



The role of idealized influence leadership in promoting workplace forgiveness[☆]

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ABSTRACT

We integrated research in psychology on employee responses to mistreatment with the leadership literature to examine whether leadership can promote forgiveness in the workplace. Drawing on these literatures, we theorized that leaders who heighten follower collective identity—those who display idealized influence—should facilitate forgiveness among employees. The results of an experimental study and a 2-part field survey support our theorizing. The field study also demonstrated that idealized influence leadership suppressed two employee antisocial responses (avoidance, revenge). Of note, whereas idealized influence leadership had the predicted effects, transactional leadership did not. This dissociation is consistent with our reasoning regarding the mediating role of follower collective identity in the relation between idealized influence leadership and employees responses to unfair events. Together, our findings suggest that idealized influence leaders may motivate employees to respond to instances of workplace mistreatment in ways that are beneficial to themselves, others, and the organization.

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“... During the performance appraisal [my boss] delivered his feedback, which was cynical and unconstructive, without editing or cushioning whatsoever. I found it very degrading, unfair and simply unkind...Even though I was upset and wanted to leave, my boss would not let me and continued the appraisal while I was visibly upset. At that point, if there had been anything constructive or positive said, I did not hear it...”

[Anonymous Participant (Study 2)]

“I had drafted a document for my management team to review, and one of the members...wrote some harshly-worded negative comments near the beginning of her feedback, before getting into more details and making specific suggestions for improvement. This feedback...was sent by e-mail and copied to the entire management team.”

[Anonymous Participant (Study 2)]

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Introduction

These comments are just two examples of interpersonal injustice that employees experience in the workplace. Unfortunately these experiences are not that uncommon. For example, the 2014 U.S. Survey on Workplace Bullying indicates that over one-quarter of adult Americans (27%) reported being interpersonally victimized at work in the last year; another 21% reported having witnessed others experience abusive conduct (Workplace Bullying Institute). Being victimized can have detrimental effects on victims' psychological well-being, such as decreased feelings of self-worth (e.g., Zdaniuk & Bobocel, 2012), increased anger (e.g., Bies & Tripp, 1996), anxiety (Harlos & Pinder, 2000), and depression (Tepper, 2001).

Employees' coping responses toward workplace mistreatment vary greatly, from antisocial responses such as revenge and avoidance, to prosocial responses such as forgiveness. Revenge and avoidance responses are ultimately self-defeating for victims in that they can further damage victims' psychological well-being (e.g., Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2008; Toussaint & Friedman, 2009) and negatively impact the quality of the victim–offender relationship (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998). Revenge can also escalate conflict (e.g., Kim & Smith, 1993). In contrast, forgiveness responses enhance victims' psychological well-being (e.g., Cox, Bennett, Tripp, & Aquino, 2012; McCullough, 2001) and improve the quality of the victim–offender relationship (Karremans & Van Lange, 2004). Forgiveness has also been associated with greater employee morale and satisfaction (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000), and enhanced organizational productivity (Cameron, Bright, & Caza, 2004).

Given the beneficial consequences of forgiveness for victims, offenders, and organizations more broadly, an important question arises: What organizational factors promote forgiveness in the workplace? In the present research, we aim to provide one answer to this question by integrating research in psychology on forgiveness and research in organizational sciences on leadership. As we explain in detail in the next section, there is good evidence in the psychology literature that people are more forgiving of mistreatment when their collective identity (i.e., sense of interconnectedness to others) is salient, or cognitively accessible. Importantly, leadership theorists have long argued for leaders' capacity to inspire attitudes and behaviors that promote group harmony by raising the accessibility of follower collective identity (e.g., Lord & Brown, 2004; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004). One dimension of leadership that has been linked (both theoretically and empirically) to heightened follower collective identity is the idealized influence component of transformational leadership, which encapsulates leader behaviors that emphasize collective interests (e.g., Bass & Avolio, 1993). Accordingly, we focus on idealized influence leadership in the present research. We theorized that leaders who raise the accessibility of follower collective identity—those who display idealized influence—should facilitate forgiveness among employees. We examined this idea in two studies—in one, we used an experimental design to maximize internal validity; in the second, we surveyed working adults to examine generalizability.

Study 2 had two additional goals. In addition to assessing idealized influence leadership, we measured an alternative leader style, transactional leadership, in an effort to provide discriminant validity evidence. In brief, unlike idealized influence leadership, transactional leadership is not associated with follower collective identity; therefore, we expected the former but not the latter to predict employee forgiveness. This dissociation as a function of leadership style would add credibility to our reasoning that what is essential in promoting forgiveness are leader behaviors that heighten the accessibility of follower collective identity, rather than any leader style. Second, although the primary focus of the current research is to examine whether idealized influence leadership promotes forgiveness, we extended our investigation in Study 2 to include two antisocial responses to mistreatment, namely avoidance and revenge. Our aim was to examine whether idealized influence not only facilitates responses such as forgiveness, which promote collective harmony, but also suppresses responses which harm group harmony such as revenge and avoidance. Doing so thus allows us to examine the relation between idealized influence leadership and employee responses to mistreatment more generally, in ways that both help and hinder group functioning.

Given the ubiquity of interpersonal conflict in organizations (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012), research examining the effect of leadership on employee forgiveness should be of importance to both organizational scholars and practicing managers. When damaged work relationships are left unattended by managers, the organization risks lowered performance and productivity among employees, and destructive responses such as revenge may ensue (e.g., Aquino, Grover, Goldman, & Folger, 2003). Thus, a key challenge is for leaders to manage interpersonal injury in a way that facilitates relationship repair and helps employees cope constructively with their feelings of injustice. Promoting employee forgiveness and reducing revenge and avoidance may help to meet this challenge. Until recently, organizational research has largely neglected the study of workplace forgiveness (Aquino et al., 2003; Barclay & Skarlicki, 2008; Bobocel, 2013; Bright & Exline, 2011; Fehr & Gelfand, 2012). Moreover, little research has examined how to reduce antisocial responses; instead, much of the research on mistreatment has focused on understanding factors that increase antisocial responses. Importantly, very little is known about leader behaviors that may promote employee forgiveness and reduce antisocial responses. Clearly, there is value in research that does so.

Background theory and hypotheses

Responses to mistreatment: The role of victim collective identity

As noted earlier, one of the most prosocial responses to mistreatment is forgiveness. Although various definitions of forgiveness have been proposed over the years, McCullough et al. (2000) observed that most share a critical assumption: “When people forgive, their responses toward (or, in other words, what they think of, feel about, want to do to, or actually do to) people who have offended or injured them become more positive and less negative” (p. 9). In other words, a fundamental feature of forgiveness is “intraindividual prosocial change toward a transgressor” (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003, p. 540).

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