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Using theory on authentic leadership to build a strong human resource management system

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ABSTRACT

Prior work has questioned whether human resource management (HRM) lives up to the organizational benefits it espouses. The intentions underlying human resource (HR) practices often differ from how they are implemented by line managers or how they are ultimately perceived by followers, thus undermining the strength of the HR system in influencing organizational outcomes and with them the overall reputation of HRM. We argue that line managers, specifically those who display authentic leadership behaviors, can strengthen an HR system (i.e., aligning intended, actual, and perceived HR policies and practices) by implementing HR practices in a way that they are perceived as distinct, consistent, and reflecting consensus. Authentic leadership theory departs from more traditional, top-down fit perspectives in strategic HRM to consider the dynamic way in which individuals within an organizational context co-create felt and perceived authenticity in interaction with others. In other words, by providing a more dynamic approach to creating alignment in HRM, authentic leadership helps HRM attain more authenticity and credibility in the organization.

Despite extensive efforts over decades, strategic human resource management (SHRM) has received a “failing grade” (e.g., [Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010](#); [Kaufman, 2012](#)) with limited acceptance of its role as a strategic partner. Specifically, only 41.1% of companies report that the human resource management function was a “full partner” in strategic decision making in 2001 and this percentage had not changed since 1995 ([Lawler & Mohrman, 2003, p. 24](#)). In particular, the HR department has been criticized for not being effective in the implementation of HR practices (e.g., [de Gama, McKenna, & Peticca-Harris, 2012](#); [Pfeffer & Sutton, 2013](#); [Piening, Baluch, & Ridder, 2014](#); [Woodrow & Guest, 2014](#)). Despite significant strides and good intentions to have more impact, it has been proposed that “HR’s aspirations do not yet fully align with its ability to deliver” ([Boudreau & Ziskin, 2011, p. 255](#)). Until recently there has been a failure of researchers to distinguish between HR practices intended by the organization and those actually implemented ([Khilji & Wang, 2006](#)) which are more important to how employees respond to HR policy and practices in terms of satisfaction ([Khilji & Wang, 2006](#)) and outcomes ([Kehoe & Wright, 2013](#)). This paper thus aligns with prior work that has aimed to shed light on how SHRM may increase the status and credibility of HRM in organizations.

To implement practices effectively, prior theory has suggested that HRM needs to introduce a “strong” SHRM system that provides a clear line of sight from strategy at the top of the organization to behavior throughout the organization; this can be done by ensuring that HR practices are aligned to provide clear messages to employees on what the organization needs from them ([Bowen & Ostroff, 2004](#)). Further, line managers are of critical importance to ensuring intended practices are enacted and perceived by employees

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(Nishii, Khattab, Shemla, and Paluch, *in press*; Nishii, Lepak, & Schneider, 2008; Piening et al., 2014; Sikora, Ferris, & Van Iddekinge, 2015). Whilst the status and capability of HR practitioners is important to effective implementation – including their willingness and ability to partner with line managers (Sanders & Frenkel, 2011; Watson, Maxwell, and Farquharson, 2007) – the capability of line managers in terms of their ability and willingness to implement HR practices is a key mediator (Sanders & Frenkel, 2011; Watson, Maxwell, & Farquharson, 2007), and the organization context a moderator (i.e., organizational culture, climate, and politics supportive of HRM; Sikora & Ferris, 2014) in this process. In particular, the interpersonal skills (Cunningham & Hyman, 2006; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Sikora et al., 2015) and the leadership behavior of line managers (i.e., supportive leadership; Sanders & Frenkel, 2011) are important elements of their ability to implement HR practices. In this paper we argue that authentic leadership will create more alignment between how HR practices are intended to function by the HR function, how they are enacted by leaders, and ultimately how they are perceived by followers (Nishii & Wright, 2007). We believe theory on authentic leadership can contribute to SHRM theory in two key ways.

First, authentic leaders have the skill and motivation to work with HR practitioners, other line managers, and subordinates to implement HR practices, not just because they have interpersonal skills, but because they are driven to maintain integrity between intended, espoused, and implemented practices and to ensure that employees perceive integrity in the implementation of HR practices. Authentic leadership is linked to leader integrity (Leroy, Palanski, & Simons, 2012) and follower identification, trust, and the quality of relationship with the leader (Gardner, Coglisier, Davis, & Dickens, 2011). Consequently, it is likely that line managers who are authentic leaders have the personal capabilities to implement intended HR practices effectively. Whereas past literature has acknowledged the important role of line managers as enactors or implementers of HR practices (Den Hartog & Boon, 2013; Gilbert, De Winne, & Sels, 2015; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007) there has been little theorising on how line managers can be most effective in doing so.

Second, line managers operate in a complex system which requires them to juggle the competing demands of various organizational stakeholders (Sanders & Frenkel, 2011; Watson et al., 2007). Such competing pressures may hinder line managers' ability to enact an HR policy the way it was intended or to ensure employees perceptions are in line with those intentions. Theory and research on authentic leadership sheds more light on these challenges because authentic leadership provides a dynamic view on how the authenticity of the leader and his or her behaviour (including the implementation of certain HR practices) is constructed in interaction with the environment. Further, the HRM implementation process is frequently viewed as a static, top down, and one-way process from the HR department's design of practices to implementation by line managers. However, it is likely that this process is more dynamic than previously theorised, requiring iterative interactions between multiple stakeholders, including the HR department, line managers, and employees. We believe that line managers who are authentic leaders are equipped to operate effectively in such a context and can thus prove useful in solving the problem of a lack of alignment of HR practices (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). This makes a contribution to closing the gap between intended and actual practices but also to how line managers may influence employee's perceptions of HR practices which is an area that has received little attention to date (Kehoe & Wright, 2013).

In contrast to a more static view on person-environment fit that characterizes traditional views of strategic alignment (i.e., where leaders and employees are required to fit a mold imposed by the HR function; Schneider, 1987), authentic leadership suggests that fit is more dynamic and is co-created between leaders and followers (Leroy, Anseel, Gardner, & Sels, 2015), as well as between leaders and HR business partners (Nishii et al., *in press*). Thus we support the notion that the HR process can be viewed as a multi-stage process involving multiple actors (Bondarouk, Trullen, & Valverde, 2016). Authentic leadership allows each party to maintain its unique perspective, while also seeking communality to come to a strong personally endorsed and shared identity (Brewer, 1991; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005), thus creating more alignment between intended, enacted, and perceived HR practices. Furthermore, we propose that misalignment is reduced because authentic leadership helps to create more consensus in, and distinctiveness and consistency of, the HR system (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). These relationships are summarized in Fig. 1, our proposed theoretical model. Thus we propose that authentic leaders can maintain integrity even in (increasingly common) dynamic contexts that induce complexity that threaten “fit” between intended and enacted practices. We believe that theory on how HRM integrity can be maintained in dynamic contexts is underdeveloped.

In specifying the relationships in Fig. 1, this paper contributes to prior research by clarifying how authentic leadership helps to foster the perceived legitimacy, credibility and authenticity of HR practices in organizations. Line managers can play an important leadership role in restoring faith and credibility back into HRM by fostering a strong, integrated HR system. Interestingly, this theory suggests that the route to a strong, aligned HR system does not reflect the more traditional focus where employees are “forced to fit,” but instead one where fit is a dynamic concept that is constructed and continuously renegotiated in the organization. In allowing room for individual agency, while accounting for the constraints of organizational structure (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Deci & Ryan, 2000), authentic leadership reveals how a strong HR climate can be created.

1. The role of line managers in HR practice implementation

Line managers too often play a significant role in the misalignment between intended, actual, and perceived HRM because it is through line managers that HR policy is operationalized (Holt Larsen & Brewster, 2003; Nishii et al., *in press*; Sikora & Ferris, 2014). Managers play an important sensemaking role in translating the HR department's espoused messages for employees (Nishii et al., *in press*). It is the HR practices that line managers enact (Sikora et al., 2015) and employees subsequently experience (Piening et al., 2014; Purcell et al., 2003) and perceive (Nishii et al., 2008), rather than the practices that HR practitioners intend to implement, that influence behavior and outcomes. Prior empirical work highlights a strong relationship between line managers' and employees' perceptions of HR practices (rather than the actual practices) and subsequent performance (Woodrow & Guest, 2014) consistent with

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