



Differentiated transformational leadership and knowledge sharing: A cross-level investigation



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ABSTRACT

Building on theories of differentiated leadership and knowledge sharing, this study investigated the influence of dual-level transformational leadership on three group climates, leader–member exchange (LMX), and knowledge sharing. Using data from 275 employees of 71 work groups in five companies, we found that group-focused leadership and individual-focused leadership both facilitated knowledge sharing while the three group climates and LMX acted as mediators at the group level and individual level, respectively. In addition, our analysis showed an interesting finding in Chinese organizations: an innovativeness climate and a fairness climate contributed to an affiliation climate, which in turn promoted knowledge sharing.

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Introduction

Employee knowledge sharing is a key process to elevate individual learning to organizational performance improvement (Hansen, 2002; Mueller, 2014; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Considerable research has highlighted the various determinants of knowledge sharing among which a growing body of studies has turned its attention to the importance of leadership in facilitating knowledge sharing (Bryant, 2003; Connelly & Kelloway, 2003; Lin & Lee, 2004; Nguyen & Mohamed, 2011; Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006; Xue, Bradley, & Liang, 2011; Yang, 2007, 2010). While all these studies have yielded interesting and useful information, transformational leadership may be more important in promoting knowledge sharing (Bryant, 2003; García-Morales, Lloréns-Montes, & Verdú-Jover, 2008). Consistent with the theoretical proposition, empirical evidence has supported this direct and positive influence at the individual level (Behery, 2008; Carmeli, Atwater, & Levi, 2011; Chen & Barnes, 2006).

With respect to the recent advances in transformational leadership research, we do have concerns about the process by which transformational leaders affect their followers' knowledge sharing behaviors. As first put forward by Kark and Shamir (2002) and later validated by several scholars (Schriesheim, Wu, & Scandura, 2009; Tse & Chiu, 2012; Wang & Howell, 2012; Wu, Tsui, & Kinicki, 2010; Zhang, Li, Ullrich, & van Dick, 2013), transformational leadership

was conceptualized as incorporating behaviors concerning both groups and individuals. Therefore, we argue that the effect mechanism of transformational leadership on knowledge sharing is more complicated than its direct impact at the individual level.

Specifically, in this study, we address the black box between transformational leadership and knowledge sharing by positing two important mediating mechanisms: group climate at the group level and leader–member exchange (LMX) at the individual level. Consistent with prior findings in transformational leadership and knowledge sharing, we develop a cross-level model as depicted in Fig. 1. Two prominent features that are also two potential contributions to the existing literature of this model are as follows: (1) we conceptualize transformational leadership as a dual-level construct of which four dimensions focus on groups and two dimensions focus on individuals (Zhang et al., 2013), and (2) we investigate the cross-level direct and indirect paths to capture the impacts of both levels on knowledge sharing.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Transformational leadership and knowledge sharing

Personal knowledge is perceived as a source of priority, advantage, and even power. Individuals, facing the risk of losing personal privilege over others, are usually not willing to share knowledge without strong personal motivation (Boer, Berends, & Baalen, 2011; Ipe, 2003). Knowledge sharing scholars have examined various factors that could possibly lead to higher knowledge sharing levels in organizations, among which transformational leadership is expected to be useful in enhancing knowledge shar-

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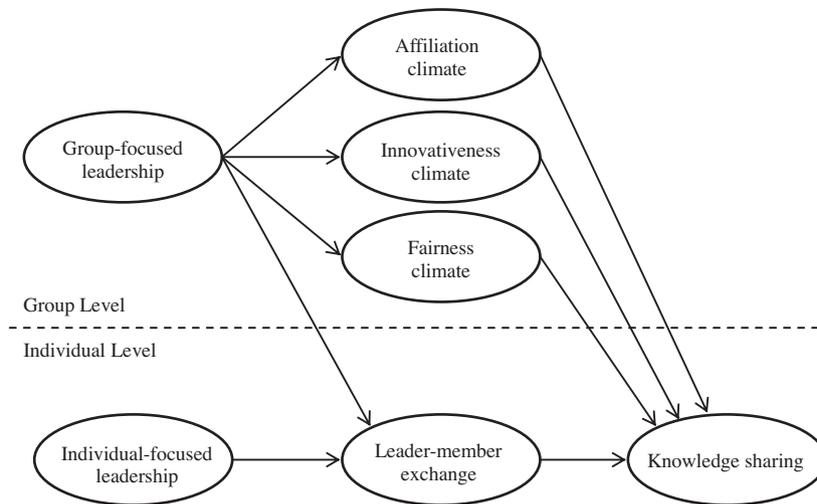


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model.

ing among individuals (Wang & Noe, 2010). Existing literature has reported a direct and positive relationship of transformational leadership with knowledge sharing at the individual level (Chen & Barnes, 2006; García-Morales et al., 2008). However, as Bryant (2003) argued, transformational leadership would have its effect on knowledge sharing at both the individual level and group level. Despite this intensive notion, all of the studies regarding this issue were conducted at the individual level.

This research shortcoming is problematic. As transformational leadership is an effective form of leadership that is associated with positive outcomes (e.g., Bass & Avolio, 1994; Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002), Kark and Shamir (2002) integrated relative theories and further proposed that transformational leadership's influence process might involve dual-level effects targeting groups and individuals separately. Building on these propositions, follow-up studies by several leadership scholars provided empirical support and confirmed the notion that transformational leadership was flexible as a level of analysis (e.g., Schriesheim et al., 2009; Tse & Chiu, 2012; Wang & Howell, 2012; Wu et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2013). We therefore opine that the effect mechanism of transformational leadership on knowledge sharing is complicated and not just a simple direct effect.

Consistent with prior research, we conceptualized transformational leadership as two distinct constructs, namely, group-focused leadership and individual-focused leadership, at the group level and individual level, respectively. Group-focused leaders view all group members as a whole and treat each member the same way (Dansereau, Alutto, & Yammarino, 1984; Wu et al., 2010). Consequently, members of the same group tend to have shared perceptions of the group leader's behavior (Muethel & Hoegl, 2013; Yammarino & Bass, 1990). In contrast, individual-focused leaders achieve their influence through the creation of followers' identification with them and vary their behaviors in accordance with individual differences (Wu et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2013). Thus, individual-focused leadership emphasizes individuals rather than groups. Six behaviors of transformational leadership were developed by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, and Fetter (1990) and were applied to research in the Chinese context (Wang, Law, Hackett, Wang, & Chen, 2005; Zhang et al., 2013). In the current study, out of these six behaviors, we defined group-focused leadership as a group-level construct consisting of four separate behaviors targeting groups (i.e., *identifying and articulating a vision, providing an appropriate model, fostering the acceptance of group goals, and expecting high performance*) and individual-focused leadership as

an individual-level construct comprising two distinct behaviors addressing individuals (i.e., *individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation*).

As for group-focused leadership, all four components motivate members within a group as a whole (Podsakoff et al., 1990; Zhang et al., 2013). First, identifying and articulating a vision refers to action that recognizes and creates new opportunities for the group, and inspires all the followers with the leader's vision of the future. Second, providing an appropriate model is associated with behavior that sets an example for all followers to follow and is consistent with the values the leader espouses. Third, fostering the acceptance of group goals aims at promoting cooperation among followers and getting them to work together toward a common goal. Fourth, expecting high performance depicts behavior that demonstrates the leader's expectations for excellence, quality, and/or high performance from all followers. What we can infer from the definitions of all four behaviors is that they collectively could prime a sense of togetherness across all members of a group and unite the group more tightly.

As we discussed earlier, knowledge sharing is voluntary and unlikely to take place without strong motivation (Ipe, 2003). However, when fighting for the common goal of the group, we argue that individuals would be motivated by group-focused leadership to contribute more to the group (Ayoko & Callan, 2010), and hence are more willing to share their personalized knowledge with others in order to expect potential improvements in group performance. We therefore propose that:

H1. *Group-focused leadership positively relates to knowledge sharing.*

As for individual-focused leadership, both of the two components pertain to individual perceptions rather than the whole group. Individualized consideration indicates behavior that shows the leader's respect and consideration of followers' personal feelings. Intellectual stimulation relates to the behavior that challenges followers to reexamine some of their personal assumptions about their work and rethink how it can be performed. Zhang et al. (2013) theoretically differentiated individual-focused leadership from two related constructs, leader favoritism (Dasborough, Ashkanasy, Tee, & Tse, 2009) and LMX differentiation (Henderson, Liden, Glibkowski, & Chaudhry, 2009). Explicitly, they summarized two salient characteristics of individual-focused leadership that make it independent from the two constructs. The first characteristic is that individual-focused leaders vary their behavior on the basis of

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