

Leadership Style Effect on Employee Performance: Regulatory Focus as a Mediator

Dina Van Dijk¹ and Ronit Kark²

Health Systems Management Department, Ben-Gurion University, Israel¹

Psychology Department, Bar-Ilan University, Israel²

dinav@bgu.ac.il karkro@mail.biu.ac.il

Abstract

This study empirically tested the theoretical model developed by Kark & Van Dijk [1], which links regulatory focus theory [2] with leadership theory. We suggest that manager's leadership style (i.e., transactional, transformational) affects employees' organizational outcomes by activating their self-regulatory focus (i.e., prevention and promotion foci).

A total of 343 employees who work in service call-centers and their 75 team managers participated in the study. Using a multilevel analysis we found that employees' promotion focus mediated the effect of transformational leadership on employees' motivation, affective commitment and normative commitment (but did not mediate creativity). The employees' prevention focus mediated the positive effect of transactional leadership on continuance commitment and the negative effect of transactional leadership on employee creativity.

This study enables us to gain a broader understanding of the leadership process and its workings, by tracing the elusive path of the leadership style and its effect on the transformation of the followers' inner self (regulatory focus) and behavior (outcomes). From a practical viewpoint, the results of this study are likely to contribute to the development processes for leader and leadership training to improve followers' organizational outcomes.

Introduction

Over the last three decades, there has been growing interest in understanding the influence of charismatic and transformational leadership on followers in terms of a process related to the follower's identity and self-concept [3,4,5]. In this study, we propose that leaders' and followers' Regulatory Foci (RF) play a central role in determining their respective motivations. Although a body of research has stressed the importance of motivation to leadership processes [e.g., 6,7], the leadership literature has paid limited attention to the underlying psychological processes and mechanisms through which leaders motivate their followers and foster innovation and creativity. Recent developments in motivation theory stress the importance of RF as a central component shaping motivation and behavior [2,8]. This theoretical development may be helpful in understanding the ability of leaders to influence and motivate by arousing different self-regulatory foci among followers.

Recently, Kark and Van Dijk [1] have developed a new theoretical framework that draws on transformational and charismatic leadership theory [e.g., 9,10] and identity and self-concept based theories of leadership [e.g., 3,4,11], as well as the theory of regulatory focus [2]. The framework is aimed at providing an explanation for the possible underlying mechanisms that enable leaders to influence followers' motivations and ultimately, their behaviors (e.g., innovation, creativity) and organizational-related outcomes.

The goal of the proposed study is to test this theoretical framework. Its aims are two-fold. First, we aim to decipher how different leadership behaviors affect followers' motivation and performance by priming different modes of followers' RF (i.e., promotion or prevention) at the group and individual level. Second, we examine how the different elicited regulatory foci affect various outcomes (innovation and creativity) at the individual and organizational level.

Identity and Self-Concept Based Theories of Leadership

Transactional leadership has been defined as an exchange of rewards for compliance. In contrast, transformational and charismatic leadership have been defined as transforming the values and priorities of followers and motivating them to perform beyond their expectations [12]. Bass and [13] proposed that transformational and charismatic leadership behaviors include the creation of an attractive vision of the future, the use of symbols and emotional arguments, the demonstration of optimism and enthusiasm, setting a personal example, demonstrating high ethical standards, providing support and coaching to followers and intellectually stimulating them. Previous research has shown that these behaviors are related to leadership effectiveness and high performance [e.g., 14].

Recent leadership theories have focused on followers' self-concept to account for elicitation of motivation [e.g., 4,11]. Forces at various levels of analysis (e.g., personality traits, dyadic relationships, organizational culture) can influence the cognitive accessibility of a given self-concept, leading to the activation of a particular identity level at a given point in time [15]. This dynamic enables leaders to play a major role in the activation of the various aspects of followers' self concept [e.g., 3].

Regulatory-Focus Theory

Higgins' theory of Regulatory Focus (RF) suggests that human motivation is regulated by two motivational systems: prevention focus and promotion focus. The prevention and promotion foci are concerned with two fundamental human needs, the need for security and safety and the need for advancement and growth, respectively [2,16]. The prevention system focuses individuals on their "ought self", their duties, responsibilities and obligations, whereas the promotion system focuses individuals on their "ideal self", their hopes, aspirations, and accomplishments. People could be either chronically or temporarily prevention or promotion-focused meaning that prevention and promotion foci could be either a trait (chronic RF) or a state induced by temporally situations (situational RF). For example, a person who is generally promotion-focused may become a prevention-focused in a situation that emphasizes potential loss or pain. Individuals who operate within the prevention focus (either chronically or temporarily) are more sensitive to the presence or absence of losses and to negative feedbacks, use avoidance and vigilant as goal-attainment strategies, are more cautious, conservative, and accurate, and experience emotions ranging from agitation or anxiety to quiescence or calmness. By contrast, individuals who operate within the promotion system are sensitive to the presence or absence of gains and positive feedbacks, use approach and eagerness as goal-attainment strategies, are more creative in problem solving, more open to change, show more willingness to take risks, and experience emotions ranging from happiness to dejection [e.g., 17,18,19,20,21,22,23].

We propose that leaders through their interaction with followers can prime the *situational* RF of followers and subsequently affect their behavior (i.e., outcomes). Next, we present a framework for understanding leaders' and followers' motivations, following Higgins' theory of RF [2].

Followers' Motivation: Priming Followers' Regulatory Focus

There is accumulating evidence that transformational and charismatic leadership substantially influences employee motivation and performance very differently from transactional or monitoring leadership [e.g., 14,24]. However, research on transformational leadership has only recently attempted to reveal the processes by which it exerts its influence on followers. In the present study, we suggest that one of the mechanisms by which transformational (transactional) leaders exert their influence on followers is by eliciting a promotion (prevention) focus among their followers.

We suggest that leaders can affect followers by highlighting different aspects of followers' RF (i.e., prevention or promotion). Different leadership behaviors can partially account for priming these distinct aspects of followers' regulatory focus at both the individual and at the group or organizational level. Thus, leaders behaving in a transformational and charismatic manner, highlighting a vision, ideals, hopes, and aspirations may elicit a promotion RF among followers, whereas leaders displaying a transactional or monitoring style, monitoring leaders' behavior and highlighting their obligations, and responsibilities, may elicit a prevention focus among followers.

Outcomes of Priming Followers' Prevention or Promotion Focus

Transformational/charismatic leadership is likely to result in a wide range of outcomes that differ from the outcomes of transactional or monitoring leadership. We suggest that these outcomes are mediated by identity shifts and priming of certain self-perceptions of the followers, specifically the RF. Transformational/charismatic leadership that evokes a promotion focus can result in followers' creativity, eagerness, attentiveness to positive outcomes, risk taking, willingness to make change, positive affectivity, affective commitment and creative behavior. In contrast, a transactional/monitoring leadership that promotes a prevention focus can result in followers' preference for stability, tendency for accuracy, risk aversion behavior, attentiveness to negative outcomes, negative affectivity, and normative or continuance commitment.

Research hypotheses

H1: Charismatic and transformational leadership will prime followers' promotion motivational focus at both the individual and group levels.

H2: Monitoring or transactional leadership will prime followers' prevention motivational focus at both the individual and group levels.

H3: Transformational and charismatic leadership behaviors mediated by priming followers' promotion focus will be positively related to followers' outcomes on the individual level (i.e., creativity, innovation, motivation, affective commitment).

H4: Monitoring and transactional leadership behaviors, mediated by priming followers' prevention focus, will positively relate to followers' outcomes on the individual level (i.e., non-creativity, accuracy, conformity, normative and continuance commitment).

Method

Sample

A total of 343 employees who work in service call-centers of several firms (e.g., insurance, communication) and their 75 team managers. The employees sample included 196 (57%) women, and 147 (43%) men, the mean age was 27.8 and the average tenure in the organization was 2.3 years. The managers' sample included 29 (39%) women and 46 (61%) men, the mean age was 32.2 and the average tenure was 5 years.

Tools

Questionnaires completed by the employees:

Manager's leadership style was assessed by 36-items of the MLQ [9]. Monitoring leadership was also assessed using a scale developed by Spreitzer, et al [25]. The manager's scores on the leadership styles dimensions were aggregated to the team level.

Employee's chronic RF was assessed by the 18-items RF Scale developed by Lockwood, et al [26].

Employee's motivation was assessed by a 10-item scale of Fox and Feldman [27]

Employee creativity was assessed by the 13-item scale of Zhou and George [28].

Employee organizational commitment was assessed by the 18-item questionnaire developed by Meyer & Allen [29].

A biographical questionnaire including gender, age, and tenure.

Questionnaires completed by the managers:

Manager's chronic RF was assessed by the 18-item Lockwood, et al [26].

Employee's creativity and conformity to rules were assessed by an inventory developed by Miron, Erez, & Naveh [30]. Each manager evaluated each one of his or her employees using this inventory.

Procedure

Two research assistants visited the organizational customer service units and distributed questionnaires to all the team managers in the organization. The managers filled the performance indices (creativity–conformity to rules) for each one of their employees. Then, after collecting the data from the managers, data was collected from the employees that were chosen for each manager. All employees, whose managers filled their performance indices, participated in this stage.

Results

Aggregation Analyses

Before testing the hypotheses, we first needed to justify the aggregation of individual perceptions of transformational leadership behaviors to the group level of analysis. Average $r_{wg(j)}$ across groups was .88, suggesting sufficient within-group agreement. In addition, ICC(1) was .25 and ICC(2) was .79, which provided sufficient evidence for between-group reliability. Finally, an analysis of variance indicated that individual perceptions of leadership significantly clustered by groups, $F(73, 271) = 4.85, p < .01$. These results provided sufficient statistical justification for aggregating individual perceptions of leadership to the group level [31].

Table 1 presents the individual-level descriptive statistics and correlations for the variables in the study. We used the RCM analyses following the steps suggested by Kenny et al. [32] to test for mediating effect.

Table 1: Correlations among study variables, including variables' Means and SDs.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|--------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-----|-----|---|---|---|---|----|
| 1. Followers' promotion | --- | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Followers' prevention | .27** | --- | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Transformational Leadership | .35** | -.03 | --- | | | | | | | |
| 4. Transactional Leadership | .15** | .30** | .18** | --- | | | | | | |
| 5. Motivation | .26** | .10† | .22** | .02 | --- | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|------|-------|-----|
| 6. Affective commitment | .35** | .06 | .43** | .07* | .45** | --- | | | | |
| 7. Continuance commitment | .05** | .35** | .05 | .21** | -.01 | .05 | --- | | | |
| 8. Normative commitment | .31** | -.15** | .40** | .10† | .34** | .74** | .22* | --- | | |
| 9. Creativity | -.09 | -.21** | .05 | -.06 | .11† | .02 | -.16** | -.07 | --- | |
| 10. Conformity to rules | .02 | -.04 | .19** | -.12* | .00 | .12* | .02 | .06 | .21** | --- |
| MEAN | 7.1 | 4.9 | 3.8 | 3.2 | 5.8 | 4.8 | 3.6 | 4.2 | 4.3 | 5.4 |
| SD | 1.2 | 1.5 | 0.8 | 0.8 | 1.0 | 1.3 | 1.1 | 1.2 | 1.17 | 1.2 |

† p<.1 (marginal significance). * p<.05. ** p<.01

Supporting H1 results from the RCM analyses (see Table 2 first step), indicated that transformational leadership significantly and positively predicted followers' promotion focus, *coefficient*=0.62, *t*(73)=4.31, *p*<.01. Supporting H2 results from the RCM analyses (see Table 3 first step) indicated that transactional leadership significantly and positively predicted followers' prevention focus, *coefficient* = 1.01, *t*(73) = 5.52, *p*<.01.

Table 2: Promotion focus as a mediator between transformational leadership and employees outcomes (dependent variables).

| Independent variable | Dependent variable | | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|------------|--------------|
| | Promotion focus | | | |
| Step 1 | | | | |
| Transformational leadership | 0.62 (73)** | | | |
| Step 2 | | | | |
| Transformational leadership | Affective commitment | Normative commitment | Creativity | Motivation |
| | 0.67** (73) | 0.59** (73) | 0.18 (73) | 0.24† (73) |
| Step 3 | | | | |
| Transformational leadership | 0.47** (73) | 0.43** (73) | 0.19 (73) | 0.11 (73) |
| Promotion focus | 0.31** (271) | 0.24** (271) | -.05 (271) | 0.21** (271) |

Note: Results are unstandardized parameter estimates from random coefficient models analyses; numbers in parentheses are corresponding degrees of freedom. † p<.1 (marginal significance), * p<.05, ** p<.01

In order to gain support for the mediation of promotion focus (H3), the relationships between transformational leadership and employees outcomes must disappear when including the promotion focus in the equation (See Table 2). H3 was partially supported for the affective commitment outcome: the relationship between transformational leadership and affective commitment declined but did not disappear after inserting promotion focus to the equation [*coefficient* = 0.67, *t*(73)=4.07, *p*<.01, in step 2, and *coefficient* = 0.47, *t*(73)=2.85 *p*<.01 in step 3]. H3 was also partially supported for the motivation outcome: transformational leadership had a marginal effect on motivation in step 1 [*coefficient*=0.25, *t*(73)=1.80, *p*<.1], and non-significant effect after inserting promotion focus in step 2 [*coefficient*=0.25, *t*(73)=1.80, *p*<.1]. H3 was not supported for the creativity outcome: promotion focus did not predict creativity nor did transformational leadership predict creativity.

In order to gain support for the mediation effect of prevention focus (H4), the relationships between transactional leadership and employees outcomes must disappear when including the prevention focus in the equation (see Table 3). H4 was fully supported for the continuance commitment outcome: the relationship between transactional leadership and continuance

commitment disappeared after inserting prevention focus to the equation [*coefficient*=0.46, *t*(73)=3.39 *p*<.01, in step 2, and *coefficient*=0.23, *t*(73)=1.90 *p*>.05 in step 3]. H4 was also fully supported for the creativity outcome. Prevention focus negatively and significantly predicted creativity [*coefficient*=-0.11, *t*(271)=-2.57, *p*<.05], and the negative relationship between transactional leadership and creativity disappeared after inserting prevention focus to the equation [*coefficient* =-0.36, *t*(73) =-2.18 *p*<.05, in step 2, and *coefficient* =-0.23, *t*(73)=-1.36 *p*>.05 in step3]. H4 was not supported for the motivation outcome: transactional leadership did not predict motivation.

Table 3: Prevention focus as a mediator between transactional leadership and employees outcomes (dependent variables).

| Independent variable | Dependent variable | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|------------|
| | Prevention focus | | |
| Step 1 | | | |
| Transactional leadership | 1.01** (73) | | |
| <hr/> | | | |
| | Continuance commitment | Dependent variable | |
| | | Creativity | Motivation |
| Step 2 | | | |
| Transactional leadership | 0.46** (73) | -.36* (73) | .02 (73) |
| Step 3 | | | |
| Transactional leadership | 0.23† (73) | -.23 (73) | -.06 (73) |
| Prevention focus | 0.23** (271) | -.11* (271) | .10* (271) |

Note. Results are unstandardized parameter estimates from random coefficient models analyses; numbers in parentheses are corresponding degrees of freedom. † *p*<.1 (marginal significance), * *p*<.05. ** *p*<.01

Summing up, we present the mediation model according to which followers' RF mediates the relationships between leaders' style and followers' outcomes (see Figure 1).

Discussion and conclusion

The conceptualization of leadership influence presented here portrays leadership as deeply tied to the individuals' internal motivational systems of the self-regulatory focus. Focusing on the dynamics of leadership influence on followers, the framework outlined in this paper and the findings suggests that leaders can affect followers by highlighting different aspects of followers' self-concept and their self-regulatory foci (i.e., prevention or promotion). This was found to influence whether followers view themselves primarily in terms of their ideals, hopes, wishes, and aspirations, or in terms of their duties, obligations, and responsibilities. Moreover, the different forms of leadership influence suggested above are important because they can lead to different outcomes. A promotion focus can result in followers' motivation, creativity and affective commitment. The theoretical framework suggested in this paper begins to shed light on the processes in which leaders' can affect diverse aspects of followers' perceptions and behaviors, resulting in follower performances.

The contribution of this paper lies in weaving and integrating concepts and insights from regulatory focus theory with leadership theory. Drawing on findings from the regulatory focus literature enables us to reach a deeper understanding of the psychological processes underlying prior findings in the leadership field. For example, leaders' ability to prime their followers' promotion focus helps us understand why transformational and charismatic leadership has been

found in prior works to be positively related to followers' affective commitment and to employees' creativity.

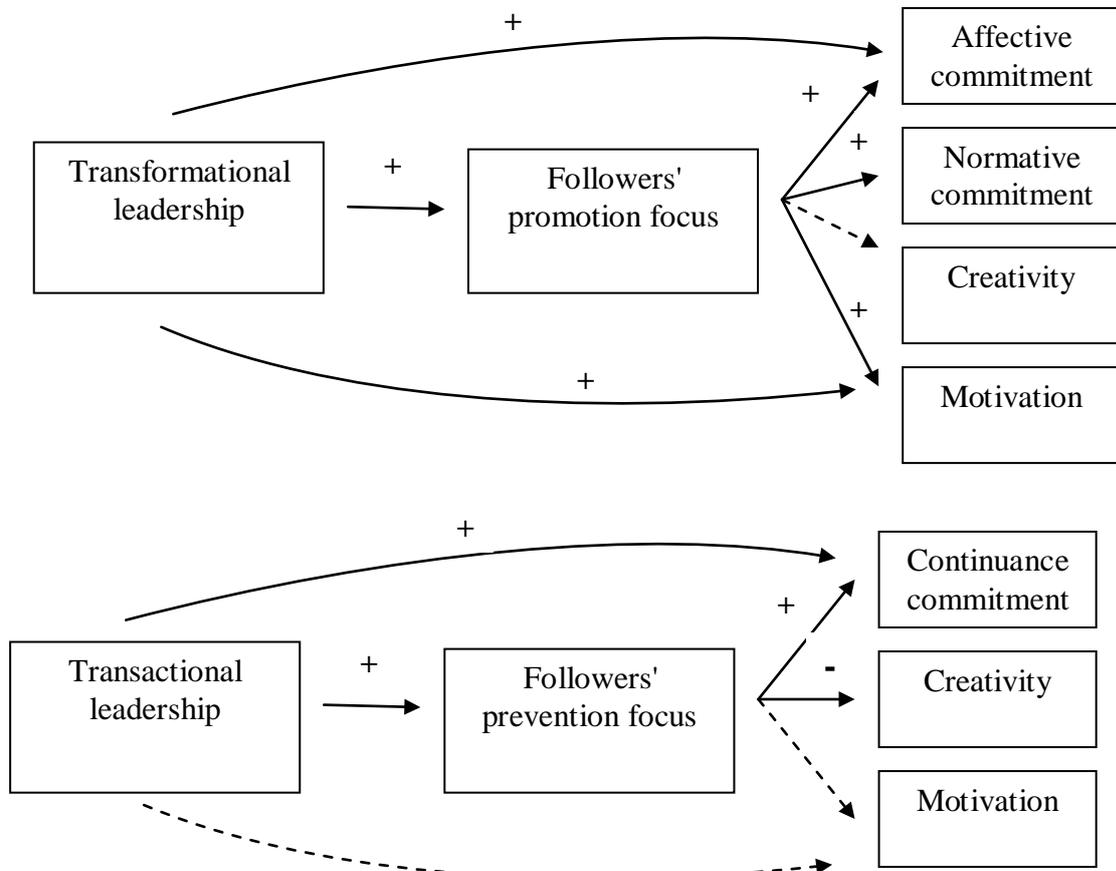
In this paper, we have offered a series of propositions that may contribute to guiding further research on leadership processes. In addition, we have raised some issues that merit attention in future studies. Three qualifications should be added at this point. First, while we maintain that leaders can affect followers' regulatory foci, we do not imply that leaders can always consciously control this influence. Affective and emotional processes related to motivational foci may be particularly difficult to manage consciously and may occur without the leader's awareness.

Second, although we maintain that different leadership behaviors can prime different aspects of identity, effective leaders use transformational and transactional behaviors together to augment their ability to influence followers [9]. Therefore, it is possible that the same leader, while enacting different leadership styles, will be able to prime both prevention and promotion foci among his or her followers at different points in time. It is also possible that the same leader will prime different regulatory foci among different groups of followers (e.g., ingroup, outgroup). According to the Leader-member-exchange [33] it is possible that the same leader will be able to behave differently towards different followers. Thus, the leader can improve his or her influence by enhancing the congruency between his or her behavior and followers' chronic regulatory foci.

Third, although we suggest that leaders can directly affect followers' self regulatory focus at both the individual level and the group level, it is premature for us to specify how these different levels of analysis are likely to interact. It is more than likely that if leaders prime followers' self regulatory focus at the individual level, this will further affect indirectly the self regulatory focus at the group level (e.g., through the process of contagion among followers). Furthermore, it is likely that when leaders affect their followers self regulatory focus as a group, this in turn can influence the self regulatory focus at the individual level. The mechanisms, by which these processes interact, interrelate, and affect each other, in direct and indirect pathways need to be further elucidated.

Future research should address some of these issues and study the dynamic of leader and followers shifting from one self-regulatory focus to another and the ways in which a leader can influence these shifts among followers. Several questions may be raised in this regard: What other variables can mediate the relationship between leaders' values, self regulatory foci, and their behavior? Can the same leader activate a prevention and a promotion focus at different points in time or even simultaneously, or are there negative relations among different identity components such that activating one level inhibits the other, as suggested by Lord and his co-authors [5]? Can leaders be trained to emphasize certain behaviors in order to prime a certain level of their followers' regulatory focus? The framework suggested above has examined leaders' behaviors and their effects on followers. However, the followers are also likely to contribute to the dynamics. According to the work of Howell and Shamir [34], leadership and followership may both play an active role in forming their mutual relationships. Dvir and Shamir [35] further demonstrated that follower characteristics are likely to contribute to the shaping of leaders' transformational leadership. In the current paper, we argue that leaders can influence followers by affecting their regulatory focus. However, based on the above perspectives, it is also possible that this is a bi-directional influence in which followers can also play a role, activating a certain regulatory focus among leaders, thus affecting their leadership style and behavior. For example, highly inspirational and empowered followers who enjoy their work may elicit the leaders' situational promotion focus. This suggested reciprocal dynamic in follower-leader relationships may serve as a focus of future research in the field.

Figure 1: Summary of modeling results.



Full lines = significant relationships; dotted lines = non-significant relationships

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