



Ethical leadership, employee citizenship and work withdrawal behaviors: Examining mediating and moderating processes

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the mediating and moderating processes in the relationship between ethical leadership and employee citizenship behavior as well as work withdrawal behavior using a sample of 277 employees and their supervisors from the People's Republic of China. Results revealed that ethical leadership negatively relates to politics perceptions and that politics perceptions partially mediate the negative influence of ethical leadership on uncertainty. We also found that uncertainty partially mediates the politics perceptions–emotional exhaustion relationship. Further, politics perceptions interact with political skill to influence emotional exhaustion through uncertainty. Finally, emotional exhaustion fully mediates the uncertainty–citizenship behavior as well as the uncertainty–work withdrawal behavior relationships. We discuss implications of these findings for research and practice.

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1. Introduction

Organizational scientists have long recognized the political implications of leadership in organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2008; House, 1995; House & Aditya, 1997). Despite this recognition, leadership research is largely lacking in conceptual and empirical studies that link specific leadership behavior or style to perceptions of organizational politics or POP (Ammeter, Douglas, Gardner, Hochwarter, & Ferris, 2002; Davis & Gardner, 2004; Vigoda-Gadot, 2007) in predicting important organizational outcomes. Ammeter and colleagues (2002) succinctly captured this limitation of leadership research in their observation that “Conspicuous in its absence has been a conceptualization of leadership from a political perspective, despite appeals for such a theory and the widely acknowledged view of political processes in organizations” (p. 751). Given the recognized importance of leadership (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Barling, Christie, & Hopton, 2010) and POP (Chang, Rosen, & Levy, 2009; Ferris, Adams, Kolodinsky, Hochwarter, & Ammeter, 2002; Kacmar & Baron, 1999) in influencing employees' experience of work and resulting behaviors, it is important to integrate these two literatures in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the leadership process. We seek to address this important research issue by focusing on ethical leadership (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005). Brown and colleagues (2005) defined ethical leadership as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (p. 120).

This study has two main purposes. First, although ethical leadership has been shown to relate to a range of follower behaviors such as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and deviant or work withdrawal behavior (e.g., Avey, Palanski, & Walumbwa, 2011; Brown et al., 2005; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008; Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011; Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, &

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Kuenzi, 2012; Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009), few studies have examined the mechanisms that link ethical leadership to these important individual-level behaviors (see Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009 for an exception of a related construct of voice). This is surprising, given that leadership researchers have often lamented the lack of adequate attention to the underlying processes of leadership influence (Avolio et al., 2009). As Barling and colleagues (2010) note, “much is known about the outcomes of leadership, but less is known about how and why these effects occur” (p. 206). Our first main objective is to address this important issue by focusing on POP as a potential intervening variable in the ethical leadership process. POP which involves the individual's subjective evaluation about the extent to which the work environment is characterized as political (Ferris, Harrell-Cook, & Dulebohn, 2000; Harrell-Cook, Ferris, & Dulebohn, 1999), has been shown to relate to aversive work environments that may result in employee withdrawal behaviors and withholding of discretionary behaviors—two outcomes of interest in this study (Aryee, Chen, & Budhwar, 2004; Chang et al., 2009; Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, & Toth, 1997; Ferris et al., 2002). Because leaders define and shape the ‘reality’ in which followers work (Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006), we argue that ethical leadership may be a theoretically relevant contextual variable that shapes POP and reactions in organizations (Brown & Mitchell, 2010).

Second, although POP has received increased research attention in the last two decades, the majority of studies have focused on the direct influence of POP on employee attitudes and behaviors (Chang et al., 2009). With a few exceptions (e.g., Parker, Dipboye, & Jackson, 1995; Rosen, Chang, Johnson, & Levy, 2009; Rosen, Harris, & Kacmar, 2009; Rosen, Levy, & Hall, 2006; Vigoda-Gadot, 2007), less attention has been given to the processes linking POP and its demonstrated outcomes in a single study. Furthermore, Chang and colleagues (2009) argued that “despite intuitive appeal of the idea that perceived organizational politics will have an impact on individual-level outcomes associated with organizational effectiveness, research has failed to consistently demonstrate such an impact” (p. 779). For instance, a recent study by Kacmar, Bachrach, Harris, and Zivnuska (2011) found that POP was neither related to task-focused nor person-focused citizenship behavior. These inconsistent findings suggest the existence of potentially unidentified mediators and/or moderators. Our second objective is to contribute to this understanding by examining uncertainty (a state of anxiety or ambiguity at work) and emotional exhaustion (a state of physical and emotional depletion resulting from excessive job demands and continuous stress) as two underlying psychological mechanisms that sequentially mediate the relationships between POP and employee OCB (discretionary behaviors that are not part of one's prescribed job role) and work withdrawal behavior (counter-productive job behaviors such as absence from work without any tangible reason). We further explore the role of political skill as a boundary condition (i.e., moderator) in the influence of POP on emotional exhaustion through uncertainty. Political skill refers to the capacity to understand others at work, and to apply such knowledge to induce others to act in ways that promote one's personal or organizational goals (Blickle et al., 2011; Ferris, Davidson, & Perrewé, 2005; Ferris, Treadway, et al., 2005).

By addressing these two broad objectives, we hope to make at least two important contributions. First, we contribute to the ethical leadership literature by shedding light on how ethical leadership relates to OCB and deviant or work withdrawal behavior. Specifically, by investigating underlying mechanisms of the ethical leadership-OCB as well as the ethical leadership-deviant or work withdrawal behavior relationships, we not only address the question of *how* and *why* an ethical approach to leadership is important but more importantly, how such a leadership approach can be sustained in organizations. Second, by examining uncertainty and emotional exhaustion as sequential intervening variables in the relationship between POP and OCB as well as between POP and deviant or work withdrawal behavior, and political skill as a moderator in these relationships, we also contribute to the POP literature by showing how and when POP relates to these important individual-level outcomes. Indeed, although POP has been noted to constitute a workplace stressor (Ferris, Russ, & Fandt, 1989) which undermines employees' energy levels leading to the withholding of discretionary efforts such as citizenship behavior, prior research has either examined uncertainty or emotional exhaustion as outcomes of POP or the behaviors that lead to politics perceptions (Hochwarter, Ferris, Zinko, Arnell, & James, 2007) but not examined them as underlying strain reactions that lead to the outcomes of politics perceptions.

To develop our arguments, we draw on affective events theory (AET; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) as an overarching theoretical framework. According to AET, features of work environment or events (e.g., political activities) influence behaviors (e.g., OCB and work withdrawal behavior) through affective states (e.g., uncertainty) that these work events create. Work events are things that employees experience every day at work and leaders are a major source of these work events (Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2003; Valle & Perrewé, 2000). The theory also suggests emotions as important mediating mechanisms through which work events and affective states influence judgment-driven behaviors such as OCB and work withdrawal. AET further posits that rather than being passive recipients, individuals (e.g., their political skill) can also influence work environment or events. Thus, AET is an important theoretical framework for conceptualizing the influence of ethical leadership on POP, and boundary conditions as well as underlying psychological processes through which POP relates to employee citizenship and work withdrawal behaviors. We focus on employee citizenship behavior because it is important for effective functioning of organizations (Hoffman, Blair, Meriac, & Woehr, 2007; Podsakoff, Whiting, Podsakoff, & Blume, 2009) and work withdrawal because it can be very costly to the organization in terms of both human and financial resources (Cascio, 1991).

Our underlying argument in the present paper is that ethical leadership is a proximal antecedent of POP, and that the influence of POP on employee citizenship behavior as well as work withdrawal behavior is sequentially through uncertainty and emotional exhaustion. With the exception of Rosen, Chang, and colleagues (2009), Rosen, Harris, and colleagues (2009) who investigated the role of frustration and job satisfaction, and Chang and colleagues (2009) who examined the role of psychological strain and morale, we are not aware of any prior research that has simultaneously investigated the role of political skill, uncertainty, and emotional exhaustion in explaining the influence of POP on employee behaviors.

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