Explaining benefits of employee proactive personality: The role of engagement, team proactivity composition and perceived organizational support

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ABSTRACT

Proactive personality is an individual difference factor capturing the behavioral tendency toward displaying proactive behaviors to enact positive situational changes. Drawing from the Job Demands – Resources framework and trait activation theory, we conducted two studies to extend the proactive personality literature by responding to calls to explore how and under which circumstances proactive personality affects work outcomes. We found that work proactive personality related to performance (i.e., task performance and counterproductive work behaviors) through its relationship with engagement in a field study of 340 employee-supervisor dyads (study 1). In order to explore what organizational factors can be targeted to intervene or support employees who lack proactive personality, we explored the boundary conditions and organizational circumstances of the proactive personality-engagement relationship. We conducted a multilevel study of 52 teams (study 2) and showed that perceived organizational support and team proactive personality composition (mean) moderated the relationship between individual proactive personality and work engagement. Specifically, this positive relationship was found to be stronger among employees who had low perceived organizational support, and who worked in teams with high team proactive personality means.

Proactive employees are of great value to organizations (Crant, 2000; Fuller & Marler, 2009). They are characterized as being unconstrained by situational limitations and likely to seek out opportunities to shape one's environment by bringing about meaningful changes (Bateman & Crant, 1993). Proactive personality is a unique dispositional characteristic defined as a behavioral tendency toward taking personal initiative in creating a favorable environment (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Crant, 2000). Mounting empirical evidence has accumulated in the past two decades showing that proactive personality is associated with desirable outcomes at the individual, team, and organization levels, including job performance (e.g., Chan, 2006; Li, Liang, & Crant, 2010; Thomas, Whitman, & Viswesvaran, 2010), creativity (Kim, Hon, & Crant, 2009), positive work attitudes and perceptions (Chan, 2006), and newcomer adaptation (Chan & Schmitt, 2000; Kim et al., 2009). Fuller and Marler (2009), in a meta-analytic review of the research on proactive personality, purport that proactive personality is consistently positively related to career success and job performance above and beyond other commonly utilized individual difference variables.

Despite the fruitful explorations of proactive personality's effects as a precursor of relevant individual and organizational outcomes, there are critical areas about which we know relatively little. First, although our understanding of relationships between

proactive personality and desirable outcomes is continuously growing, counterproductive work behavior (CWB), an essential performance facet and a theoretically relevant consequence of proactive personality, has received far less empirical consideration in the proactive personality literature. CWBs are defined as intentional behaviors on the part of an employee viewed by the organization as contrary to its legitimate interests (e.g., withholding effort, poor attendance; Sackett & DeVore, 2002). As per the definition, proactive employees seem to be doing the opposite, that is they tend to take the initiative to contribute above and beyond role requirements (Campbell, 2000). Study 1 extends the nomological network of proactive personality by conceptualizing CWB as an outcome of proactive personality. Second, our current understanding of how and when proactive employees unfold their personality traits in achieving desirable work outcomes is incomplete; therefore, researchers have called for more research along this line (Greguras & Diefendorff, 2010; Thompson, 2005). Study 1 contributes to the closing of this gap and extends the proactive personality literature by conceptualizing work engagement as a mediator through which proactive personality carries over to key work outcomes. Given the potential mediating role of engagement and our ultimate goal to contribute to managerial practice, we conducted a second study to examine what practices and organizational factors managers can rely on to help employees low on proactivity compensate and still experience engagement. The exploration of these boundary conditions is critical because they may deliver hints about constructs or pathways that can help organizations and employees compensate for a lack of proactive personality and thus achieve positive overall outcomes based on high levels of engagement. Thus, in study 2, we explore what constructs organizations may target in an effort to compensate for a lack of proactive personality among employees. Taken together, these two studies will expand what we currently know about the relationship between proactive personality and positive work outcomes by exploring the roles of CWB and work engagement and the boundary conditions that apply to these relationships.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Proactive personality predicting task performance and career success potential

Growing consensus points to the notion that proactive personality provides valid and consistent predictions of career success (both subjective and objective; Fuller & Marler, 2009; Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999), career adaptation (Cai et al., 2015; Hou, Wu, & Liu, 2014), intention to quit (Loi, Liu, Lam, & Xu, 2016), and job performance (Fuller & Marler, 2009; Li et al., 2010; Thompson, 2005). The theoretical grounds for the relationships between proactive personality and career success are rooted in interactional psychology perspectives that suggest reciprocal interactions between the environment and individuals' dispositions (Magnusson & Bendler, 1977). Proactive employees' dispositional tendency of shaping the environment provides a number of advantages such as being more likely to negotiate work procedures and content, exert influence to extend the available job resources, change or seek better ways of accomplishing job tasks, and engage in career management activities (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Thompson, 2005). Therefore, proactive people have a higher likelihood of not only achieving greater task performance, but also of being viewed by supervisors as fully motivated and possessing higher career success potential than their less proactive counterparts. We define career success potential as a supervisor's evaluations of the subordinate's potential to have a successful career (Thacker & Wayne, 1995). Consistent with prior research, we define career success as the valued psychological or other results the subordinate accrues as a consequence of their work (Seibert et al., 1999). Consistent with prior theoretical and empirical evidence and in the spirit of constructive replication, we expect a positive relationship between proactive personality on one hand, and task performance and supervisor-ratings of future career success potential on the other hand.

1.2. Proactive personality predicting CWBs

Although the existing literature has focused on proactive personality as an antecedent for positive work outcomes, not enough attention has been placed on its possible negative relationships with adverse outcomes. Thus, we argue that the criterion space for proactive personality needs to be extended to include counterproductive work behaviors (CWB). Researchers have long recognized that the construct of job performance encompasses at least three broad domains: task performance (in-role), contextual performance (extra-role), and CWBs. However, existing literature on proactive personality as a precursor of job performance focuses on task and contextual performance, but has yet to consider CWBs or any other forms of negative performance indicators (Fuller & Marler, 2009). To fill this gap, and continue in the direction of examining relationships between proactive personality and all performance domains, we introduce CWB as a meaningful performance outcome relevant to organizations (Glomb, 2002).

We expect that proactive employees have a lower likelihood of engaging in CWBs because they are more engaged in their work and tend to experience better coping behaviors. Generally, proactive behaviors include being on constant lookout for potential upcoming problems and initializing favorable changes to optimize working experience and achieve greater work results to fulfill their high needs for achievement (Bateman & Crant, 1993). In other words, proactive personality leads employees to engage with their work at a deeper level and persistently pursue solutions to challenges they experience. This pursuit of goals that goes beyond the boundaries of their job description requires cognitive and affective immersion in their work. Consistent with this rationale and prior research that shows how proactive employees exert more effort toward their job, we argue that they are unlikely to withhold effort or exhibit other withdrawal and production deviant behaviors at work (CWB) which could prevent them from achieving desirable work outcomes. Second, proactive personality is a precursor of employees' proactive coping behaviors (Greenglass & Fiksenbaum, 2009), which oftentimes results in positive social responses that are linked to positive affective experiences. Third, proactive employees are, through behaviors such as proactive coping, likely to experience more positive emotional states because they derive energy and a sense of efficacy from overcoming obstacles and challenges. Given these positive affective states are counter to the negative affective