



# Transformational and passive leadership as cross-level moderators of the relationships between safety knowledge, safety motivation, and safety participation

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** While safety knowledge and safety motivation are well-established predictors of safety participation, less is known about the impact of leadership styles on these relationships. **Method:** The purpose of the current study was to examine whether the positive relationships between safety knowledge and motivation and safety participation are contingent on transformational and passive forms of safety leadership. **Results:** Using multilevel modeling with a sample of 171 employees nested in 40 workgroups, we found that transformational safety leadership strengthened the safety knowledge–participation relationship, whereas passive leadership weakened the safety motivation–participation relationship. **Conclusions:** Under low transformational leadership, safety motivation was not related to safety participation; under high passive leadership, safety knowledge was not related to safety participation. **Practical Applications:** These results are discussed in light of organizational efforts to increase safety-related citizenship behaviors.

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## 1. Introduction

Although safety research has traditionally focused on ways to improve employee compliance with safety rules and policies, a growing body of research recognizes the important function of employee safety participation. Whereas safety compliance by definition concerns the enactment of required safety-related behaviors (e.g., donning personal protective equipment), safety participation reflects extra-role behaviors (i.e., organizational citizenship or stewardship behaviors) that go above and beyond mere compliance to improve safety within the workplace setting. Examples include proactively helping coworkers resolve safety problems, voluntarily participating in safety-related activities and training (Cree & Kelloway, 1997; Neal, Griffin, & Hart, 2000), attending safety meetings (Neal & Griffin, 2006), and voicing safety concerns to managers (Mullen, 2005).

Previous meta-analytic research indicates that both safety knowledge and safety motivation are related to increased employee levels of

safety participation (Christian, Bradley, Wallace, & Burke, 2009). Moreover, the extant literature also suggests that effective safety leadership can improve safety-related outcomes (Clarke, 2013). However, despite calls for more research on person–situation interactions (Christian et al., 2009), no research has yet assessed the extent to which different supervisor safety–leadership styles might attenuate or strengthen the relationships between safety knowledge and safety motivation and safety participation.

Such research is important for several reasons. Much of the research to date has focused on delineating the positive effects of transformational safety leadership (consisting of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation) on employee safety behaviors (Barling, Loughlin, & Kelloway, 2002). While it is understandable to focus on positive forms of supervisor leadership, not all leaders are transformational. Indeed, despite the scholarly focus on transformational safety leadership, most subordinates are likely to experience passive (including laissez-faire leadership and management-by-exception) rather than transformational leadership during their working life (Aasland, Skogstad, Notelaers, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2010). Research also indicates that individual leaders might display both transformational and passive leadership styles alternatively (Kelloway, Mullen, & Francis, 2006; Mullen, Kelloway, & Teed, 2011). Thus, it is particularly important to determine the joint effects of these differing forms of supervisor leadership. As such, the purpose of our

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current study was to examine both transformational and passive forms of safety leadership simultaneously, as well as explore their relative importance in moderating the relationships between safety knowledge and motivation and safety participation.

This study focuses on safety participation (i.e., voluntary safety-related behavior) as the outcome of interest, because past research has found that transformational leadership has a stronger relationship with safety participation than with safety compliance (Christian et al., 2009; Hofmann, Morgeson, & Gerras, 2003); additionally, safety participation was meta-analytically related to fewer accidents and injuries (Christian et al., 2009). As noted above, safety participation is associated with extra-role or organizational citizenship behaviors regarding safety (e.g., safety stewardship, proactively helping others, and initiating positive safety change). Voluntary in nature, safety participation helps to develop an environment that supports safety and improves the work situation for a broader set of employees than merely the individual enacting the behaviors (Neal & Griffin, 2006). On the other hand, safety compliance reflects the enactment of “generally mandated” safety behaviors (Neal et al., 2000, p. 101). Because safety compliance is described as “the core safety activities that need to be carried out by individuals to maintain workplace safety (Griffin & Neal, 2000, p. 349),” and therefore is obligatory and mandatory, these behaviors might not be influenced by transformational leadership styles as much as voluntary behaviors (see Clarke, 2013 for a recent meta-analysis on this issue).

Our work makes three primary contributions to the safety and leadership literature. First, our study extends scholars' understanding of the complex relationships between safety knowledge, safety motivation, and safety participation by showing how these relationships might depend on the degree to which leaders display proactive or reactive actions regarding safety. We also contribute to the development of the theory in this area by arguing that leadership behaviors act not only as antecedents to safety participation (Christian et al., 2009) but also as potential moderators of the relationship between employee knowledge and motivation and safety participation. From a practical perspective, because most subordinates are likely to experience passive leadership during their working life (Aasland et al., 2010), we attempt to answer the important question of the extent to which such passive leadership might undermine otherwise positive relationships between employee safety-related knowledge and motivation on their enactment of safety participation behaviors. Finally, by utilizing multilevel modeling and data from individual employees nested in their supervisor, we are able to conduct a valid test of our hypotheses by avoiding the commonly violated assumption of independence and modeling our variables of interest at levels of analysis that are in alignment with their theoretical constructs.

We begin by establishing previous findings on the positive relationships between safety knowledge, safety motivation, and safety participation. Next, we explain why and how transformational and passive leadership might moderate these relationships. Finally, we present the results of our hypothesis tests using multilevel modeling with data from employees of a public transit agency.

## 2. Safety knowledge and safety motivation

Safety knowledge is an employee's understanding of safety operating procedures and adequate safety training and instruction (Hofmann, Jacobs, & Landy, 1995), whereas safety motivation refers to “an individual's willingness to exert effort to enact safety behaviors and the valence associated with those behaviors” (Neal & Griffin, 2006, p. 947). Building upon Neal and Griffin's (2004) framework of workplace safety, Christian et al. (2009) considered safety knowledge and safety motivation as proximal antecedents to safety participation. Indeed, their meta-analysis found that the corrected mean correlation between safety knowledge and safety participation was .61. Similarly, a positive relationship between safety motivation and safety participation has long been

established (e.g., Neal & Griffin, 2006). Given these established relationships, we similarly expected to find that:

**Hypothesis 1.** Safety knowledge is positively related to safety participation.

**Hypothesis 2.** Safety motivation is positively related to safety participation.

However, the relationships between safety knowledge and safety motivation and safety participation are more complex than previously thought. Employee safety knowledge and motivation only provides employees with the potential to engage in safety participation. We argue that this potential can be either fostered or hindered depending on the context they experience. The safety literature suggests that leadership is a key aspect of the context that affects safety participation. Employees are driven to modify their behaviors to conform to a cultural norm if they perceive such behaviors will lead to desired outcomes (O'Dea & Flin, 2001; Vredenburg, 2002). This study therefore examined the possibility that the safety knowledge–participation and safety motivation–participation relationships are contingent upon supervisor levels of transformational and passive leadership (see Fig. 1 for a graphical depiction of these predicted relationships).

## 3. Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership encompasses a complex set of behaviors including idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Barling et al., 2002). First, transformational leaders behave as role models with whom subordinates' can identify. By emphasizing the importance of safety and exhibiting idealized behaviors, these leaders tend to increase subordinates' safety awareness and instill in their subordinates the belief that safety is a shared common goal. Consequently, employees are more likely to exhibit safety participation. Second, transformational leaders provide inspirational motivation. Energized by their leaders, employees are likely to transcend their individual interests for the collective benefit. Third, the leaders' intellectual stimulation encourages subordinates to voice their concerns, discover new and better ideas, and explore new approaches to solve safety-related issues. Finally, individualized consideration motivates leaders to act as mentors showing special attention to their subordinates' safety, development, and well-being. As such, subordinates are likely to engage in more safety participation as an avenue for reciprocity. Indeed, a positive relationship between transformational leadership and safety participation has been consistently established (Clarke, 2013). Therefore, we similarly expected that:

**Hypothesis 3.** Transformational leadership is positively related to safety participation.

Transformational leadership is predicted to affect the safety knowledge–participation and safety motivation–participation relationships because transformational leaders challenge employees to fully utilize their knowledge regarding safety to help others, and motivate employees to strive for creating a safer working environment. When leaders articulate a compelling vision, serve as a role model to energize the subordinates to perform safely, and align subordinates' goals and values, employees with safety knowledge and safety motivation are likely to identify with the leaders, utilize that knowledge, and act on that motivation by displaying more voluntary safety behaviors. When leaders challenge assumptions, direct their subordinates to be creative, consider individual subordinates' input, and value individuals' safety and well-being, employees with safety knowledge and safety motivation might feel inspired and encouraged to voice their ideas to

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