



Context matters: A research agenda to move beyond conventional leadership-safety relationship



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 October 2016

Received in revised form 18 March 2017

Accepted 28 June 2017

Keywords:

Context

Leadership

Occupational safety

ABSTRACT

Despite the growing body of literature on the salience of leadership for workplace safety, questions have been raised concerning leadership effectiveness mostly because extent literature remains largely oblivious to the context in which the leader-follower relationship operates. The current study looks to address this shortcoming in the safety literature by aligning the characteristics of leaders with the context in which they operate. We develop a typology to explain the type of leaders more likely to succeed at ensuring workplace safety in specific contexts. We also analyze major findings of literature on the leadership-safety relationship and propose potentially significant but overlooked avenues of research for a more comprehensive understanding of this relationship.

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1. Introduction

Ensuring occupational safety remains the biggest challenge for theorists and practitioners alike (Barton and Sutcliffe, 2009; Clarke, 2010). Workers around the world continue to bear millions of injuries each year (International Labor Organization). Therefore, it is not surprising to see a plethora of research identifying policies, practices, and leadership styles that ensure workplace safety (Christian et al., 2009; Kapp, 2012; Parboteeah and Kapp, 2008;

Zacharatos et al., 2005), or those that thwart it (Dembe et al., 2005; Kaminski, 2001; Kelloway et al., 2005; Nahrgang et al., 2011; Probst and Brubaker, 2001).

Among factors imperative for safety outcomes in organizations, leadership assumes a vital position. (Clarke and Ward, 2006; Kelloway and Barling, 2010). As noted by Bass and Avolio (1993, p.113) “cultural norms arise and change because of what leaders focus their attention on”. The nature of the leader's role, enabling a one on one interaction with subordinates, gives leaders precedence over policies and practices in ensuring workplace safety (Yukl, 2006). Over the years, scholars have identified various leadership styles most effective in improving workplace safety (Barling

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et al., 2002; Hofmann et al., 2003; Inness et al., 2010; Kelloway and Barling, 2010; Thompson et al., 1998).

However leadership effectiveness literature faces serious criticism, and its success has been termed as propagated rather than real (Thorpe et al., 2011). With the exception of some studies, (e.g. Bass, 1997; Osborn et al., 2002; Shamir and Howell, 1999), it remains largely ignorant to the role of context regarding leader-follower interaction (Denis et al., 2010). Porter and McLaughlin (2006), called for more emphasis on leadership context. Leadership role and its effectiveness is understandably difficult to comprehend without due consideration of the context in which it functions (Denis et al., 2010).

In addition to leadership literature, safety literature also lacks the essential consideration for context (Pilbeam et al., 2016). This lack of attention to context has restricted safety literature to three leadership styles- namely; transformational leadership, transactional leadership and leader-member exchange (Lekka and Healey, 2012; Pilbeam et al., 2016). Literature on these has predominantly focussed on aligning the conceptual definitions of leadership styles with social exchange theory. The salience of various organizational and leadership factors for safety outcomes of leadership hints at a deeper role of context in ensuring safety (Conchie et al., 2013; Hoffmeister et al., 2014). Although general leadership literature has started to incorporate context in examining leader-follower relationship (Avolio et al., 2009). However, studies on the role of context in improving the relationship between leadership and safety outcomes are few (Conchie et al., 2013).

Similar concerns were raised in the review of Pilbeam et al. (2016). Using the seven major components of organizational context given by Porter and McLaughlin (2006), they reviewed the safety leadership literature by, taking into consideration Porter's typology of organizational context. But their review sparsely discussed the imminent role of context in a leadership-safety relationship. Hence, this paper intends to draw on the existing safety literature to discuss the leadership-safety relationship in terms of contextual factors. Also, it discusses the need for looking beyond the conservative approach which has restricted safety literature to three types of leadership. Lastly, the paper looks to define and articulate the role of context precisely in the perspective of leadership-safety relationship. Up until now, this lack of attention to context indicated incomplete understanding of the leadership-safety outcome relationship (Guediri et al., 2014).

2. Leadership-safety relationship: What we know and don't know?

Early work on the significance of leadership in ensuring safety emphasized the association between leader and followers in safety at work (e.g. Cohen, 1977; Dunbar, 1975). The leader-follower relationship is rooted in the theory of social exchange (Emerson, 1976) where followers develop a liking for their leaders based on leaders concern for their health and safety. As a result of this mutual trust and the resulting bond, followers become willingly involved in behaviors targeted at improving safety performance and become compliant with safety rules and regulations, ultimately improving safety outcomes.

A review of literature (Lekka and Healey, 2012) validates that literature on safety leadership predominantly focuses on relationship-oriented leadership (transformational/leader-member exchange), with some focus on transactional leadership. In this study, we summarize major studies on these leadership styles in safety literature, and suggest avenues for future research. Additionally, because literature indicates more accidents or injuries in SMEs as compared to large organizations (Sorensen et al., 2007),

therefore, we review the previous research and identify the future role of safety leadership in SMEs. Furthermore, we discuss the role of 'context' and why it is important to incorporate it into leadership-safety relationship. We discuss all the prevailing leadership styles in safety literature and align priorities of each leadership style with the given context to elaborate which leaders can be most effective in the four organizational contexts relevant to occupational safety.

2.1. Leader-member exchange

High-quality leader-member exchange (LMX) results in fewer accidents (Hofmann and Morgeson, 1999), decreased safety-related events (Michael et al., 2006) and nurtures safety-related citizenship behaviors among followers (Hofmann et al., 2003). However, we know little about the role of low-quality LMX relationship in predicting safety outcomes and the magnitude of such an effect. For instance, Yagil and Luria (2010) reported that when safety climate levels are low, high quality coworker relationships enable safety compliance. Similarly, manager's attitude towards employee well-being may not ensure well-being performance (Pagell and Gobeli, 2009). This raises the question if low-quality LMX relationships impede the safety situation in organizations or if it is something related to organizational culture. More focus is required on the 'outgroup' which does not have a close relationship with their immediate supervisors (Furunes et al., 2015). Besides, a longitudinal study will better explain how low quality relationships affect overall safety outcomes overtime.

Low-quality LMX relationships closely align with the definition of transactional leadership (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995), and safety literature recognizes the significance of transactional leadership for safety outcomes (Zohar, 2002). Hence findings of an association between low-quality LMX and safety outcomes will have important implications for safety literature particularly in cultures where the distant leadership is considered more effective (Avolio et al., 2009; Bass, 1997).

2.2. Transformational leadership

Another leadership style which focuses on the relationship with followers is transformational leadership. Transformational leaders are believed to "motivate others to do more than they originally intended and often even more than they thought possible, they set more challenging expectations and typically achieve higher performances" (Bass, 1996, p. 18). Since its inception (Bass, 1985), transformational leadership has attracted more research than any other leadership construct (Jin et al., 2016). Although Bass's full model also included transactional leadership, general leadership literature and safety specific studies have mostly emphasized on transformational leadership. The concept of safety-specific transformational leadership (Barling et al., 2002) further established it as a lead predictor of occupational safety. A considerable amount of safety literature underscores the role of transformational leadership in shaping workplace safety (Burke et al., 2011; Inness et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2016; Zohar and Luria, 2004).

Despite the abundance of literature showing the role of transformational leadership literature in the domain of workplace safety, few things remain unexplored. First, available literature is insufficient to warrant a conclusion regarding how this relationship will work in a more authoritative culture. More research is needed in some Asian and other similar cultures (Avolio et al., 2009) where authoritative styles are in practice. Additionally, longitudinal studies examining the effect of transformational leadership on safety outcomes are very few. A longitudinal study by Franke and Felfe (2011) reported that transformational leadership had positive effects on followers health in short run but opposite

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