

Leadership styles and followers' motivation to behave proactively:

A social cognitive perspective

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper proposes a model that explains how the style of leadership may engender followers' motivation that guides their proactive behavior. Current literature demonstrates how leaders promote proactive behavior. However, followers' motivation to behave proactively is less known. Understanding followers' motivation is important because it determines how their behaviors are influenced by their leaders. We apply social cognitive theory and present a model that contrasts the impact of transformational leadership and management-by-exception on followers' motivation for proactive behavior. We draw on empirical evidence to construct our model and offer propositions. Lastly, we discuss theoretical contributions and future research.

Keywords: transformational leadership, management-by-exception, cognition, motivation, proactive work behavior, social cognitive theory

INTRODUCTION

Proactive behavior has gained importance as organizations move toward decentralization to meet the pace of innovation and growth (Parker & Collins, 2010; Bindl & Parker, 2010). In spite of its growing importance, the role of leaders in developing proactive behavior is not well understood (Griffin, Parker & Mason, 2010; Belschak & Den Hartog, 2010; Strauss, Griffin & Rafferty, 2009). In particular, how leaders induce followers' motivation for proactive behavior warrants further study (Sivanathan, Arnold, Turner & Barling, 2004; Crant, 2000). Hence, the present paper offers a model that explains how the style of leadership influences followers' motivation to act proactively.

Leadership is an important factor affecting followers' attitudes and behaviors (Felfe & Schyns 2010; Pearce & Sims 2002). Therefore, it is necessary for organizations to identify the appropriate leadership style for cultivating proactive behavior. Scholars argue that every leader displays both transformational and transactional leadership styles and individual leaders tend to emphasize one of these styles (Bass & Avolio, 2000; Conger & Kanungo, 1998). Bass (1985) conceives a full range leadership scale based on transformational and transactional behaviors. Researchers adopting Bass's scale usually contrast the different effects of the two leadership styles (Morhart, Herzog, & Tomczak, 2009; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990; Burns, 1978). Accordingly, we adopt a method of contrast between the effects of the two leadership styles. We propose that the level of followers' motivation to engage in proactive

behavior is influenced by the style of leadership. Hence, we explore the emergence of followers' motivation for proactive behavior by contrasting the impact of the two leadership styles.

SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2006, 1986) posits that people learn how to behave through social interaction with other people. In the workplace, followers interact with leaders and acquire cues to form cognition or thinking that shapes their motivation and behavior (Wood & Bandura, 1989; Davies & Luthans, 1981). In essence, followers take the initiative and regulate their actions according to the style of leadership that organizations provide. Therefore it is important to identify impact of different leadership styles on followers' proactive behavior. In the following sections, we begin by defining the variables in the proposed model. Next, we support the linkages between variables with empirical evidence and offer propositions. Lastly, we discuss the theoretical contributions and thoughts for future research.

LEADERSHIP STYLES

Transformational leadership (TFL) refers to a leadership style that motivates staff to higher levels of performance by broadening and elevating their goals and providing them with confidence to perform beyond job requirements (Dvir, Eden, Avolio & Shamir, 2002). Bass and Avolio (2000) conceptualize TFL in four dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. TFL is recognized by scholars as the most researched and most effective style of leadership (Kearney & Gebert, 2009; Judge & Piccolo 2004; Dirk et al., 2002). TFL is important for organizations because it is found to enhance followers' extra-role proactive efforts (Kearney et al., 2009; Rafferty & Griffin, 2004; Jung, Chow & Wu, 2003). In view of its value to organizations, we postulate TFL as a situational factor affecting followers' motivation for proactive behavior.

According to Bass and Avolio (2000), transactional leadership comprises the dimensions of contingent reward and management-by-exception (MBE). Researchers find that contingent reward and MBE lead to

conflicting effects on motivation. Evidence shows that contingent reward is associated with higher levels of followers' motivation because it involves positive reinforcement (Nahum-Shani & Somech, 2011; Lee, Kim, Son, & Lee, 2011; Podsakoff, Bommer, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006). Unlike contingent reward, MBE is found to be less effective for influencing followers' motivation because it conveys aversive reinforcement (Bass, 1999; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996 for a meta-analysis). To avoid the conflicting effects of the two dimensions of transactional leadership on motivation, we focus on MBE as a unique style of leadership. Scholars argue that MBE is an integral facet of leadership because it is a dominant style of leadership behavior (Bass et al., 2000) and is often practiced actively by leaders (Bass & Avolio, 1993). Indeed, evidence indicates that MBE, as a dimension of transactional leadership, is practiced by leaders in different types of organizations (Fein, Vasiliu, & Tziner, 2011; Marmaya, Hitam, Toriman, & Muhamad, 2011; Casida & Parker, 2011; Nahum & Somech, 2011). Although MBE is a potential facet of leaders' behavior, we question its effectiveness and compare it to TFL in their impact on followers' motivation for proactive behavior.

PROACTIVE MOTIVATION

Social cognitive theory postulates that people's cognitive states guide their behaviors (Bandura, 2006; Bandura et al., 1989), just as people's motivation to act proactively may guide their proactive behavior (Parker, Bindl & Strauss, 2010). Parker and her associates define proactive motivation as comprising the cognitive states of can-do, reason-to and energized-to motivation. Can-do motivation refers to people's judgments about their ability to perform particular tasks. Reason-to motivation explains why people are prone to proactive behavior. Energized-to motivation provides the emotional energy for persisting in proactive behavior. Scholars argue that effective leadership does not depend solely on the leader's own behavior but also on followers' cognitive states (Felfe et al. 2010; Howell & Shamir, 2005). It is therefore crucial to understand followers' motivation that determines how their behavior is influenced by leaders.

Consistent with the social cognitive view that people's cognition guides their behavior, we argue that followers' proactive motivation may determine how leaders influence their proactive behavior.

PROACTIVE WORK BEHAVIOR

Scholars define proactive work behavior (PWB) as self-initiated, anticipatory action that aims to change and improve the situation or oneself in the workplace (Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006). According to Parker and her associates (2010), PWB comprises the behaviors of taking charge, voice, individual innovation and problem prevention. PWB is critical for organizations as the growth of decentralization accentuates the need for employees to take initiatives and be proactive in the workplace (Parker et al., 2010; Parker et al., 2006). Indeed, research has demonstrated the positive outcomes of PWB that contribute to organizational performance (Li, Liang & Crant, 2010; Kim, Hon & Crant, 2009). In view of its importance to organizations, we explore its emergence under the influence of TFL and MBE.

LINKING LEADERSHIP STYLES TO PROACTIVE WORK BEHAVIOR

Based on social cognitive theory, employees learn their behaviors from leaders as role models (Bandura, 1986). Scholars contend that TFL is conducive to employees' PWB because of its motivational characteristics (Kark et al., 2007). Transformational leaders are viewed by followers as proactive role models due to their idealized influence (Avolio, Bass & Jung, 1999) and inspirational motivation (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Research shows that TFL promotes followers' extra effort and personal initiatives (Komives, 1991; Yammarino & Bass, 1990) as well as proactive service (Rank, Carsten, Unger & Spector, 2007). However, there is limited evidence linking TFL directly with PWB. We argue that the linkage can be better understood in the light of followers' social learning as a consequence of observing transformational leaders as role models of proactive behavior.

Proposition 1: There is a positive relationship between transformational leadership and followers' proactive work behavior.

In contrast, leaders who manage by exception focus on the avoidance of risks and tend to react negatively to followers' deviations from standards by means of aversive reinforcement (Podsakoff, Bommer, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006; Bass, 1990). As leaders focus on avoiding risk and error, followers are likely to learn from their negative role model and focus on existing standards rather than to initiate future-oriented proactive behavior (Choi, Anderson & Veillette, 2009; Lee, 2008). Nonetheless, specific evidence linking MBE to PWB is limited. We argue that MBE may diminish followers' propensity for PWB because it prompts them to learn from leaders' focus on avoiding mistakes.

Proposition 2: There is a negative relationship between management-by-exception and followers' proactive work behavior.

LINKING LEADERSHIP STYLES TO PROACTIVE MOTIVATION

Scholars contend that the environment affects people's cognition (Bandura, 1986), just as the style of leadership may influence followers' proactive motivation (Parker et al., 2010). We will discuss the linkage of the two leadership styles with proactive motivation which comprises can-do, reason-to and energized-to states of motivation.

Can-do motivation is analogous to the notion of self-efficacy in social cognitive theory and refers to people's belief that they can do certain tasks (Bandura, 2001,1989). Parker and associates (2010) suggest that leadership may influence followers' self-efficacy. Research illustrates that TFL enhances followers' self-efficacy in connection with outcomes such as creative thinking, organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Gong, Huang, & Farh, 2009; Nielsen, Yarker, Randall, & Munir, 2008; Walumbwa, Peng, Lawler & Kan, 2004). On the other hand, evidence of how self-efficacy contributes to proactive motivation is scarce. We tap into Parker and associates' (2010) notion of proactive motivation and propose that TFL elicits followers' self-efficacy which contributes to their can-do motivation for PWB.

Proposition 3a: There is a positive relationship between transformational leadership and followers' self-efficacy.

In contrast, MBE involves leaders' aversive reinforcement when followers deviate from performance standards (Bass, 1999). Scholars argue that leaders who are preoccupied with followers' weaknesses often undermine their feeling of competence or self-efficacy (Felfe & Schyns, 2002). In an experiment, evidence indicates that MBE leads to lower level of followers' self-efficacy (Lyons & Schneider, 2009). Hence, we contend that MBE may diminish followers' self-efficacy because followers learn from the adverse experience of aversive reinforcement.

Proposition 3b: There is a negative relationship between management-by-exception and followers' self-efficacy.

Reason-to motivation refers to motivation that explains why employees are prone to PWB (Parker et al., 2010). Scholars assert that one of the reasons why employees are motivated toward proactive behavior is their promotion focus (Kark, et al., 2007). Promotion focus refers to motivational states characterized by intention to go beyond job duties in search of ideals and hopes (Higgins, Friedman, Harlow, Idson, Ayduk & Taylor, 2001). Thus, promotion-focused employees are expected to go beyond current duties and engage in future-oriented proactive efforts (Griffin, Parker & Mason, 2010). Transformational leaders are shown to display a pattern of promotion-focused behavior characterized by inspirational and visionary messages (Gardner & Avolio, 1998). Consistent with the notion of role modeling, leaders with promotion-focused behavior are found to induce promotion focus in followers (Wu, McMullen, Neubert & Yi, 2008). We tap into social cognitive theory and posit that transformational leaders as role models induce promotion focus in followers.

Proposition 3c: There is a positive relationship between transformational leadership and followers' promotion focus.

In contrast, evidence shows that the more the leader advocates loss avoidance, as in MBE, the more likely followers will focus on preventing loss rather than promoting success (Brockner & Higgins, 2001). Indeed, leaders who manage by exceptions are found to encourage their followers to avoid errors rather than promote ideals for change (Moss, 2009; Lockwood, Marshall & Sadler, 2005). Thus, we argue that followers learn to focus on avoiding mistakes from leaders who manage by exception and are less likely to develop promotion focus.

Proposition 3d: There is a negative relationship between management-by-exception and followers' promotion focus.

Positive affect is defined as the extent to which a person feels enthusiastic, active and alert (Barrett & Russell, 1998), thus providing emotional energy for persisting in PWB. In line with the notion of role modeling, followers are found to mimic the emotional responses expressed by their leaders because of the referent status of those holding managerial positions (Manz & Sims, 1981; Bandura, 1969). In particular, TFL is shown to engender staff's positive affect through its idealized influence and inspirational motivation (Johnson, 2008; Bono & Ilies, 2006). We therefore propose that TFL elicits followers' positive affect through followers' observation of their display of positive words and emotions.

Proposition 3e: There is a positive relationship between transformational leadership and followers' positive affect.

In contrast, MBE involves aversive reinforcement (Bass, 1999). Aversive reinforcement often entails leaders' expression of negative emotions such as dissatisfaction and despair with followers' weaknesses. When followers learn from the unpleasant consequences of leaders' negative emotions, they are less likely to experience positive affect. Evidence shows that leaders' MBE style decreases the level of positive emotion of followers in the voluntary sector and in experiments (Rowold & Rohmann, 2009;

Lyons et al., 2009). Thus, we propose that followers may be influenced by leaders' MBE and display of negative emotions, and are less likely to experience positive affect.

Proposition 3f: There is a negative relationship between management-by-exception and followers' positive affect.

LINKING PROACTIVE MOTIVATION TO PROACTIVE WORK BEHAVIOR

In this section, we discuss the linkage of the three components of proactive motivation (Parler et al., 2010) to PWB. Social cognitive theory views self-efficacy as a central factor governing the self-control of human behavior (Bandura, 1991; Bandura et al., 1989). Research demonstrates that self-efficacy enhances employees' extra efforts to initiate changes (Morrison & Phelps, 1999; Speier & Frese, 1997), which are proactive in nature. To recall, self-efficacy represents people's belief that they have the ability to accomplish tasks. Thus, we propose that self-efficacy is a component of proactive motivation that infuses can-do confidence in followers to act proactively.

Proposition 4a: There is a positive relationship between self-efficacy and proactive work behavior.

Scholars argue that people with a strong promotion focus seek to achieve the maximum level of accomplishment (Shah, Higgins & Friedman, 1998). Indeed, people with promotion focus are shown to perform better in proactively solving problem and offering ideas (Crowe & Higgins, 1997). Also, employees with promotion focus are found to outperform other employees in tasks requiring proactivity for creative insight and ideas (Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko & Roberts, 2008). We therefore argue that followers' promotion focus is a potential reason that motivates them to act proactively.

Proposition 4b: There is a positive relationship between promotion focus and proactive work behavior.

Broaden-and-build theory posits that the experience of positive emotions broadens thought-action repertoires and builds energy reserve for behaviors (Fredrickson, 2001). Evidence supports the theory by showing that positive emotion indeed broadens people's scope of attention and thought-action urges (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). Also, positive affect is found to promote employees' personal initiative, which is a form of proactive behavior (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2007). Hence, we argue that positive affect broadens and builds followers' reserve of emotional energy for persisting in PWB.

Proposition 4c: There is a positive relationship between positive affect and proactive work behavior.

MEDIATING ROLE OF PROACTIVE MOTIVATION

The social cognitive approach to the study of leadership hinges on followers' cognition that mediates the effect of leadership on their behavior (Bandura, 2006; Bandura et al., 1989; Davis et al., 1980). Scholars advocate the need to study the mediating effect of cognitive states underlying proactive behavior (Jung, Yammarino & Lee, 2009; Sivanathan et al., 2004). Accordingly, we explore followers' proactive motivation as a cognitive state that mediates the impact of leadership styles on PWB. We discuss below the mediating role of the three components of proactive motivation.

Research demonstrates that followers' self-efficacy mediates the relationship between leaders' influence and followers' creativity (Gong et al., 2009), which is essential to the proactive behavior of individual innovation. However, leaders' influence may differ as a consequence of the style of leadership. To recall, TFL is found to enhance followers' self-efficacy (Nielsen et al., 2008; Walumbwa et al., 2004), whereas MBE leads to lower level of self-efficacy (Lyons et al., 2009). We have discussed the positive effect of TFL and the negative effect of MBE on both self-efficacy and PWB. On the other hand, specific evidence of self-efficacy mediating the impact of the two leadership styles on PWB is limited (Strauss et al., 2009).

We tap into the social cognitive notion of self-control of behavior through people's cognition (i.e. self-efficacy) and submit the propositions below.

Proposition 5a: The positive relationship between transformational leadership and proactive work behavior is mediated by self-efficacy.

Proposition 5b: The negative relationship between management-by-exception and proactive work behavior is mediated by self-efficacy.

Followers' promotion focus is shown to mediate the relationship between leaders' promotion-focused behaviors and followers' extra-role efforts (Wu et al., 2008; Wood et al., 1989), which involves proactive self-initiatives. Evidence shows that TFL exhibits promotion-focused behaviors characterized by inspirational and visionary messages (Gardner et al., 1998), whereas MBE involves behaviors focusing on error avoidance rather than promoting ideals (Moss, 2009; Lockwood et al., 2005). However, the role promotion focus plays in transmitting the effect of leadership styles to followers' PWB awaits further research (Parker et al., 2010; Strauss et al., 2009). We have discussed earlier the positive relationship of TFL and the negative relationship of MBE with both promotion focus and PWB. Based on the social cognitive notion that people's cognition (i.e. regulatory focus) controls their behavior, we articulate the propositions below.

Proposition 5c: The positive relationship between transformational leadership and proactive work behavior is mediated by promotion focus.

Proposition 5d: The negative relationship between management-by-exception and proactive work behavior is mediated by promotion focus.

Lastly, followers are found to mimic the emotional responses displayed by their leaders because they look up to their leaders as role models (Manz et al., 1981; Bandura, 1969; Bandura & Walters, 1963). In addition, followers' positive moods are shown to mediate the relationship between TFL and proactively

offering help to co-workers (Tsai, Chen & Cheng, 2009). In contrast, evidence shows that leaders' MBE style is negatively related to followers' positive emotion (Rowold et al., 2009; Lyon et al., 2009), which may ultimately constrict their proactivity. To recall, we have argued for the positive impact of TFL and the negative impact of MBE on both positive affect and PWB. In line with the social cognitive view that followers mimic leaders' emotional displays, we propose that followers develop different levels of positive affect in response to TFL and MBE that in turn guide their PWB.

Proposition 5e: The positive relationship between transformational leadership and proactive work behavior is mediated by positive affect.

Proposition 5f: The negative relationship between management-by-exception and proactive work behavior is mediated by positive affect.

In summary, we draw on social cognitive theory and propose that followers develop different levels of motivation to engage in PWB through social interactions with leaders who exhibit TFL or MBE. The proposed relationships are illustrated in our conceptual model (Figure 1).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Theoretical contributions

Current literature reveals how leaders influence followers to act proactively. However, less is known about followers' motivation that guides their proactive behaviors. We offer a model that explains the potential influence of social learning on followers' proactive motivation through social interactions with leaders. Scholars advocate more understanding of the role leaders play in promoting proactive behavior (Belschak et al. 2010). Our model sheds light on the critical role of leaders by contrasting the potential effects of transformational and MBE styles of leadership on followers' PWB.

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986) views self-efficacy as the key cognitive mechanism determining human behavior (Sadri & Robertson, 1993; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998; Bandura, 1991). We tap into Parker and associates' (2010) notion of proactive motivation and suggest that in addition to self-efficacy, promotion focus and positive affect may be examined together as can-do, reason-to and energized-to cognitive mechanisms facilitating PWB.

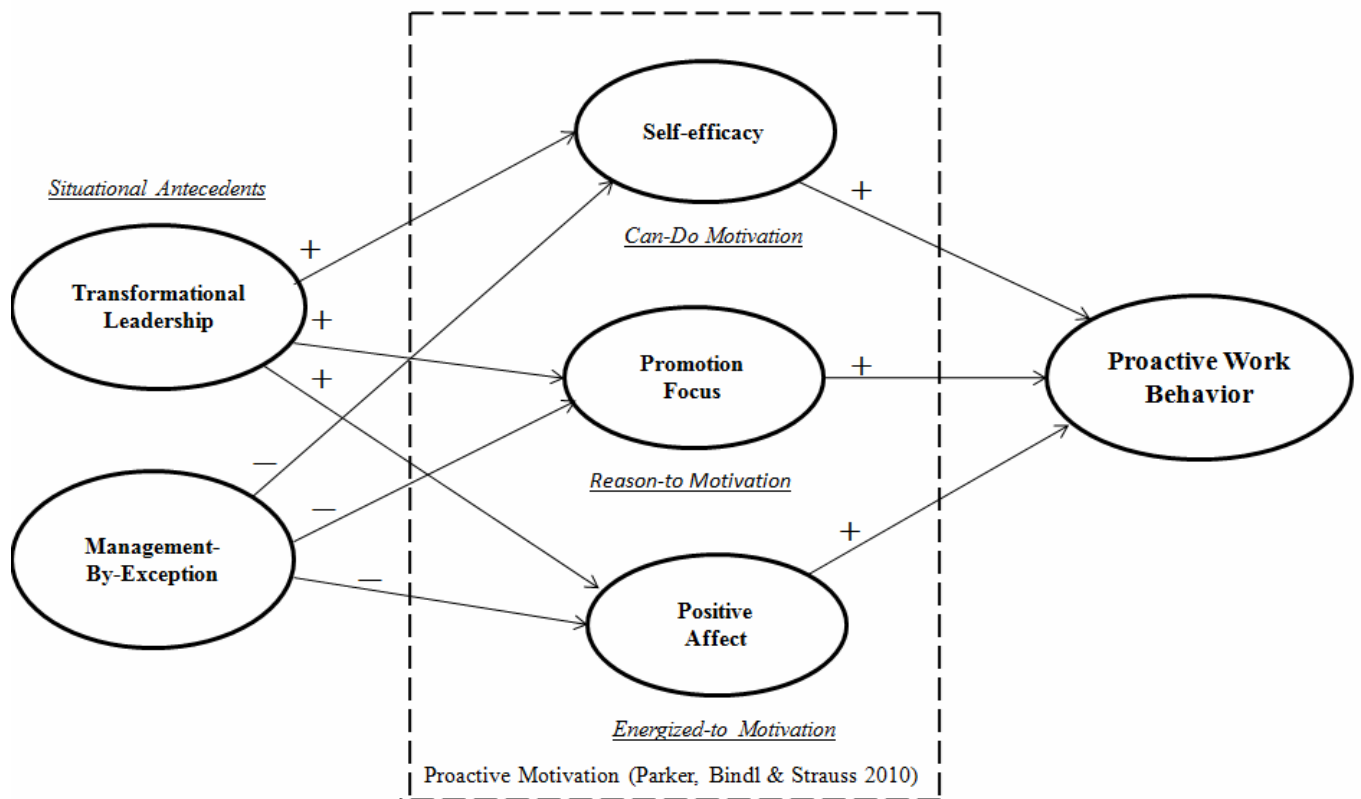
Future Research

Future research may explore further the role cognition plays in determining proactive motivation and behaviors. For instance, followers' proactive motivation stemming from interaction with leaders can be investigated in connection with cognitive appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), goal orientation (Dweck, 1999; Dweck & Leggett, 1988) and individual differences such as attachment styles (Bowlby, 1997) and self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). As factors in the environment may strengthen or weaken the impact of leadership on followers' cognition and behaviors, research may examine further the moderating role of work conditions such as role clarity and job autonomy. Lastly, the effect of leadership styles may be contingent on external environment factors such as national cultures or industry sectors. Hence, studying the potential effects of external factors may advance understanding of the relationship between leadership styles and followers' proactive behavior

Conclusion

The role of leaders in developing proactive behavior is not well understood despite its growing importance for organizations, (Griffin et al., 2010; Strauss et al., 2009). We draw on social cognitive theory and explore how followers acquire learning through social interaction with leaders and develop motivation that guides their PWB. Overall, the paper elucidates the emergence of motivation to engage in PWB based on two contrasting leadership styles. Thus, it extends the practical value of social cognitive theory to the study of leadership styles and proactive behavior in the workplace.

FIGURE 1. CONTRASTING LEADERSHIP EFFECTS ON PROACTIVE WORK BEHAVIOR



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