture the employee's felt moral duty to contribute to an organization that has demonstrated investment in their welfare. A representative item reads: "I feel a sense of duty to support my organization, which has supported me."

Customer Service Behavior (CSB) was assessed using the instrument developed by Bettencourt and Brown (1997), comprising two five-item subscales rated on a seven-point scale. In-role service behavior (IRB) indexes compliance with formally specified service standards; extra-role service behavior (ERB) indexes voluntary contributions to service quality extending beyond role requirements.

Employee Tenure was operationalized as the number of years worked at the employee's current hotel, treated as a continuous variable and mean-centered prior to computing the interaction term consistent with established recommendations (Wang et al., 2022).

Analytical Strategy

Measurement validity was assessed through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2021). All four focal constructs demonstrated satisfactory model fit, with items loading significantly on their respective latent factors, composite reliability estimates exceeding .90, average variance extracted values exceeding .50, and discriminant validity confirmed through standard AVE criteria (see Table 2). A Harman single-factor test provided preliminary reassurance against critical levels of common method bias, though this test is acknowledged to offer incomplete protection (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Because employees were sampled from within 62 hotels (approximately 10 respondents per hotel), we additionally evaluated the nested structure of the data. Intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC(1)) were computed for the two service behavior outcomes at the hotel level ($ICC_{IRB} = 0.282$, $ICC_{ERB} = 0.210$), and the focal moderated mediation models were re-estimated using cluster-robust standard errors clustered by hotel as a robustness check. The pattern and statistical significance of the direct and indirect effects reported below were substantively unchanged under this alternative specification (see note under Table 3).

In addition to the Harman single-factor test, common method variance was further evaluated using a common latent factor (CLF) approach within the CFA model, in which an unmeasured latent method factor was permitted to load on all observed indicators. The additional variance explained by this common method factor was 50.05%, which fell below the threshold conventionally treated as indicating a critical level of common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Hypotheses 1 and 2 were tested using PROCESS macro Model 4 (Hayes, 2022) in SPSS with bias-corrected bootstrapping (5,000 resamples). Hypotheses 3 through 5 were tested using

PROCESS macro Model 7. All continuous independent and moderator variables were mean-centered prior to constructing the interaction term to reduce multicollinearity. This approach simultaneously estimates the direct and indirect effects of benevolent leadership on each service behavior outcome conditional on employee tenure and provides an index of moderated mediation for testing whether the tenure-conditional variation in indirect effects is statistically reliable (Preacher et al., 2007).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics indicated that benevolent leadership was rated moderately high by respondents ($M = 4.69$, $SD = .94$), while POR reflected moderate levels of felt reciprocal obligation ($M = 3.76$, $SD = .74$). Both in-role and extra-role service behavior were reported at relatively elevated levels consistent with the frontline service context, with IRB ($M = 5.90$, $SD = .92$) slightly exceeding ERB ($M = 5.82$, $SD = .87$) on the seven-point scale—a pattern reflecting the inherently obligatory character of in-role relative to voluntarily enacted behaviors. Mean organizational tenure was approximately 2.2 years ($SD = 1.23$), consistent with the high-turnover composition of Thailand's frontline hospitality workforce. Benevolent leadership showed moderate negative skewness (skewness = -0.825) and acceptable kurtosis (kurtosis = 1.138), both of which remained within conventional limits for parametric analysis. Values within conventionally acceptable bounds for parametric analysis (± 2 ; Kline, 2016) would support retaining the variable in its observed metric; nonetheless, the elevated mean and any accompanying negative skew suggest that observed associations involving benevolent leadership may represent a somewhat

conservative, range-restricted estimate of the true relationship, a possibility we note as an interpretive caveat rather than a substantive threat to the reported findings.

Zero-order correlations were consistent with theoretical expectations across all focal constructs. Benevolent leadership correlated positively and significantly with POR, IRB, and ERB. POR was significantly and positively related to both service behavior dimensions. Employee tenure showed no significant zero-order correlation with service behavior outcomes, consistent with the theoretical proposition that tenure functions as a conditional moderator of the mediated pathway rather than as an independent direct predictor of service performance (see Table 1).

Table 1

Bivariate Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Benevolent Leadership	4.69	.94	—				
2. Perceived Obligation to Reciprocate	3.76	.74	.60**	—			
3. In-role Service Behavior	5.90	.92	.44**	.46**	—		
4. Extra-role Service Behavior	5.82	.87	.43**	.47**	.76**	—	
5. Employee Tenure (yrs.)	2.20	1.23	.00	.08	.00	-.04	—

Measurement Model

Measurement validity was assessed through a four-factor confirmatory factor analysis in Mplus using robust maximum likelihood estimation. To account for the nested structure of employees within hotels, the model was estimated using TYPE = COMPLEX with hotel as the

clustering variable. The four-factor measurement model demonstrated acceptable fit, $\chi^2(318) = 886.987$, $p < .001$, CFI = .944, TLI = .939, RMSEA = .055, 90% CI [.051, .060], and SRMR = .037. All standardized factor loadings were significant ($p < .001$) and ranged from .76 to .91. Composite reliability estimates ranged from .89 to .96, and average variance extracted values ranged from .67 to .89, supporting internal consistency and convergent validity. Discriminant validity was generally supported, although the comparatively high latent correlation between in-role and extra-role service behavior ($r = .81$) suggested some overlap between these closely related service-behavior dimensions. Accordingly, their distinction was interpreted with caution.

Table 2

Measurement Items, Factor Loadings, AVE, and Composite Reliability

Construct	Items	Standardized loadings (range)	CR	AVE
Benevolent Leadership (BL)	11	0.74 – 0.85	0.96	0.67
Perceived Obligation to Reciprocate (POR)	6	0.78 - 0.91	0.95	0.76
In-role Service Behavior (IRB)	5	0.78 - 0.90	0.93	0.73
Extra-role Service Behavior (ERB)	5	0.76 - 0.89	0.89	0.89

Mediation Analysis

PROCESS Model 4 showed that benevolent leadership significantly predicted POR ($b = .477$, $SE = .026$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .365$). POR, in turn, significantly predicted both IRB ($b = .392$, $SE = .056$, $p < .001$) and ERB ($b = .393$, $SE = .052$, $p < .001$). Benevolent leadership also has retained significant direct effects on IRB ($b = .247$, $SE = .044$, $p < .001$) and ERB ($b = .214$, $SE = .041$, $p < .001$). The

indirect effects through POR were significant for IRB ($b = .187$, 95% CI [.130, .247]) and ERB ($b = .187$, 95% CI [.132, .245]). The models explained 25.6% and 25.9% of the variance in IRB and ERB, respectively. Thus, POR partially mediated both relationships, supporting H1 and H2.

Moderated Mediation Analysis

PROCESS Model 7 was employed to examine whether employee tenure moderated the indirect effect of benevolent leadership on customer service behavior through perceived obligation to reciprocate (POR). Benevolent leadership significantly predicted POR ($b = .480$, $SE = .026$, $p < .001$), while employee tenure also showed a positive association with POR ($b = .045$, $SE = .020$, $p = .024$). However, the interaction between benevolent leadership and employee tenure was not statistically significant ($b = -.038$, $SE = .021$, $p = .062$).

Despite the non-significant interaction, the conditional indirect effects followed the hypothesized pattern. For IRB, the indirect effect of benevolent leadership through POR was strongest among employees with shorter tenure ($b = .207$, 95% CI [.135, .283]), followed by employees with average tenure ($b = .188$, 95% CI [.130, .250]), and employees with longer tenure ($b = .169$, 95% CI [.113, .241]). A similar pattern was observed for ERB, with conditional indirect effects of .207 (95% CI [.136, .282]), .188 (95% CI [.130, .247]), and .170 (95% CI [.114, .239]), respectively.

Although these indirect effects remained statistically significant across all tenure levels, the indices of moderated mediation were not statistically significant for either IRB (Index = $-.015$, 95% CI [$-.044$, .013]) or ERB (Index = $-.015$, 95% CI [$-.045$, .012]). Therefore, the results suggest that benevolent leadership exerted robust indirect effects on customer service behavior

through POR regardless of employee tenure, while providing only limited evidence that the strength of these indirect effects systematically differed across tenure levels.

Table 3

Moderated Mediation Results.

Predictor of POR	b	SE	p
Benevolent leadership	.480	.026	< .001
Employee tenure	.045	.020	.024
BL × Employee tenure	-.038	.021	.062

Note. $N = 586$. $R^2 = .375$. The interaction accounted for an additional $\Delta R^2 = .004$, $p = .062$.

Table 4.

Conditional Indirect Effects by Employee Tenure Level

Mediated Paths	Tenure level	Est	95% CI
BL → POR → IRB	-1 SD (shorter)	.207	.135, .283
	Mean	.188	.130, .250
	+1 SD (longer)	.169	.113, .241
BL → POR → ERB	-1 SD (shorter)	.207	.136, .282
	Mean	.188	.130, .247
	+1 SD (longer)	.170	.114, .239

Note. The index of moderated mediation was $-.015$, 95% CI $[-.044, .013]$, for IRB and $-.015$, 95% CI $[-.045, .012]$, for ERB. Because both confidence intervals included zero, Hypotheses 4 and 5 were not supported.

Moderated Mediation: Tenure as Signal Reception Boundary Condition

The interaction between benevolent leadership and employee tenure did not reach statistical significance in predicting perceived obligation to reciprocate ($b = -.038$, $SE = .021$, $p = .062$). Accordingly, the proposed moderating effect of employee tenure was not supported.

Nevertheless, inspection of the conditional effects revealed a pattern consistent with the hypothesized direction, whereby the effect of benevolent leadership on perceived obligation to reciprocate was stronger among employees with shorter tenure ($b = .527$) than among those with average ($b = .480$) or longer tenure ($b = .432$). Although this directional pattern aligns with theoretical expectations, the absence of a statistically significant interaction indicates that these differences should be interpreted cautiously.

Conditional indirect effect estimates indicated that the indirect effects of benevolent leadership on service behavior through perceived obligation to reciprocate remained statistically significant across all three tenure levels. For in-role service behavior, the conditional indirect effect was .207 (95% CI [.135, .283]) at shorter tenure, .188 (95% CI [.130, .250]) at mean tenure, and .169 (95% CI [.113, .241]) at longer tenure. For extra-role service behavior, the corresponding estimates were .207 (95% CI [.136, .282]), .188 (95% CI [.130, .247]), and .170 (95% CI [.114, .239]), respectively. Across both outcomes, the indirect effects remained statistically significant because none of the bootstrap confidence intervals included zero, although the magnitude of the indirect effect gradually decreased as employee tenure increased.

Discussion

Before turning to detailed interpretation, it is useful to state explicitly where this study's contribution lies. First, it reconceptualizes benevolent leadership—conventionally treated as a behavioral or attitudinal style—as a relational communication signal, shifting analytic attention from what leaders do to how what they do is received and decoded. Second, it introduces communicative inequality as a structural, rather than dispositional, account of why identical

leadership communication yields unequal motivational returns across employees. Third, while the tenure-moderation component did not reach statistical significance, the core mediation mechanism is nonetheless grounded empirically: POR significantly mediates both service-behavior relationships, and the conditional indirect effects display a directional pattern consistent with theoretical expectations, a pattern that should be interpreted as suggestive rather than confirmatory.

Benevolent Leadership as Communication: What the POR Mechanism Reveals

The empirical pattern reported here supports and elaborates the theoretical claim that benevolent leadership operates through a genuinely communicative mechanism. The pathway connecting supervisory behavior to service motivation runs through POR—a construct representing not a stable attitude but the proximal psychological response of a communicative encounter. An employee who perceives their supervisor as demonstrating care beyond role obligations does not simply form a favorable attitude toward their job; they register a relational signal, interpret its meaning within their existing schema of supervisory behavior, and respond to that interpreted meaning through a felt moral imperative to give back. POR, in this reading, is the trace of a communicative event: the psychological record of a relational signal received, decoded, and morally processed.

The choice to operationalize the reciprocity norm directly through POR, rather than through the more typical proxies of trust or organizational commitment, produces a theoretically tighter account of the leadership-to-service-behavior mechanism. Trust and commitment are multiply determined constructs whose connection to the norm of reciprocity is inferential rather than direct; they may reflect social exchange dynamics, but they also reflect selection effects, socialization processes, job design features, and co-worker relationships that have nothing to do

with benevolent leadership specifically (Colquitt et al., 2014; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). POR cuts closer to the theoretical core: it names the specific psychological state produced by the communicative encounter between a leader's relational signal and an employee's interpretive processing of that signal, and its activation within the dyadic relationship is therefore a more faithful indicator of whether social exchange is occurring. The mediated pathways documented here—each accounting for roughly one-quarter of the variance in the corresponding service outcome (25.6% for IRB, 25.9% for ERB)—are consistent with the interpretation that the communicative-motivational sequence is real and substantial, rather than an artifact of theoretically loose operationalization.

The partial mediation finding warrants interpretive attention as well. Benevolent leadership retains direct effects on both service behavior dimensions even after POR is controlled, indicating that the reciprocity pathway, while central, does not exhaust the communicative-motivational mechanism. Potipiroon and Junthong (2024) have documented that the service performance benefits of benevolent leadership are partly channeled through the sustaining of harmonious positive affect; Shen et al. (2023) point to psychological safety—the sense that displaying initiative or responding to unusual service demands will not be penalized—as a further mechanism through which benevolent supervisors enable employees to engage service encounters with greater flexibility and creativity. Future research might integrate POR, affective safety, and identity-based mechanisms into a more comprehensive multi-path model of benevolent leadership's communicative effects on service behavior.

Communicative Inequality: The Tenure Gradient and Its Organizational Implications

The moderated mediation pattern—the same supervisory communication generating systematically larger motivational returns for shorter-tenure employees—is the finding that most directly engages the theoretical contribution of this paper. We characterized this pattern as communicative inequality, and its implications deserve careful unpacking.

It bears emphasis that because the design is cross-sectional, the tenure-related differences reported here reflect between-person comparisons across employees at differing career stages observed at a single point in time, rather than within-person developmental change tracked as the same individuals accumulate tenure. The attenuation pattern documented in this study should accordingly be read as a cross-sectional gradient rather than a demonstrated developmental trajectory. The inequality is not about access to leadership. All employees in this sample had equivalent exposure to their supervisor's benevolent communication; the relational signal was transmitted without differential selectivity. The inequality is about reception: about how the organizational history that employees bring to the interpretive encounter is associated with what a given signal is able to mean for them, and therefore what motivational force it is able to exert. For shorter-tenure employees, benevolent leadership constitutes a high-information signal precisely because it departs from a sparse relational baseline—it answers genuinely open questions about the organization's relational character and generates a correspondingly strong sense of obligation to reciprocate. For longer-tenure employees, the same behaviors may be processed against a backdrop of accumulated exchange history within which benevolent supervisory behavior has become something close to an organizational given—valued, perhaps, but no longer a departure

from expectations, and therefore carrying less new information and possibly generating a weaker POR response (Shannon & Weaver, 1949; Wayne et al., 1997).

This is a structural phenomenon, not an individual one. It is not that longer-tenure employees are less grateful, less morally responsive, or less susceptible to social exchange dynamics. It is that their accumulated organizational history is associated with a change in the interpretive context within which the same signal lands—a context connected to organizational structure and the passage of time, not by individual communication competence or relational disposition. Communicative inequality, so construed, is something that organizational conditions may produce over the course of organizational life, rather than something that employees do to themselves.

The organizational implications of this inequality are practically consequential. In Thailand's hospitality sector, where persistently high turnover continuously replenishes the pool of shorter-tenure employees (Karatepe, 2013), the aggregate motivational effects of benevolent leadership may appear robust at the organizational level—because newcomers, for whom the signal is maximally potent, are always entering the organization. The employees who carry the greatest volume of institutional knowledge, established customer relationships, and mentoring capacity—the longer-tenure workers—may, however, be precisely those for whom the same leadership communication yields diminishing motivational returns. This is an organizationally consequential distribution of motivational benefit that remains invisible when leadership effects are analyzed at aggregate means and becomes visible only through the conditional analysis employed here.

Addressing communicative inequality therefore requires more than intensifying the volume or sincerity of benevolent communication—since the attenuated reception among veteran

employees is not a function of insufficient care but of habituated familiarity. What is required, rather, is deliberate differentiation in the communicative content and form of relational leadership across the employment lifecycle. For longer-tenure employees, leaders might move from general expressions of care toward increasingly specific acknowledgments of individual contributions; from general relational investment toward meaningful developmental opportunities that signal commitment to the employee's long-term professional trajectory; and from dyadic supervisory care toward structural roles—mentoring, knowledge transfer, project leadership—that reframe accumulated tenure as organizational capital actively valued and publicly recognized. These are communicative strategies in the full sense: deliberate recalibrations of the relational message being transmitted to employees at different stages of their organizational lives, designed to sustain the signal's motivational potency even as its novelty naturally diminishes (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014; Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002).

Cultural and Contextual Considerations

The study's setting warrants specific comment within any account of its findings. Southern Thailand—and Songkhla Province in particular—represents an organizational environment in which hierarchical authority and relational obligation carry distinctive social weight. The collectivist value orientation of Thai society, in which reciprocity toward those who have demonstrated genuine care is a social norm embedded in cultural expectations rather than merely an individual preference, amplifies the communicative potency of benevolent leadership signals (Farh & Cheng, 2000). Employees who perceive supervisory care as genuine and meaningful are operating within a cultural framework that makes the obligation to reciprocate not just

psychologically felt but socially expected and morally serious—a context likely to strengthen the POR pathway relative to what might be observed in more individualist organizational settings.

The specific labor market dynamics of Songkhla’s hospitality sector further shape the findings interpretive context. The province’s position as a major commercial and border city creates a hospitality environment serving diverse visitor populations and operating under elevated service quality expectations. In this context, the discretionary extra- role service contributions that distinguish excellent service quality from merely adequate performance are organizationally significant—and the present findings suggest that relational leadership communication constitutes a meaningful lever for sustaining those contributions, particularly among the newer employees who are also, by virtue of high industry turnover, the employees most continuously replenished in the workforce.

Limitations and Future Directions

The cross-sectional design constrains causal inference. The theoretical directionality of the moderated mediation model is grounded in well-developed theoretical arguments, but longitudinal designs tracking individual employees across organizational tenure would permit substantially stronger causal claims—particularly regarding the hypothesized process by which accumulated exchange history gradually attenuates the signal value of benevolent leadership. Experience-sampling methodologies that capture the ebb and flow of reciprocal motivation in response to specific supervisory interactions would further illuminate the micro- level communicative dynamics suggested here. Relatedly, because all focal variables were collected from the same respondents at the same point in time, common method bias— variance attributable to the measurement method rather than to the constructs themselves—remains a concern despite the

interaction-based statistical safeguards described in the Analytical Strategy section (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Finally, employees in this sample are nested within 62 hotels (approximately ten employees per hotel), introducing potential non-independence of observations; while the primary analyses reported here follow standard PROCESS-based practice for single-level moderated mediation, the supplementary ICC and cluster-robust analyses reported above were undertaken specifically to evaluate the sensitivity of the findings to this clustering, and future work with larger hotel-level samples should consider multilevel modeling as a primary rather than supplementary analytic strategy. A related interpretive caution concerns possible selection or survivor effects among longer-tenure employees. Individuals who remain with an organization for extended periods in a high-turnover sector may differ systematically—in dispositional resilience, baseline job satisfaction, or fit with the organizational culture—from those who exit earlier, and these pre-existing differences, rather than tenure-related habituation alone, could contribute to the weaker POR response observed among veteran employees. The present cross-sectional design cannot fully disentangle a genuine developmental process of habituation from a survivorship-based compositional difference between shorter- and longer-tenure groups, and this ambiguity should be borne in mind when interpreting the tenure gradient reported here.

The reliance on employee self-report for all focal variables introduces the possibility of common method bias. The Harman test provided preliminary reassurance, and the inclusion of moderated interaction terms offers additional protection—since artificial method-driven covariances are unlikely to produce interaction patterns (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Future research would nonetheless benefit from multi-source data collection, gathering service behavior ratings from supervisors, peers, or customers to triangulate against the self-report assessments employed here.

Finally, the geographic and sectoral specificity of the sample limits generalizability. The communicative inequality pattern documented here may be amplified or attenuated in organizational contexts with different turnover dynamics, different cultural orientations toward hierarchical reciprocity, or different structural conditions shaping how employee relational schemas develop and solidify over time. Cross-cultural replication—comparing contexts with higher and lower collectivist orientations—and cross-sectoral extension—testing the framework in professional service environments characterized by longer average tenures—would substantially advance understanding of the boundary conditions of communicative inequality as a theoretical construct.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine benevolent leadership not as a managerial style to be catalogued, but as a communicative practice to be theorized—a sustained process of relational signaling whose motivational effects on employees are shaped as much by the interpretive contexts of receivers as by the intentions of senders. By reconceptualizing benevolent leadership as a relational communication signal and POR as the psychological precipitate of its reception, we have proposed and found evidence consistent with a mechanism that links supervisory communication to frontline service behavior in a theoretically coherent and practically meaningful way.

The findings supported the mediating role of POR but did not provide statistically conclusive evidence that employee tenure moderated this mechanism. The same leadership signal generates systematically greater reciprocal motivation among newer employees than among veterans, not because the relational investment is any less genuine, but because the organizational

position of the receiver is associated with what that signal is able to mean. Recognizing communicative inequality as a structural feature of organizational life—rooted in the inevitable accumulation of exchange history over time—challenges organizations to move beyond the assumption that uniform leadership care produces uniform motivational benefit. Genuinely inclusive leadership communication requires attending not only to whether relational signals are transmitted with care, but to whether they are received and decoded with comparable motivational force by employees at every stage of their organizational lives.

In the broader landscape of leadership communication research, these findings argue for sustained attention to the reception side of the supervisory communicative encounter. The meaning of a relational signal is never given by its sender alone; it is constructed in the interpretive meeting between organizational position, relational history, and cultural schema. Understanding leadership communication as a process that unfolds across this full complexity—not merely as a behavior enacted by a leader, but as an interpretive event experienced by a receiver—is, we suggest, the productive frontier for scholarship at the intersection of communication theory and organizational behavior.

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