



Emotional intelligence and leadership emergence in small groups

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Emotional intelligence

Emotion

Leadership

Leadership emergence

ABSTRACT

We report the findings from two studies that examine the association between emotional intelligence and leadership emergence in small groups. In both studies, members of groups completed measures of emotional intelligence and other individual differences prior to working on a group project. Their peers rated their leadership emergence at the conclusion of the project. Overall emotional intelligence and a number of its dimensions were associated with leadership emergence over and above cognitive intelligence, personality traits, and gender. These findings were observed when emotional intelligence was measured with an ability test but not when it was measured with a self-report scale. Among the dimensions of emotional intelligence, the ability to understand emotions was most consistently associated with leadership emergence.

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Emotional intelligence is a set of abilities concerned with processing emotions and emotional information (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Grewal, 2005; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). This concept has generated considerable interest, but some researchers have questioned its validity (Landy, 2005; Roberts, Zeidner, & Matthews, 2001). Emotional intelligence remains controversial, in part, because there are only a few studies that tested whether it is associated with criteria over and above two extant predictors, cognitive intelligence and personality traits. The paucity of studies impedes the assessment of incremental validity and leaves open the possibility that other individual differences cause spurious associations between emotional intelligence and criteria.

To evaluate more completely the validity of emotional intelligence in applied research, studies that test its associations with new criteria over and above other individual differences are needed (Conte, 2005; Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2002). Past research has shown that emotional intelligence is associated with task performance (Côté & Miners, 2006), the success of formally appointed leaders (Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005), and public speaking effectiveness (Rode et al., 2007) over and above both cognitive intelligence and personality traits. The goal of this research is to test whether emotional intelligence exhibits incremental associations with a new criterion, leadership emergence.

Leadership emergence represents the degree to which a person who is not in a formal position of authority influences the other members of a group (Lord, De Vader, & Alliger, 1986; Schneider & Goktepe, 1983; Taggar, Hackett, & Saha, 1999). In self-managing groups, no member is formally appointed as the leader. Instead, the members of self-managing groups assume roles that are flexible and dynamic, so that any member can provide leadership on a specific task. It is possible that one member, several members, or no members of a group exhibit leadership emergence. Leadership emergence is a continuous variable because it reflects the degree to which each member exerts influence, rather than the presence or absence of leadership emergence in each member.

The definition of leadership emergence suggests that its correlates may differ from the correlates of the effectiveness of formally appointed leaders. Leadership emergence and leadership effectiveness differ conceptually because they reside at different levels of analysis (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). Leadership emergence is a within-group phenomenon, so that some

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members of a group exert more influence than the other members of the same group. Leadership effectiveness, in contrast, is a between-group phenomenon, so that some groups perform better than other groups because they have more effective leaders. Consistent with these arguments, three major traits of personality – conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness – exhibit different associations with leadership emergence and leadership effectiveness (Judge et al., 2002). Similarly, the findings of past research on emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness (Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005) may not generalize to leadership emergence.

Early attempts to identify the characteristics of emergent leaders took a highly cognitive approach, focusing on behaviors such as gathering information, seeking opinions, and initiating ideas (Fisher, 1974; Stogdill, 1950). Failing to include emotional concepts in models of leadership emergence, however, may be a serious omission (Pescosolido, 2002). A few studies have examined whether some emotional abilities are associated with leadership emergence in groups (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002, 2006; Offermann, Bailey, Vasilopoulos, Seal, & Sass, 2004; Wolff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002). The findings reveal that the abilities to perceive and to express emotions may be positively related to leadership emergence.

Our research extends these studies in three significant ways. First, we provide a stronger test of the incremental validity of emotional intelligence with respect to leadership emergence. Past research has controlled for cognitive intelligence (Kellett et al., 2002, 2006) and some personality traits (Offermann et al., 2004) separately. Thus, we do not know whether emotional intelligence explains variance in leadership emergence that is not explained by both types of individual difference characteristics. In addition, no study has controlled for self-monitoring, a personality trait that reflects the tendency to monitor and to control one's behavior in social situations (Snyder, 1974). Self-monitoring has been linked to leadership emergence (Ellis, 1988; Garland & Beard, 1979). To increase our confidence that emotional intelligence explains variance in leadership emergence that is not accounted for by extant individual differences, we simultaneously control for the Big Five personality traits (Studies 1 and 2), cognitive intelligence (Study 2), and self-monitoring (Study 2).

Second, we focus on both the broad construct of emotional intelligence and the specific abilities that comprise it to pinpoint how emotional intelligence may contribute to leadership emergence. Past research has examined whether leadership emergence is associated with the ability to perceive emotions (Kellett et al., 2002, 2006; Wolff et al., 2002) and the ability to express emotion (Kellett et al., 2006). Other abilities included in models of emotional intelligence, such as the abilities to understand emotions and to regulate emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990), have not yet been examined in relation to leadership emergence. To fully understand how emotional intelligence is associated with leadership emergence, it is important to examine the other emotional abilities.

Third, there remains a debate about how best to assess emotional intelligence. There have been discussions of the validity of self-report versus ability-based measures of emotional intelligence (cf. Brackett & Mayer, 2003; Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, & Salovey, 2006; Conte, 2005; Roberts et al., 2001). No past study, however, has directly compared the validity of the ability test and self-report scale approaches to measuring emotional intelligence with respect to the criterion of leadership emergence. In this research, we compare the criterion validity and incremental validity of the two approaches to inform future decisions about measurement.

1. The construct of emotional intelligence

Researchers have proposed several models of emotional intelligence that can be broadly categorized as either ability or mixed models (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000). Ability models define emotional intelligence strictly as a set of abilities pertaining to emotions and emotional information processing (e.g., Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Mixed models lump together abilities pertaining to emotions, personality traits, motivational factors, and other concepts (e.g., Bar-On, 2001; Goleman, 1998). Abilities are defined as “the possible variations over individuals in the liminal [threshold] levels of task difficulty ... at which, on any given occasion in which all conditions appear to be favorable, individuals perform successfully on a defined class of tasks” (Carroll, 1993, p. 8). As such, abilities are distinct from other individual differences such as personality traits, which reflect how people typically behave across situations and over time (McCrae & John, 1992). Because intelligence is one of its constituent terms, it is important to treat emotional intelligence as a set of abilities, and to exclude other individual differences from the construct (Mayer & Ciarrochi, 2006). Accordingly, we did not adopt a mixed model of emotional intelligence in our research and, instead, we selected an ability model.

We chose Mayer and Salovey's (1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990) ability model of emotional intelligence because it is the ability model that has undergone the most development and refinement, gained the greatest acceptance among researchers, and served as the basis for the most measures (Spector & Johnson, 2006). This model proposes that emotional intelligence is a set of four emotion-related abilities. The ability to perceive emotions represents the ability to detect and decipher emotions in faces, pictures, voices, and cultural artifacts, and to identify one's own emotions. The ability to use emotions is the ability to harness emotions to facilitate cognitive activities such as information processing and decision-making. The ability to understand emotions represents the ability to comprehend emotion language, the distinctions among discrete emotions, and the causes and consequences of emotions. Finally, the ability to manage emotions is the ability to change emotions in oneself and others.

2. Emotional intelligence and leadership emergence

Roles typically evolve in small groups, allowing some individuals who do not possess formal authority to stand out and exhibit leadership; this is termed leadership emergence (Lewis, 1972; Slater, 1955). Past research has found that individual differences

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