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Leader negative feedback-seeking and leader effectiveness in leader-subordinate relationships: The paradoxical role of subordinate expertise

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ABSTRACT

From a motivational perspective of feedback-seeking behavior, we examined the mediating role of leaders' negative feedback-seeking from subordinates in the relationship between the quality of leader-member exchange (LMX) and subordinates' evaluation of leader effectiveness, along with the moderating role of subordinate expertise in the mediated relationship. Using 151 unique matched sets of leader and subordinate reports obtained from 5 large Korean companies, we found that the positive relationship between LMX and leader effectiveness was mediated by leaders' negative feedback-seeking. Additionally, the positive relationship between LMX and leader negative feedback-seeking was stronger when perceived subordinate expertise was lower. Lastly, the indirect effect of LMX on leader effectiveness through leader negative feedback-seeking was stronger when perceived subordinate expertise was lower. These findings were obtained after controlling for leaders' power distance and goal orientations that might influence their motives to seek or avoid feedback. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

The heroic orientation of leadership has led to viewing the leader's roles as setting goals, managing people, and providing the right answers, resulting in an exclusive emphasis on the outcomes or benefits that subordinates obtain from leader-subordinate relationships (Bass, 2008). This orientation also views feedback as valuable information that leaders provide to their subordinates or that subordinates are supposed to seek from their leaders (Ashford, Stobbeleir, & Nujella, 2016). As a consequence, although research on leader-member exchange (LMX) is built on its theorization of dyadic relationships around mutual trust, respect, and liking between a leader and each of his or her subordinates within a work unit (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), the benefits that leaders acquire in these reciprocal relationships remain largely unexplored (Wilson, Sin, & Conlon, 2010). Likewise, relatively little research to date has examined leaders' feedback-seeking from their subordinates (Ashford et al., 2016; Millward, Asumeng, & McDowall, 2010).

Feedback-seeking behavior refers to proactive action to gather information relevant to one's own behavior and performance at work to clarify role expectations and evaluate the adequacy and appropriateness (Ashford & Tsui, 1991). Given that spontaneous upward feedback and constructive criticism from subordinates are often constrained (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003), the rarity of research on leader feedback-seeking appears problematic, because leaders' feedback-

seeking without jeopardizing the image of being a competent manager can be instrumental for their leadership development and career advancement (Ashford et al., 2016; Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Sosik, Potosky, & Jung, 2002). Accordingly, this study attempts to fill the gaps in the literature of LMX and feedback-seeking by examining a benefit leaders gain from LMX, how the benefit is derived from the mediating role of their feedback-seeking from subordinates, and when such mediation is more or less pronounced by the moderating role of subordinate expertise.

Specifically, we consider subordinates' favorable evaluation of leader effectiveness as the benefit that leaders obtain from a high-quality LMX (Wilson et al., 2010). The importance of this benefit is evident in that leadership exists in the eye of the beholder and that favorable perceptions enhance leaders' performance evaluations and reputations in their organizations (Bass, 2008). What is unclear, however, is whether such a positive appraisal of the leadership is mainly derived from actual managerial improvement by leaders' genuine reciprocation for a high-quality LMX (Wilson et al., 2010) or from apt impression management by taking advantage of a high-quality relationship (Wayne & Green, 1993). A proactive form of managerial action that helps explore these two possibilities is negative feedback-seeking behavior, a proactive attempt to obtain information about one's inadequacies in role fulfillment and work performance (Ashford & Tsui,

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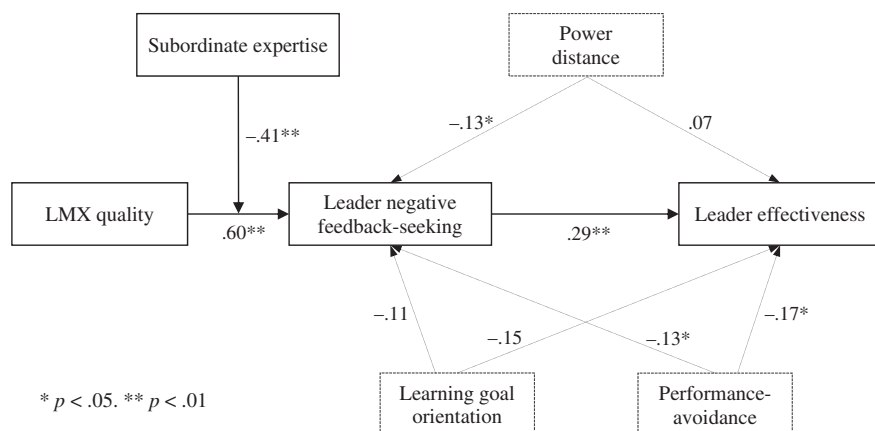


Fig. 1. Research model and summary of results.

1991). Seeking negative feedback proves to be not only more diagnostic and developmental, but also more image enhancing than positive feedback-seeking that asks for good news about oneself (Morrison & Bies, 1991; Moss, Valenzi, & Taggart, 2003). Thus, negative feedback-seeking behavior can be affected by two different motives: an *instrumental* motive for performance improvement and an *impression management* motive for enhancing or protecting one's image/ego (Ashford et al., 2003; Ashford & Tsui, 1991).

Feedback-seeking is a complex goal-oriented process that involves both instrumental self-assessment activities and image- and ego-sensitive considerations (Ashford et al., 2016). Research suggests that leaders' negative feedback-seeking from subordinates can be even more complex, because the leaders may face the dilemma between the need for accurate assessment for performance improvement and the need for image/ego management (Millward et al., 2010; Morrison & Bies, 1991). Expectations of competence across a wider range of tasks are typically greater for leaders, compared to lower level employees (Ashford & Tsui, 1991). In such cases, with increased instrumental utility of feedback from subordinates, potential damage to a leader's image and ego by drawing attention to his or her incompetence increases as well. Given this tendency, it is expected that a high-quality, rather than a low-quality, LMX relationship is more conducive to leaders' negative feedback-seeking from subordinates. When directed to high-quality LMX subordinates, leaders' negative feedback-seeking is more likely to be seen as a way to reciprocate in a positive manner for a high-quality relationship and more likely to convey an image of being attentive to and caring about the interests of subordinates, which in turn encourage subordinates' favorable evaluation of leader effectiveness.

Furthermore, we suggest that considering leaders' motives underlying their negative feedback-seeking from subordinates facilitates a more nuanced understanding of leader feedback-seeking behavior, in that different, potentially conflicting motives can drive leaders to be selective about the source of feedback (Millward et al., 2010). For example, when leaders act primarily upon an instrumental motive for performance improvement, they are more likely to seek honest feedback from those who can actually help reduce uncertainties and develop competence. When the impression management motive is salient, however, increased image and ego concerns make such honest feedback-seeking less likely (Ashford et al., 2003). To examine which of the two feedback-seeking motives predominates in leaders' feedback-seeking from subordinates, we considered subordinate expertise as a moderator in the relationship between LMX and leader negative feedback-seeking. Subordinates serve as feedback sources, and their expertise may provide leaders with two contrasting implications: (a) expert subordinates as sources of useful information or (b) expert subordinates as potential rivals and referent persons who set comparative standards that may create the impression of leader inferiority to the subordinates (Millward et al., 2010; Morrison & Bies, 1991;

Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). If leaders' negative feedback-seeking is primarily driven by the instrumental motive, then leaders are more likely to seek negative feedback from expert subordinates rather than from non-expert subordinates because they view the feedback as essential for their development. Contrarily, if leaders ask for critical appraisal from subordinates for the purpose of impression management, they are less likely to seek negative feedback from expert subordinates, because such feedback-seeking may increase subjective probabilities of disapproval that would endanger the competent leader's image and identity.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the above competing rationales underlying leader negative feedback-seeking in supervisory relationships by completing three tasks. First, we examined the mediating role of leader negative feedback-seeking behavior in the relationship between LMX and subordinates' evaluation of leader effectiveness. Second, we explored whether the relationship between LMX and leader negative feedback-seeking is positively or negatively moderated by subordinate expertise. Lastly, we attempted to determine whether the indirect relationship between LMX and leader effectiveness through leader feedback-seeking is contingent on perceived subordinate expertise. Fig. 1 presents this study's research model.

This study makes two main contributions. First, by investigating what leaders obtain from supervisory relationships and how they acquire benefits, this study corroborates the relational approach to LMX (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Wilson et al., 2010) and the feedback-seeking literature (Ashford et al., 2016). By providing empirical evidence for the mediating role of leader negative feedback-seeking in the relationship between LMX and leader effectiveness, we extend the LMX and feedback-seeking literature, which has tended to view only subordinates as feedback seekers and beneficiaries of LMX. Second, this study further extends the feedback-seeking literature by looking at the effect of feedback source expertise from the leader's perspective, and by demonstrating the moderating role of subordinate expertise in predicting leader negative feedback-seeking behavior. The above contributions are practically important as well, because leaders, compared to subordinates, are generally intolerant of feedback, negative in particular (Anseel, Beatty, Shen, Lievens, & Sackett, 2015) and thus have limited access to spontaneous and critical assessment from subordinates (Ashford et al., 2016). Given this tendency, it is especially important for leaders to actively seek such feedback, ideally not for impression enhancement, but for performance improvement.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Leader negative feedback-seeking as a mediator

Relational leadership approaches (Uhl-Bien, 2006) consider leadership as a social influence process in which both leaders and

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