Initiating structure leadership and employee behaviors: The role of perceived organizational support, affective commitment and leader-member exchange

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The aim of this study was to examine the mediating role of perceived organizational support (POS) and affective organizational commitment (AOC) in the relationship between initiating structure (ISL) and employee behaviors. In addition, we also analyzed the moderator role of leader–member exchange in this relationship along three dimensions (affect, loyalty and professional respect). We conducted a survey-based study of 484 employees of a retail business and the results of the multiple regression analyses indicate that POS and AOC act as mediators in the relationship between ISL and two employee behaviors (extra-role organizational citizenship behaviors and turnover). Further, our results support the moderator effect of professional respect in the positive relationship between ISL and POS. This study makes an interesting contribution to the literature on ISL and its effects by construing POS as a consequence of this leadership style, and by adding professional respect among the possible moderators. Research avenues, limitations, and the practical implications of our findings are discussed.

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The study of leadership behaviors has attracted renewed interest in recent years. Researchers have been re-examining a conceptualization that was dominant in the 1950s but subsequently neglected (Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004), namely that of consideration and initiating structure behaviors (Fleishman, 1953). Originally, this conceptualization of leadership formed part of a vast research stream initiated by a group of researchers at Ohio State University. After noticing the limits of the trait theory of leadership, they examined the efficacy of leadership from a behavioral perspective. Several studies conducted in the 1950s–1970s contributed not only to developing our knowledge of consideration and initiating structure leadership, but also to establishing the robustness of this conceptualization (Fleishman, 1995). Surprisingly, despite their importance, consideration and initiating structure behaviors have largely paled in importance in leadership research, in favor of research on charismatic or transformational leadership (e.g., Bass, 1985). These behaviors are viewed by many scholars as the “forgotten ones” of organizational leadership (e.g., Judge et al., 2004; Lambert, Tepper, Carr, Holt, & Barelka, 2012).

The concept of consideration has been taken up in the behavioral architecture of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) and has been explored extensively in the last few decades (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006), yet the concept of initiating structure, and hence of initiating structure leadership (ISL), had seemed to fall into a theoretical and empirical gap. Whereas consideration behaviors are defined by their relational orientation, initiating structure behaviors are more task oriented. An initiating structure leader assigns responsibilities, specifies procedures to follow, clarifies expectations and plans work (House, Filley, & Kerr, 1971, p. 321). Because they are oriented toward attaining objectives, such leaders establish precise procedures and communication channels (Fleishman, 1953; Judge et al., 2004).

In 2004, Judge et al. reversed the trend by performing a rigorous meta-analysis of the validity of consideration and initiating structure behaviors in leadership research. After having analyzed 159 correlations, they established that initiating structure behaviors were linked to several indicators of leadership effectiveness, thus...
justifying their place in the “leadership puzzle.” This meta-analysis is seminal in that it prompted the reintroduction of initiating structure behaviors in leadership models. Since 2004, numerous studies have integrated initiating structure leadership in their models (e.g., Blickle et al., 2013; Bock, Ng, & Shin, 2008; Borgmann, Rowold, & Bormann, 2016; Dale & Fox, 2008; Ewen et al., 2014; Hartmann, Naranjo-Gil, & Perez, 2010; Holtz & Harold, 2013; Hong, Cho, Froese, & Shin, 2016; Keller, 2006; Kim, Eisenberger, & Baik, 2016; Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko, & Roberts, 2008; Piccolo et al., 2012). In 2011, the meta-analysis of DeRue et al. notably reaffirmed the link between initiating structure behaviors and diverse indicators of leadership effectiveness (group performance, job satisfaction, satisfaction with the leader and leader effectiveness).

Despite recent advances, several lines of analysis of ISL and its effects, previously considered very promising, have never been followed (Lambert et al., 2012). Such avenues include identification of the components of the “black box” and contextual elements that favor the efficiency of ISL.

Very few studies have examined the psychological mechanisms that intervene in the relationship between ISL and employee performance (Judge et al., 2004; Lambert et al., 2012). Previous research has focused on perceived justice (Gaudet & Tremblay, 2012), the regulatory focus (Neubert et al., 2008) and ambiguity and role conflict (Dale & Fox, 2008) can be considered components of the psychological “black box” of the effects of ISL. Nonetheless, the results of these studies show that much of the variance in employee performance remains unexplained in ISL models, which suggests that other mediating factors may play a role in this process. The first objective of this study was therefore to examine the mediating role of perceived organizational support (POS) and of affective organizational commitment (AOC) in the relationship between initiating structure behaviors and subordinate performance. POS represents the level of perceived engagement of the organization toward its employees (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), whereas AOC designates employees’ level of attachment toward their organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991). To our knowledge, no study has examined the combined role of these two attitudes in the relationship between ISL and employee performance.

The second objective of this study was to evaluate the moderator role of leader–member exchange (LMX, Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982) in the influence of ISL on POS. LMX represents the quality of the relationship between leaders and their subordinates (Graen & Cashman, 1975; Liden & Maslyn, 1998). We posit that the relationship between ISL and POS will be stronger when the level of LMX is higher rather than lower. We studied the three best-known dimensions of the LMX construct: affection (or affect), loyalty and professional respect (Liden & Maslyn, 1998).

To summarize, we tested a theoretical model in which (1) POS and AOC play a mediating role in the relationship between ISL and performance indicators (organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) and turnover); and in which (2) LMX moderates the relationship between ISL and POS. This model is presented in Fig. 1. Although studies conducted in the 1990s had established a positive link between initiating structure behaviors and OCB (Schnake, Cochran, & Dumler, 1995; Schnake, Dumler, & Cochran, 1993), subsequent research was mainly interested in the effect of consideration leadership (Fleishman, 1953). Thus, very few studies have sought to understand the link between ISL and OCB. Regarding turnover, apart from the inconclusive results of Dixon and Hart (2010), there is little evidence of a link between ISL and employee termination. In this regard, the antecedents of turnover and OCB are worth examining because they play a major role in organizational performance (Cascio, 2000; Podsakoff, Blume, Whiting, & Podsakoff, 2009; Whitman, Van Rooy, & Viswesvaran, 2010).
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