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# When does respectful engagement with one's supervisor foster help-seeking behaviors and performance?

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## ABSTRACT

We developed an integrative logic for why respectful engagement with supervisors would encourage and enable help-seeking from coworkers, resulting in greater levels of task performance. Using time-lagged data, the results of a moderated-mediated model supported our theorizing that respectful engagement between employees and their supervisors is key to fostering help-seeking behaviors. Our results suggest respectful engagement fosters help-seeking behaviors particularly when employees report lower levels of psychological safety. Those help-seeking behaviors consequentially improve employee performance. We use these results to suggest how and when workplace relationships endogenously resource individuals to engage and achieve higher levels of job performance.

## 1. Introduction

The workplace provides numerous opportunities for coworkers to give and to receive help. Helping is a pro-social behavior that is pervasive in organizations where tasks are increasingly interdependent and complex (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000). Collaboration in such situations is not only needed (Grant & Patil, 2012; Taber & Deosthali, 2014), but is essential for carrying out work duties (Perlow, 1999; see Grodal, Nelson, & Siino, 2015). Helping involves both help-seekers and help-givers. Our focus here is on help-seeking, as this is an important behavior in work organizations (Gino & Schweitzer, 2008) that occurs daily when a person makes requests for resources from others at work (Mueller & Kamdar, 2011).

Seeking and providing professional help may be instrumental for a member's capacity to address demands and take on task-related issues. Research reveals several mechanisms by which one's job performance can improve. One mechanism for improving job performance is through the seeking of professional (work-related) help in organizations. Improvements in job performance arises from greater motivation and capacity for learning, the acquisition and development of new skills such as problem solving, the boosting of competence which enhance performance (Anderson & Williams, 1996; Bamberger, 2009; Brooks, Gino, & Schweitzer, 2015; Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2006; Lee, 1997). Further, recent research suggests that greater attention should be directed to the study of the context in which individuals are motivated to ask for professional help (Mueller & Kamdar, 2011), and to the study of the performance implications of help-seeking as enacted in the workplace (Geller & Bamberger, 2012). Scholars alert us that the link between help-seeking and performance is largely contingent and that this discretionary behavior depends on the workplace context, such that positive outcomes may not be realized (Geller & Bamberger, 2012, p. 493). For example, when one seeks help from another person and the latter (helper) does not provide the kind of help the help-seeker is hoping for this cannot only result

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in feelings of discomfort but also affect the performance of the help-seeker (Newark, Bohns, & Flynn, 2017). Others have pointed to the importance of behavioral configurations of helpers and recipients in shaping the interpersonal dynamics such that they will be more or less beneficial for performance improvements (Golan & Bamberger, 2015). Thus, key theoretical puzzles focus on the context in which help-seeking is enacted and when it increases performance.

When considering the context in which help-seeking is enacted, scholars also note that our understanding of the underlying sources which fuel the seeking of professional help needs further development (Bamberger, 2009). Particularly, a focus on the help-seeker and his/her perspective can deepen understanding of how interactions unfold (Grodal et al., 2015). Thus, an emphasis on interpersonal conditions is a promising avenue to investigate one's help-seeking behavior (Newman, 2006). However, this focus on interpersonal conditions has remained relatively underdeveloped (Hofmann, Lei, & Grant, 2009; Lee, 1997, 2002; see van der Rijt et al., 2013, p. 260). The promise of greater attention to interpersonal conditions, as a useful approach for understanding help-seeking, arises from a basic understanding of the way in which people interrelate. That interrelation can provide psychological and physiological resources, which in turn will allow them to be healthy and competent in what they are trying to accomplish (e.g., Heaphy & Dutton, 2008; Rousseau & Ling, 2007). In other words, high quality interrelating can create more positive psychological states that facilitate an optimal level of functioning (Vinarski-Peretz, Binyamin, & Carmeli, 2011).

A focus on how interpersonal conditions facilitate action is theoretically and practically important because help-seeking in work organizations involves taking personal initiative and is an effortful interpersonal action (Lee, 2002). A subordinate's help-seeking efforts are shaped, in part, by how supervisors treat them. However, in many work organizations supervisors—or people with formal or informal power over others—can open up or shut down an employee's initiative-taking, as they are pivotal actors in encouraging or discouraging these forms of discretionary behaviors.

Thus, a key question our study addresses is: how can supervisors encourage subordinates to seek professional help through their interactions with their subordinates? Our focus on how supervisors interact with their subordinates comes from a basic interest in the power of respectful engagement. Respectful engagement is a form of interaction that we know is important from a variety of relational theories. Our hypotheses are grounded in ideas drawn from the relational model of authority (Smith, Tyler, & Huo, 2003; Tyler & Lind, 1992), group value model (Smith, Tyler, Huo, Ortiz, & Lind, 1998), group engagement model (Tyler & Blader, 2000), and social valuing perspective (Dutton, Debebe, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Together these models contribute to building an overall logic for the importance of respectful interactions with supervisors in order to explain a subordinate's help-seeking from coworkers, thereby enhancing task performance. We call this integrative logic a “relational resourcing theory,” suggesting that positive forms of interacting at work (such as respectful engagement) are generative (i.e., resource-producing) conditions that enhance an individual's capacities for discretionary behaviors, like help-seeking. When help-seeking increases, this form of proactive behavior contributes to greater task performance.

We further seek to understand the relational conditions that facilitate help-seeking. We suggest that the psychological and social bolstering that emerges when supervisors interact with subordinates in respectful ways is particularly important when employees do not feel psychologically safe. Low levels of psychological safety imply that individuals are unable to completely show and employ their full selves, nor take interpersonal risks because of the fear of negative repercussions (Edmondson, 1999; Kahn, 1990). Therefore, our study contributes to a better understanding of the context in which help-seeking is enacted (Geller & Bamberger, 2012). We attempt to do so by shedding light on *how* and *when* a supervisor's respectful interactions with subordinates facilitate help-seeking, thereby contributing to job performance at work.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

### 2.1. The importance of respectful engagement

A relational perspective—which focuses on the ways people treat others or how people react to others' actions towards them—has long been a key subject of inquiry in organizational behavior, and more specifically in human relations. In pursuing this line of research, scholars have built and expanded on the relational model of authority (Smith et al., 2003; Tyler & Lind, 1992), the group value model (Smith et al., 1998), and the group engagement model (Tyler & Blader, 2000). All of those conceptual frameworks apply a justice perspective on respect to one's interaction with other persons (i.e., whether one treats another person fairly such that he or she feels respected) (Lind & Tyler, 1988, 1992). Conceptualizations of respect vary from respect as a cognitive “social evaluative feedback from the group” (i.e., perceived status; Blader & Tyler, 2009; Tyler & Smith, 1999), to respect as an affective valuation (i.e., perceived liking; Branscombe, Spears, Ellemers, & Dooje, 2002) (In: Huo & Binning, 2008). In either case, respect involves the perception of one person's treatment of another. While perceived respect—defined as “an individual's assessment of how they are evaluated by those with whom they share common group membership”—is important (Huo & Binning, 2008, p. 1571), it is often created not by one's formal position but through particular forms of interpersonal treatment during interaction. We call these particular forms of interpersonal treatment that create respect, “respectful engagement” (Dutton, 2003). The kinds of behaviors that capture “doing respect in interaction” include, “being present to others, affirming them, communicating and listening in a way that manifests regard and an appreciation of the other's worth” (Dutton, 2003, p. 22). We see respectful engagement as a pattern of interactions marked by behaviors that convey positive regard (Rogers, 1957), appreciation, and a sense worthiness of others (Goffman, 1967; see also Grover, 2014; Rogers & Ashforth, 2015; Shefer, Carmeli, & Cohen-Meitar, 2018). We suggest that respectful engagement captures the substance and essence of interpersonal interaction, fundamentally creating conditions that resource individuals to engage.

It is argued that respectful interactions are *generative* in the sense that these ways of interaction produce psychological and

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