A new substitute for leadership? Followers' state core self-evaluations

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ABSTRACT

In this experimental study we integrate transformational leadership theory with recent theoretical considerations and research on core self-evaluations (CSE) in a contingency approach to leadership. We analyze to what extent high state CSE may represent a substitute for transformational leadership in terms of its influence on follower motivation and performance. In a 2 × 2 –design the relationship between transformational leadership and followers' motivation and performance is compared for followers with high versus low state CSE. Participants (76 students) were randomly assigned to four groups. High or low state CSE was activated through a priming manipulation. After that, participants were presented with a written vignette of a transformational or a nontransformational leader who instructs them to perform the subsequent task, a word-search puzzle. Results reveal that followers' state CSE moderated the relationship between transformational leadership and followers' motivation and performance. As expected, followers' state CSE represents a substitute for transformational leadership. Results are discussed for leadership research and management practice.

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1. Introduction

The identification of contingencies determining whether preventive or intervening actions are effective is an important goal in clinical, psychoeducational, and business settings. Knowledge on such contingencies may help to streamline treatments and to spare program resources. Evaluations of intervening programs and treatments commonly report that they are more beneficial for those with low baseline levels in a given resource. As an example, a clinical intervention designed to strengthen individuals' self-efficacy and foster positive self-evaluations may be more effective for those with lower self-efficacy levels because there is more potential for a gain (Haney & Durlak, 1998).

Due to their positive impact on a number of valuable outcomes (Chang, Ferris, Johnson, Rosen, & Tan, 2012) positive self-evaluations represent an important individual resource also in organizational settings. In organizations, similar to an intervention, transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) may strengthen employees' self-worth and self-efficacy in order to raise their motivation and consequently improve their performance (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). Accordingly, just like the abovementioned intervention, transformational leadership should be more beneficial for followers with low baseline levels in these self-evaluations. When followers' self-evaluations are currently low, a boost in motivation and performance through transformational leadership should be larger as there is much potential for a boost. In contrast, when followers' self-evaluations, and as a consequence, their motivation to perform well, are already high, there is not much potential for a gain. Therefore, they are not in need of a transformational leadership style. This may render followers' self-evaluative states a potential substitute for leadership, a situational contingency of leadership effectiveness.

In the present study we focus on followers' current core self-evaluations (state CSE; Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2004, 2011) as a substitute for transformational leadership by analyzing its moderating influence on the links between transformational leadership and...
Transformational leadership has been one of the most popular leadership paradigms of the last decades (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). At the heart of the behavior-oriented model of Bass (1985; Bass & Avolio, 1995) is the assumption that transformational leaders motivate, inspire, and “transform” followers’ needs, values, and motives towards a collective, higher-order goal. Transformational leadership consists of the following five dimensions (Bass & Avolio, 1995): idealized influence attributed, idealized influence behavior, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. According to Bass (1985), transformational leaders communicate an attractive vision and ideological goals and express confidence in followers’ capabilities to achieve these goals. By acting in accordance with their communicated high performance standards and values transformational leaders serve as role models and cause followers to develop a deep sense of commitment and trust in their leadership. Transformational leaders also stimulate creativity and careful problem solving in their followers by, for example, setting high performance goals while showing confidence and faith in followers’ competencies. Through this, followers come to believe that they can accomplish the task so that they persist in their efforts and overcome significant obstacles (Bass, 1985). As a consequence of these behaviors, followers are willing to work hard in order to realize the vision and perform beyond expectations. In accordance with Bass’ theory several meta-analyses (e.g., Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996) give evidence to the importance of transformational leadership for both subjective and objective performance criteria.

As an approach to explain how transformational leaders positively impact follower performance Shamir and colleagues (1993) stress the importance of motivational mechanisms as mediators of transformational leadership effectiveness. Transformational leaders enhance followers’ self-esteem and self-efficacy and, as a consequence, their motivation to perform well (Bandura, 1997) by setting high performance goals while showing confidence and faith in followers’ competencies. Through this, followers come to believe that they can accomplish the task so that they persist in their efforts and overcome significant obstacles (Bass, 1985). Further, transformational leaders increase followers’ intrinsic motivation by emphasizing higher ideological values and elevating the significance of the task. As a consequence, followers view their jobs as more meaningful and significant and are more motivated to perform well. Past research has confirmed a number of motivational mechanisms that are able to explain the positive effect of transformational leadership on follower performance, such as self-efficacy (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Liao & Chuang, 2007), intrinsic motivation (Charbonneau, Barling, & Kelloway, 2001), and extra effort (Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002). The positive relationship between transformational leadership and follower motivation has also been supported by Judge and Piccolo’s meta-analysis (2004). Thus, based on past theory and research, we suggest:

Hypothesis 1a.

Transformational leadership will have a positive effect on followers’ performance.
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