



Transformational leadership, goal difficulty, and job design: Independent and interactive effects on employee outcomes

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Abstract

A field study of 209 leader–follower dyads from 12 different organizations was conducted to test the moderating effects of job enrichment and goal difficulty on the relationship between transformational leadership and three follower outcomes: performance, affective organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior. Moderated regression analyses were conducted to test for direct and moderated relationships. Transformational leadership and job enrichment each had significant main effects. In addition, we found that job enrichment substituted for the effects of transformational leadership on affective commitment, whereas goal setting enhanced relationships between transformational leadership and both affective commitment and performance.

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1. Introduction

Transformational leadership has been consistently linked to a number of positive outcomes across samples and cultures (e.g., Bass, 1997; Bycio, Hackett, & Allen, 1995; Howell & Avolio, 1993; Howell

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& Higgins, 1990; Koh, Terborg, & Steers, 1991; Wofford, Goodwin, & Whittington, 1998), which has led some scholars to view transformational leadership as an unbounded, “universal” theory (Bass, 1997; Bass & Avolio, 1994). Others have suggested the need to examine it within a situational context (e.g., Bass, 1985; Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer, 1996; Whittington, 1997).

The substitutes for leadership model developed by Kerr and associates (Howell, Dorfman, & Kerr, 1986; Kerr, 1977; Kerr & Jermier, 1978) provides this context because of advantages it has over other situational approaches to leadership (Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994; Podsakoff, Niehoff, MacKenzie, & Williams, 1993). First, it represents the most comprehensive attempt to identify the potential factors that may moderate leader effects on followers, focusing more attention than previous theories on organizational factors. In addition, the substitutes model provides some guidance for leaders who may want to create substitutes in their environment to supplement or enhance their effectiveness (Howell et al., 1986; Podsakoff et al., 1993).

In early research, Kerr and Jermier (1978) suggested that certain task characteristics (e.g., those that provide feedback and that are intrinsically satisfying) and organizational characteristics (e.g., formalization in terms of explicit plans and goals) may substitute for the effects of a leader, or neutralize the impact of a leader’s behavior. In an extension of the earlier work, Howell et al. (1986) developed a typology of moderators based on the mechanisms by which they operate. Their substitutes typology was refined to include *neutralizers* and *enhancers* of the relationship between leader behavior and associated outcomes. *Neutralizers* interrupt the predictive relationship between a leader behavior and criteria, but have little or no impact on the criteria themselves, thus, representing a negative moderating influence on the relationship. Conversely, *enhancers* augment the relationship between leader behaviors and criteria with their own predictive power over the criteria, thus, representing a positive moderating influence on the relationship.

Substitutes for leadership must meet three criteria (Howell et al., 1986): (1) there must be a logical reason why the leader’s behavior and the potential substitute should provide the effect indicated by the criterion measure; (2) the potential substitute must be a neutralizer that weakens the effect of the leader’s behavior on the criterion; and (3) increasing levels of the substitute must result in higher criterion levels. This impact on the criterion distinguishes a substitute from a neutralizer; a substitute reduces and replaces the effect of the leader behavior on the criterion.

Although Kerr and Jermier originally focused on substitutes for task-oriented or relationship-oriented leader behavior, they stated that the “elaboration of the substitutes construct must necessarily include the specification of other leader behaviors” (Kerr & Jermier, 1978, p. 359). Incorporating transformational leader behavior into this paradigm, Podsakoff et al. (1996) reported several findings that link these bodies of literature. First, both transformational leader behaviors and substitutes for leadership had unique effects on a wide variety of follower outcomes. Second, the total proportion of variance accounted for by the substitutes for leadership and the transformational leader behaviors was substantially greater than had been previously reported for either alone. Finally, many of the transformational leader behaviors were significantly related to several of the substitutes for leadership variables. Thus, the omission of situational variables in previous studies of transformational leadership may have led to biased estimates of relationships found for transformational leaders.

Previous research on the “substitutes for leadership model” has been criticized recently by Villa, Howell, Dorfman, and Daniel (2003). They pointed out that much of the research on the effects of substitutes on relationships between leader behaviors and follower outcomes was not supported by a

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