

Subordinate–manager gender combination and perceived leadership style influence on emotions, self-esteem and organizational commitment

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Abstract

A theoretical model was developed to investigate the relationships among subordinate–manager gender combinations, perceived leadership style, experienced frustration and optimism, organization-based self-esteem and organizational commitment. The model was tested within the context of a probabilistic structural model, a discrete Bayesian network, using cross-sectional data from a global pharmaceutical company. The Bayesian network allowed forward inference to assess the relative influence of gender combination and leadership style on the emotions, self-esteem and commitment consequence variables. Further, diagnostics from backward inference were used to assess the relative influence of variables antecedent to organizational commitment. The results showed that gender combination was independent of leadership style and had a direct impact on subordinates' levels of frustration and optimism. Female manager–female subordinate had the largest probability of optimism, while male manager teamed with a male subordinate had the largest probability of frustration. Furthermore, having a female manager teamed up with a male subordinate resulted in the lowest possibility of frustration. However, the findings show that the gender issue is not simply female managers versus male managers, but is concerned with the interaction of the subordinate–manager gender combination and leadership style in a nonlinear manner.

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1. Introduction

A recent study (Fletcher et al., 2000) claimed that women leaders especially place value on building and fostering relationships with their supervisees in order to realize performance outcomes. But this focus has not been appreciated as “real” work, being relegated to things “women do” or they are being “nice” and “helpful” (Fletcher et al., 2000) or worse being considered as a negative practice. However, no study to date has demonstrated that female managers have been able to significantly impact, either positively or negatively, organization-based self-esteem or organizational commitment. Furthermore, no study has investigated the impact

of gender combinations of managers and subordinates on organizational outcomes. Also, the role of subordinate–manager gender combinations and perceived leadership style on subordinates' emotions of optimism and frustration is an unstudied area. Knowledge of these influences has significant ramifications for both theory and practice.

The structure of the paper is to first outline a theoretical framework while highlighting important gaps in the literature. Specifically, gender combination and interactions, leadership styles, emotions, organization-based self-esteem and organizational commitment are reviewed. The initial section concludes with a statement of the objectives of the study. Next, methodological issues are addressed, with an emphasis on the requirements of causal claims and the appropriateness of Bayesian networks. The Results section presents a causal model, in the form of a Bayesian network, and the probabilistic inference findings based on network interventions. Finally, a discussion of results, implications and limitations conclude the paper.

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2. Conceptual framework and objectives

2.1. Gender combinations and interactions

Differences in the way males and females manage have been widely acknowledged (Eagly and Johnson, 1990; Lewis, 2000). In particular, female superiors are regarded as less competent than male superiors when providing criticism to their subordinates (Sinclair and Kunda, 2000). Although the traditional stereotype of a leader is that of a male (Oakley, 2000), with men being perceived to be “better” leaders than women (Heilman et al., 1989; Nieva and Gutek, 1980; Gutek, 1985), a current contention is that female leaders particularly endeavor to develop mutually rewarding relationships with their subordinates, further highlighting the high value female managers appear to put on relational aspects (Fletcher et al., 2000). The key appears to lie in the way the women participate in “growth fostering relationships,” which implies mutual empathy and empowerment (Jordan et al., 1991). The female focus is on participating in “connection,” mutuality, interdependence and collectivity rather than the traditionally masculine focus on self-gratification, autonomy, competition and independence. Fletcher et al. (2000, pp. 251–253) found in a detailed workplace study that women believed effective outcomes were best achieved through a “context of connection where the conditions of mutual psychological growth such as empathy, mutuality, authenticity and empowerment are met.”

Effective managers do not work in isolation from their subordinates. Rather, they work with their subordinates in what is often referred to as dyadic relationships of manager–subordinate (Brower et al., 2000). The nature of the relationship between the manager and subordinate has been acknowledged as both complex and interactive. Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that there is exchange and reciprocity in manager–subordinate relationships. Indeed, leader–member exchange theory claims that “both parties bring something of value to the exchange, and that the two individuals become interrelated” (Brower et al., 2000, p. 230). This clearly suggests that it is not sufficient to consider only one of the parties involved. Rather, we must consider the interaction of the subordinate–manager combination of the manager and the gender of each party.

Therefore, given that (1) the findings by Oakley (2000) and Fletcher et al. (2000) suggest that female managers appear to interact with their subordinates differently to male managers by placing importance on developing and building mutually satisfying relationships and that this is likely to impact on outcomes for the individuals involved as well as the respective organizations; (2) the study of female leaders by Fletcher et al. (2000) found that female managers were able to achieve effective outcomes by connecting with their subordinates and developing their subordinate’s competencies including self-confidence; (3) that we cannot simply look at the gender of the manager in isolation from the gender of the subordinate; and (4) no study to date has

investigated the gender combination of manager and subordinate and the impact of this on outcomes; we argue that demonstrating that these gender combinations produce differential results in terms of organizational outcomes has major theoretical and practical implications. In sum, it may not be simply whether the manager is male or female but the gender combination of manager and subordinate that is important.

2.2. Leadership style

The style of the leader is considered to be particularly important in achieving organizational goals (Dubinsky et al., 1995) and so it is not surprising that many studies endeavor to categorize leadership style. In this study, leadership style is categorized into four styles: laissez faire, management-by-exception, contingency reward and transformational leadership styles, following Bass (1985a) and Bass and Avolio (1994). These style categories have been widely applied in training efforts and evaluation studies (Bass and Avolio, 1994), as well as a typology in academic research (e.g., Sosik and Dionne, 1997). Laissez faire is a passive style that is reflected by high levels of avoidance, indecisiveness and indifference. Typical behaviors of management-by-exception leadership style include standard setting, deviation monitoring, error searching, rule enforcement and a focus on mistakes. Transactional exchanges of rewards and recognition for accomplishments for desired outcomes characterize the contingency reward style. The concept of transformational leadership, named by Burns (1978) in his exploration of “world class leaders” and championed by Bass (1985a,b, 1990, 1997, 1998), has enjoyed wide theoretical and practical acceptance (Tichy and Devanna, 1986; Stewart, 1994; Avolio, 1998).

Transformational leadership has been described as guidance through individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation and idealized influence (Bass, 1997). Individualized consideration emphasizes personal attention, while intellectual stimulation encourages use of reasoning, rationality and evidence. Further, inspirational motivation is assumed to raise levels of optimism and enthusiasm, while idealized influence provides a vision and sense of mission (Dubinsky et al., 1995). Studies have investigated relationships between transformational leadership style and a wide range of consequences, such as leadership trust (Podsakoff et al., 1996), self-efficacy beliefs (Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1996), leadership satisfaction (Yammarino and Bass, 1990), worker absenteeism and satisfaction (George and Jones, 1997; Staw et al., 1994; Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996) and performance outcomes (Barling et al., 1996; Howell and Avolio, 1993). Transformational leadership has consistently been demonstrated to offer benefits over the other three styles, particularly in terms of achieving organizational goals (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Dubinsky et al., 1995), and being able to evoke work effort (Barling et al., 1996).

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