

The impact of supervisory mentoring on personal learning and career outcomes: The dual moderating effect of self-efficacy

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ABSTRACT

Using survey data from 226 employees and their supervisors in four manufacturing companies in China, we found that employee self-efficacy has a dual moderating effect on the impact of supervisory mentoring on subordinate career outcomes. Path analytic tests of mediated moderation suggested that self-efficacy moderates the mediated effects of supervisory mentoring on job performance and career satisfaction through personal learning such that the mediated effect on job performance is stronger when employees have higher self-efficacy, but the mediated effect on career satisfaction is stronger when they have lower self-efficacy.

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Introduction

Supervisory mentoring has been recognized as a key developmental resource in organizational settings (Noe, Greenberger & Wang, 2002). Supervisors use their greater knowledge, experience and status to help develop their subordinates (Bass, 1990). Specifically, supervisory mentoring serves primarily three functions: a career function, a psychosocial function, and role modeling (Scandura & Ragins, 1993). These functions provide help for subordinates in sponsorship, coaching, protection, exposure-and-visibility, and challenging work assignments. Empirical studies suggest that the amount of supervisory mentoring provided predicts subordinate-reported career outcomes, such as career satisfaction, career commitment, and low turnover intentions (e.g. Koberg, Boss, & Goodman, 1998; Noe, 1988), and supervisor-rated career outcomes, such as promotion, compensation or salary increase (Dreher & Ash, 1990), and job performance. In this study, we focus the career outcomes on subordinate job performance and career satisfaction.

While the question of whether supervisory mentoring leads to positive outcomes is the primary focus in the mentoring literature, more research is called for to examine the intermediate process and boundary conditions through which supervisory mentoring affects subordinate work outcomes. To date, paucity of research has attempted to explore the mechanisms and to uncover the effectiveness of supervisory mentoring. The mentoring literature would benefit from a clearer delineation of factors that mediate or moderate the effect of supervisory mentoring on subordinate career outcomes.

We suggest that personal learning and self-efficacy are particularly salient to mentoring relationship. One important function of supervisory mentoring is to help subordinates to learn about organizational life and prepare them for advancement opportunities. Desire to learn plays a key role in the process of mentoring (Kagan, 1994). However, not much research has explicitly examined the mediating role of personal learning in the links between supervisory mentoring and subordinate career outcomes. More studies are needed to explore the effect of subordinate characteristics in the process of supervisory mentoring. Knowledge of how subordinate characteristics affect the impact of supervisory mentoring improves our understanding of the

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development of supervisory–subordinate relationships (Aryee, Lo & Kang, 1999; Turban & Dougherty, 1994). Self-efficacy provides explicit guidelines on how to develop and enhance the quality of human functioning such as human motivation and attainments (Bandura, 1995). In spite of the critical role in affecting individual's ability and willingness to exercise control (Litt, 1988), paucity of research has explored how subordinate self-efficacy affects their experiences in the receipt of supervisory mentoring. Taken together, this study aims to integrate the intermediate role of subordinate personal learning and potential boundary effect of self-efficacy in the relationship between supervisory mentoring and subordinate career outcomes.

Consistent with the current mentoring literature, supervisory mentoring will have a direct positive effect on protégés' job performance and career success (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz & Lima, 2004; Underhill, 2006). Moreover, mentoring process can be viewed as a mutual learning exchange relationship. This paper attempts to extend the current mentoring literature by incorporating research from the learning and development approach (Maurer, 2002). Personal learning and self-efficacy have been identified as important traits related to an individual's learning and development. Using a learning and developmental perspective, we developed and tested an integrated framework and posited that self-efficacy moderates the mediated effects of supervisory mentoring on outcomes (job performance and career satisfaction) through personal learning. The framework can be schematically represented in Fig. 1.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Supervisory mentoring and career outcomes

Following Russell and Adams (1997), we define supervisory mentoring as an intense interpersonal exchange between the supervisor (a senior experienced colleague) and a subordinate (a less experienced junior colleague) in which the supervisor provides support, direction, and feedback regarding career plans and personal development. In her study of the difference between a supervisory mentoring relationship and a typical employee/manager relationship, Booth (1996) found a manager is more structured and task-oriented while a mentor is committed to the long-term development of the protégé. A mentor has a deeper personal relationship with the protégé than does a manager. They may share with one another their personal values as well as on-and-off-the-job goals and experiences. Their connections go beyond those established in a formal reporting relationship which is dictated by the individual's respective positions. Supervisory mentors are generally more accessible and have more opportunities to provide career-related benefits than non-supervisory mentors (Richard, Ismail, Bhuian & Taylor, 2009). Supervisors have personal knowledge of their subordinates' needs and workplace environments and have responsibility for their subordinates' work-related development. Thus, supervisors have a unique opportunity to coach and counsel their subordinates and advocate their subordinates' career progression (Kram, 1985). The frequent daily interactions between the participants of a supervisory mentoring relationship might foster a closer relationship and a higher degree of trust and commitment than between participants of a non-supervisory relationship (Tepper, 1995). Thus, it should be reasonable that supervisors would, to some degree, mentor their subordinates.

Prior studies predominately support that supervisory mentoring enhances subordinate's subjective and objective outcomes (Allen et al., 2004; Underhill, 2006). First, supervisors possess more job knowledge. By providing subordinates with that job knowledge, subordinates are able to respond to problems that arise on the job (Hunter, 1986). Second, supervisors transfer new

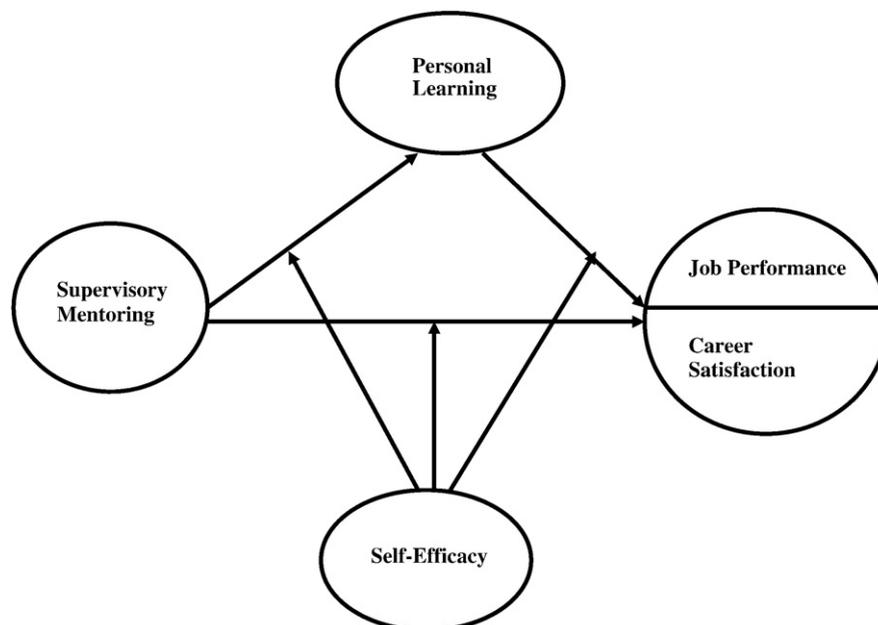


Fig. 1. Schematic representation of the model.

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