



# The trickle-down of work engagement from leader to follower: The roles of optimism and self-efficacy<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The present research seeks to explore *how* and *when* leader work engagement trickles down to the follower. Relying on social learning theory, we hypothesize that optimism mediates the relationship between leader work engagement and follower work engagement. Follower self-efficacy is supposed to strengthen the effect of follower optimism on work engagement. In a sample of 707 employees from 72 teams in Chinese enterprises, we tested the hypotheses using Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM). The results suggest that leader work engagement is positively related to follower work engagement and that follower optimism significantly mediates the relationship. Moreover, follower self-efficacy strengthens the positive relationship between follower optimism and work engagement as well as the indirect effect of leader work engagement on follower work engagement via follower optimism. Theoretical and practical implications are further discussed.

## 1. Introduction

Work engagement has garnered much research attention over the past decade (Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2014) and has been found to have a significant impact on both employee performance (Bakker & Bal, 2010; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009a) and well-being (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, & Ilies, 2012). A plethora of empirical evidence suggests that work is positively related to individual task performance (Xanthopoulou et al., 2012), contextual performance (OCBs and extra-role performance) (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011), proactive behavior (Sonnentag, 2003), individual work-family facilitation (Culbertson, Mills, & Fullagar, 2012), job satisfaction (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009b) and subjective well-being. Given its productivity and positivity, both academicians and practitioners are concerned about how to enhance employee work engagement. As a positive cognitive-emotional state, work engagement is transmittable between persons (Bakker, Shimazu, Demerouti, Shimada, & Kawakami, 2011). Taking an interactional perspective, researchers have explored and substantiated the interpersonal transmission of work engagement (Bakker et al., 2011; Bakker & Demerouti, 2009; Bakker & Xanthopoulou, 2009). For instance, Bakker et al.'s (2011) study showed that work engagement can transmit from a person to his/her spouse, and Bakker and Xanthopoulou (2009)

suggested that work engagement can cross over between work partners.

However, these studies exclusively focused on work engagement transmission at a single level, neglecting the fact that work engagement may transmit from people in higher hierarchies (i.e., leaders) to lower-level employees. According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1997), people learn values, emotions, attitudes, and behaviors from leaders (Johnson, 2008). It is likely that the leader's work engagement may be imitated and learned by the followers, which speaks to a potential trickle-down of work engagement from supervisor to subordinates. Previous studies have also supported the existence of an effect of leaders on employee work engagement (Tims, Bakker, & Xanthopoulou, 2011; Xanthopoulou et al., 2009a). However, to date, work engagement has mostly been studied at the individual level; the prevalence of multi-level methods has motivated researchers to theorize work engagement at a higher level, such as at the group or even organizational level (Barrick, Thurgood, Smith, & Courtright, 2015). In particular, as Barrick et al. (2015) noted, work engagement that is embedded in an organizational context and hierarchy should be susceptible to factors from multiple levels of the organization. In this sense, studying antecedents or transmission of work engagement at a single level prevents us from obtaining a full picture of work engagement. Given the limited research in this field, it is imperative to explore the antecedents of work engagement at a higher level. Taken together, and following the logic of

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“Like leader, like employee,” this study aims to explore *whether, how, and when* leader work engagement trickles down from supervisors to subordinates.

Our research intends to make a threefold contribution. First, we intend to explore the antecedents and transmission of work engagement at a higher level. As many researchers lament, work engagement research is plagued by a narrow focus on a single level, especially the individual level, concentrating on phenomena such as job demands and resources (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009a, 2009b) and on individual resources (Xanthopoulou et al., 2012). This narrow perspective may undermine our understanding of work engagement in terms of breadth and depth. Christian et al. (2011) called for research on work engagement in a broader context and at a higher level. Similarly, Barrick et al. (2015) advocated for studying work engagement at a higher level and within the complex organizational context. In response to their claims, we intend to study work engagement at the group (leader) level and explore how it will trickle down to the followers. Thus, we will be able to expand the antecedents of work engagement to a higher level and obtain a full picture of what factors may facilitate work engagement.

Second, by introducing social learning theory to work engagement trickle-down research, we attempt to enrich theoretical perspectives on work engagement and elaborate on the social learning process of the trickle-down model. Social learning theory is a principal theory in the trickle-down model and has been applied to a wide range of trickle-down phenomena (Mawritz, Mayer, Hoobler, Wayne, & Marinova, 2012; Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012). Nevertheless, Wo, Ambrose, and Schminke (2015) noted that, surprisingly, we still have little knowledge of how this social learning process occurs. They called for more research efforts to directly and explicitly unveil the social learning process that underlies the trickle-down model. Specifically, we examine the mediation of optimism in the trickle-down of work engagement from supervisors to subordinates. Optimism is considered a positive prediction learned from the social environment (Snyder et al., 1991) and has been found to link leader influence to employee work engagement (Tims et al., 2011; Xanthopoulou et al., 2009a). In this sense, optimism can capture the social learning process underlying the trickle-down of work engagement. Investigating the mediation of optimism can help us unfold the social learning process in trickle-down models and provide fresh insights into work engagement research.

Third, we further delineate boundary conditions that qualify the relationship between optimism and work engagement. In current organizational and management research, one of the main missions is to delineate boundary conditions of a certain theory or studied phenomenon. In our study, social learning theory asserts that the extent to which individuals can correctly understand and respond to the social environment is contingent upon individual self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001). For people with perceived optimism, confidence in their ability not only infuses them with positive prediction but also enables them to mobilize cognitive and emotional resources to translate a positive evaluation of the social environment into positive work outcomes (Bandura, 1982). Following this rationale, we posit that self-efficacy can equip optimistic employees with the confidence to translate positive expectancy into work engagement. In other words, self-efficacy will strengthen and qualify the relationship between optimism and work engagement. By examining the moderation of self-efficacy, we can further clarify the conditions under which work engagement can trickle down from supervisors to subordinates. The research model is shown in Fig. 1.

## 2. Literature review and hypotheses

### 2.1. The trickle-down model and social learning theory

In hierarchical organizations, people who are higher in the hierarchy have a significant influence on those who are lower in the hierarchy. Generally, those lower in the hierarchy tend to emulate and

imitate the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of their supervisors. Researchers have used the word “trickle-down” to describe the transmission of perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors from supervisors to subordinates (Masterson, 2001). Empirical studies have corroborated the trickle-down effect across a variety of phenomena, including organizational justice (Masterson, 2001; Wo et al., 2015), ethical leadership (Mayer et al., 2012), and abusive supervision (Mawritz et al., 2012). Social learning theory is the predominant theoretical underpinning of the trickle-down effect (Mawritz et al., 2012; Mayer et al., 2012). According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986), people learn the desirability and plausibility of a behavior from their social environment and then make decisions or perform based on those social cues. There are two stages in the social learning process: 1) people learn from the social environment via interpreting cues or stimuli, and 2) they use these interpretations to decide how to respond or behave.

In the trickle-down model, the two stages are as follows. First, people learn the appropriateness of a behavior from their supervisors. In organizations, supervisors are commonly considered legitimate role models. On the one hand, leaders are proximate to the followers, making their behaviors highly visible to them. On the other hand, supervisors have higher status and formal authority over those at lower organizational levels (Yukl & Lepsinger, 2004). Therefore, supervisors are naturally seen as a source of legitimate information (Ambrose, Schminke, & Mayer, 2013) and are the targets of identification and emulation (Mayer et al., 2012). From the supervisors' behaviors and their consequences, employees can learn the appropriateness of a behavior (Mayer et al., 2012; Tucker, Turner, Barling, & McEvoy, 2010). For example, rewarded behaviors are considered favorable, whereas punished behaviors are seen as unfavorable.

Second, based on what they learn from their supervisors, employees will decide and strive to emulate the rewarded behaviors (Bandura, 1977). Liu, Liao, and Loi (2012) suggested that the likelihood of individuals choosing to enact a behavior learned from role models depends on the perceived consequences of that behavior. People generally wish to obtain positive outcomes and avoid negative consequences (Bandura, 1977, 1986). This means that they will opt to mimic behaviors rewarded by leaders, as these behaviors will bring about positive outcomes. To do so, employees will set performance standards for themselves, monitor their own behaviors, and adjust them until they meet the standards. Over time, they will successfully emulate their leaders' favorable behaviors.

### 2.2. The positive relation between leader work engagement and follower work engagement

Consistent with previous research, work engagement is defined as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002, p. 74). Vigor refers to a high level of energy and mental resilience at work. Dedication indicates involvement in work and experiencing significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, and challenge. Absorption refers to full immersion in one's work. Employees who are absorbed in their work perceive that time passes quickly and find it difficult to detach themselves from work (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). Schaufeli et al. (2002) emphasized in their definition that work engagement is not a work attitude or behavior, but a stable and malleable work state. Work attitudes refer to individual cognitive and emotional evaluations of the work itself, while work behaviors indicate individual purposeful and planned actions to achieve set goals. Unlike either of these, work engagement is more a positive and transitory experience that depicts individual physical, emotional and cognitive immersion in the work (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008). Numerous studies have supported the distinction between work engagement and work attitudes (i.e., organizational commitment and job satisfaction) and the role of work engagement as the precursor of work behaviors (Christian et al., 2011). Given the transitory and malleable

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