



How is leadership related to employee self-concept?



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ABSTRACT

In the field of leadership research, the relationship between leadership styles and follower self-concept was of great interests to researchers. The purpose of this study is to investigate how leadership styles such as transformational leadership, passive leadership and leader-member exchange (LMX) relate to employee self-concept. A total of 585 valid responses were collected from hotel front line employees in mainland China. The results showed that the effect of transformational leadership on self-concept was mainly mediated by LMX. The strong direct effects of LMX on levels of self-concept were also identified in this study. Theoretical and practical implications were provided based on the results of this study.

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1. Introduction

The role of follower self-concept has attracted much research attention in recent years (Hogg et al., 2003; Lord et al., 1999a,b; Lord and Hall, 2005; van Knippenberg et al., 2004), and its mediating role in the relationship between leadership and follower attitudes and behaviors is also attracting the interests of researchers (Chang and Johnson, 2010; van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Internal to subordinates, self-concept is a robust construct that reflects leader's influence on subordinate psychological, social, and cognitive outcomes (Lord and Brown, 2004). A key element to understanding effective leadership is to understand follower self-concept (Lord and Brown, 2004), which is important to shape employee behaviors, especially for services industry in which encounters between employee and customer are crucial (Parasuraman et al., 1988). As important as self-concept is to leadership, the theoretical integration of leadership and self-concept was constrained due to the extensive scientific treatment of each of the topics even though there were plethora of published papers on each topic (Lord and Brown, 2004). Furthermore, empirical studies on self-concept relating to leadership processes were limited, and valuable theoretical

and practical contributions to this field are still in demand (van Knippenberg et al., 2004).

Limited research conducted on leadership and self-concept calls for empirical studies examining the general as well as nuanced relationship between the two concepts for both theory advancement and practical implementation. In the Chinese hotel industry, while many well-known international brands are expanding their presence as part of their globalization strategy, the effectiveness and appropriateness of their leadership styles substantiated mainly by Western leadership theories have to be examined and adjusted in this market. Furthermore, as hotel employees born after 1980s in China are becoming the main workforce (62.7%) and are regarded as more self-centered as a result of the single child family policy practiced in China for the last few decades (Su and Xiao, 2008), their self-concepts in the work environment will also be an interesting topic for investigation. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to empirically investigate the relationships between leadership styles (i.e., transformational, passive leadership, and leader-member exchange (LMX)) and employee self-concept in the context of China's hotel industry. More specifically, the objectives intended to achieve in this study were: (1) to formulate the theoretical integration of leadership and self-concept; (2) to examine how each of the three leadership styles is related to self-concept. The findings of this study not only provide empirical evidences on the relationships between leadership styles and subordinates' self-concept, but also highlight the application and implication of western theories in the context of Chinese hospitality industry, a sector which is going through a fast paced globalization process.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Self-concept

Self-concept is an overarching knowledge structure that helps organize one's goals and behavior. It can help individuals understand the self and others, and regulate social interactions based on such an understanding (Lord and Brown, 2004). Putting it in a managerial context, it affects the interactions between the control of thoughts of executives and the resultant actions of subordinates. Therefore, employee self-concept plays a very important role in our understanding of the leadership concept.

Self-concept consists of three alternative levels (Brewer and Gardner, 1996): the individual, relational, and collective. At the individual level, one's sense of uniqueness and self-worth are derived from perceived similarities with and differences from other individuals by interpersonal comparisons. At the relational level, individuals define themselves in terms of dyadic connections and role relationships with others, which may encourage cooperation and/or shape behavior in relation to other individuals. The collective level involves self-definition based on one's social group memberships, where favorable inter-group comparisons give rise to self-worth, which may motivate teamwork. Self-concept at different levels may cause different attitudes and varied behaviors of subordinates; it reflects not only influences of leadership on attitudes, but also behaviors of subordinates.

Alternatively, the three levels of self-concept can also be re-categorized into two groups: the social self-concept consisting of relational and collective self-concept, and the individual self-concept which is more closely related to personal self-concept (Lord and Brown, 2004). The former level of self-concept is more favorable for leaders in service management since it stimulates cooperation and teamwork, while the latter should be avoided at work because it is self oriented and may cause unawareness of the interests of customers or coworkers in service deliveries. Therefore, how to influence employee's self-concept is crucial in effective leadership implementation in management contexts. In the process of understanding how leadership can influence follower's self-concept and behavior, *working self-concept* (WSC) is crucial. WSC is the activated, contextual sensitive portion of self-concept that can guide actions on the cues of one's current context and immediate past history (Lord and Brown, 2004).

2.2. Full range leadership theory (FRLT)

Full range leadership theory (FRLT) includes three types of leadership: *transformational*, *transactional*, and *laissez-faire* leadership (Avolio and Bass, 2004). *Transformational leadership* includes five factors: (1) *idealized influence* (attribute) (IIA), which refers to the socialized charisma of the leader by which the leader is perceived as being confident and powerful, focusing on higher-order ideals and ethics; (2) *idealized influence* (behavior) (IIB), which refers to charismatic actions of the leader that embody values, beliefs, and mission; (3) *inspirational motivation* (IM), which refers to the ways in which leaders energize their followers with optimism, ambitious goals, and idealized achievable vision; (4) *intellectual stimulation* (IS), which refers to leader actions that appeal to followers' sense of logic, challenge followers to think creatively and find solutions to difficult problems; and, (5) *individualized consideration* (IC), which refers to leader behaviors that contribute to follower satisfaction by advising, supporting, paying attention to individual needs of followers, and developing followers by allowing them to self-actualize. *Transactional leadership* comprises the following three factors: (1) *contingent reward* (CR) leadership that refers to leader behaviors focusing on clarifying role and task requirements and providing followers with material or

psychological rewards contingent on the fulfillment of contractual obligations; (2) *management-by-exception active* (MBEA) that refers to the active vigilance to ensure that standards are met; and, (3) *management-by-exception passive* (MBEP) in which leaders only intervene after incidences occurred or when mistakes have already been made. *Laissez-faire* leadership is generally considered the most ineffective style of leadership because leaders avoid making decisions and taking responsibility with their authorities.

This study is based on leadership of hotel supervisors. Leadership styles are developed from the FRLT, which includes transformational, transactional, and laissez faire leadership with nine factors. According to a prior study (Luo et al., 2013), only two factors of leadership styles were embodied by hotel supervisors in China based on exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis with pretty good goodness-of-fit indices; they are renamed as *Transformational* and *Passive leadership*. The new named *Transformational leadership* includes 12 items from IS, IM, IC of the original transformational leadership scale, and CR of the original transactional leadership scale. II(A), II (B), and MBEA were excluded in the new *transformational leadership* due to their low reliabilities, and this result was also supported by prior studies (Hinkin and Schriesheim, 2008; Yukl, 1999). It can also be argued that supervisors may lack the charismatic leadership compared to high level leaders, and the MBEA behavior such as "Concentrates his/her full attention on dealing with mistakes, complaints, and failures" may not appropriate for supervisors due to Chinese culture such as *mian zi* (face; maintaining the respect from others as well as to respect others), *ren qing* (being kind or respecting the feeling of others), and *wan zhuan* (indirect, non-confrontational expression) (Shao and Webber, 2006). The new *Passive leadership* includes the four items of MBEP of the original transactional leadership scale, and the four items of *Laissez-faire* of FRLT (MLQ, Form 5X) (Avolio and Bass, 2004). That is, in the context of hotel industry in China, transactional leadership is not a unique factor, CR and MBEA fall into the category of transformational leadership, and MBEP was re-categorized as part of *passive leadership*. Similar findings were supported by other researchers (Schriesheim et al., 2009; Tejada et al., 2001). As argued by Bycio et al. (1995), leaders are either active to develop followers, form relationships of exchange, stimulate their thinking and inspire them to high level performance, or they are passive or avoidant and only react to problems to be corrected or do not react at all. Therefore, this two-factor model of FRLT might not unique to Chinese supervisors, and investigation and verification of this two factor model might be meaningful to not only the globalized Chinese hotel industry, but also in some other social and cultural contexts. Consequently, the two-factor construct of FRLT was used as main leadership constructs in this study.

2.3. Leader-member exchange theory (LMX)

Leader-member exchange refers to the quality of the exchange relationship that exists between employees and their superiors. It describes the role-making processes between a leader and each individual subordinate and the exchange relationship over time (Yukl, 2005). It clearly incorporates an operationalization of a relationship-based approach into leadership. LMX theory was formerly called the vertical dyad linkage (VDL) theory because its focus is on reciprocal influence processes within vertical dyads between one leader and his/her direct reporters. Therefore, LMX is also considered an important type of leadership for supervisors because they interact with employees most frequently compared to higher level leaders (Lord and Brown, 2004).

The essence of LMX is that effective leadership process is based on the development of a mature leader-subordinate relationship, and they gain many benefits from the relationship (Graen and Uhlbien, 1995). Therefore, LMX has tremendous impact on

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