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The impact of a workplace terrorist attack on employees' perceptions of leadership: A longitudinal study from pre- to postdisaster

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ABSTRACT

A terrorist attack targeting a workplace represents an organizational crisis that requires the leaders to manage emerging threats. The changing roles and expectations of the leaders are reflected in the employees' perceptions of them over time. The purpose of this study was to determine whether the 2011 Oslo bombing attack affected the targeted employees' perceptions of the leadership behaviors of their immediate superiors or the organizational managers' interest in the health and well-being of their workers. Ministerial employees ($n \approx 180$) completed questionnaires on fair, empowering, and supportive leadership, in addition to human resource primacy, on two occasions several years prior to the terrorist attack. Assessments were then repeated one, two, and three years after the attack. Changes in the course of perceived leadership from predisaster to postdisaster were examined using bootstrapped *t*-tests and latent growth curve models. Furthermore, the general course of perceived leadership was compared with a nonexposed control sample of matched employees. Results showed that employees with high levels of posttraumatic stress perceived their immediate leader to be less supportive. However, overall perceptions of leadership were remarkably stable, which suggests that the effects of critical incidents on perceptions of leadership may be negligible.

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Introduction

When directed at a workplace, a terrorist attack can be characterized as an acute and extraorganizational stressor that may have devastating effects on the employees' physical and psychosocial work environment. Potential challenges include destruction of workspaces, relocation and restructuring of the organization, and forcing employees to cope with their own and colleagues' posttraumatic stress symptoms. A terrorist attack directed at a workplace represents an "organizational crisis," defined as "a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as a belief that decisions must be made swiftly" (Pearson & Clair, 1998, p. 60).

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Previous research suggests that perceived leadership can have a profound influence on organizational resilience after a terrorist event (Peus, 2011) and the employees' ability to recover from workplace trauma (Farooq Malik, Abdullah, & Anak Uli, 2014; Montano, Reeske, Franke, & Hüffmeier, 2016). Leadership in crises involves working under other organizational conditions that are abnormal in day-to-day leadership, and styles of leadership may not successfully transcend to different situations and contexts (Sternberg & Vroom, 2002). Therefore, knowledge about how perceived leadership may change in such situations is crucial in developing proficient leaders that are able to lead their employees and organizations through a crisis. Furthermore, knowledge about how and when perceived leadership change occurs will add to our overall understanding of perceived leadership as a phenomenon. In this study, we aimed to determine whether and to what extent a terrorist attack on a workplace could change employees' perceptions of leadership.

Terrorist attacks on workplaces

Terrorism is defined as "the premeditated use or threat to use violence by individuals or subnational groups against noncombatants to obtain political or social objectives through the intimidation of a large audience" (Brandt & Sandler, 2010, p. 216). In the aftermath of terrorist attacks, elevated levels of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have been found both in the USA (Galea et al., 2002; Grieger, Waldrep, Lovasz, & Ursano, 2005; North, 2001) and in Europe (Conejo-Galindo et al., 2007; Hansen, Nissen, & Heir, 2013). However, not all of the exposed individuals are seriously psychologically harmed by trauma (Bonanno, Brewin, Kaniasty, & La Greca, 2010). For example, a review of longitudinal studies after the 9/11 terrorist attacks showed that one to two thirds of exposed individuals developed a chronic course of posttraumatic stress (Steinert, Hofmann, Leichsenring, & Kruse, 2015).

Officials, business organizations and their employees may be particularly attractive targets for terrorists (Brandt & Sandler, 2010; Inness & Barling, 2005) because they can be selected for ideological reasons, it is easy to target many people at once, and they often receive considerable media attention (Farooq Malik et al., 2014). Several studies of work environments after the 9/11 terrorist attacks suggest that terrorist attacks have consequences not only for individuals, but also for their workplaces. For example, employees who experienced strain from the terrorist attacks were more likely to be absent in the weeks after the event (Byron & Peterson, 2002). In addition, employees may experience emotional, attitudinal, and relational disengagement from their work (Kleinberg, 2005).

Studies in other contexts also contribute to our understanding of the effects on employees of a traumatic event on the workplace. Employees exposed to violence on the job report less confidence and enthusiasm about their job or employer (Nachreiner, Gerberich, Ryan, & McGovern, 2007), and employees working in banks that have recently been robbed have less desire to work for the same employer (Miller-Burke, Attridge, & Fass, 1999). Furthermore, employees exposed to earthquakes experienced increased workload and job complexity and a lack of institutional support (Kuntz, 2014). Similarly, a study of organizations requesting assistance from American critical incident stress management units found that incident severity was associated with lower job performance four weeks after the incident, extended absences, and transfers to other units within the organization (Defraia, 2013). Thus, it is likely that a terrorist attack directed at the workplace has consequences for employees' perceptions of their work environment.

Leadership in the aftermath of terrorist attacks

A terrorist attack represents a crisis that threatens the viability of the organization (Pearson & Clair, 1998), may have the potential to dismantle it (King, 2002) and often falls under close media scrutiny (Fink, 1986). Therefore, in times of crisis, leadership becomes integral to successful organizational crisis outcomes, and may intensify or attenuate the consequences of traumatic events (Dynes, Quarantelli, & Kreps, 1981; Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio, & Cavarretta, 2009). Leaders have to think fast and rationally to act (Weisæth, Knudsen, & Tønnessen, 2002) in a novel and ambiguous situation while interacting with other leaders who may not have the same beliefs concerning the best response to such events (Combe & Carrington, 2015). When an organization is in crisis, the role and expectations of the leaders are likely to change (Muffet-Willett & Kruse, 2009; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). Often, leaders have specific roles to execute, but owing to the rarity of crises, they may not be familiar with or prepared to manage those specialized tasks. While crisis management involves issues at several levels (e.g. social–political or technological–structural) and requires orchestration of multiteam efforts (DeChurch et al., 2011; Pearson & Clair, 1998), it also involves leadership of individual employees. In this paper, we focus on the individual level of analysis (see e.g. Dionne et al., 2014).

After traumatic events, employees tend to feel more vulnerable and are more willing to scrutinize their leaders (Hurst, 1995). Employees are inclined to look to their leaders; they expect them to be prepared to take charge, to provide clear directions, to be compassionate toward victims, and to prioritize security measures (Boin & Hart, 2003; Byron & Peterson, 2002). This means that the organization needs leaders that are equipped to adapt their leadership practices to meet the extra challenges while preserving organizational stability, structure, and function (Defraia, 2013). From an individual and psychological perspective, how the leaders are perceived is influenced by the leaders' objective behavioral response to the terrorist attack; e.g. how they protect their workforce and facilitate restoration. In addition, the employees' subjective appraisals play a role in their perceptions of leaders' behavior.

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