A process model of self-regulation and leadership: How attentional resource capacity and negative emotions influence constructive and destructive leadership

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ABSTRACT

This study proposes a process model of the antecedents of both constructive and destructive leadership. As task difficulty increases, a leader's limited attentional resource capacity may become overwhelmed by the experience of high levels of negative emotions, resulting in self-regulation impairment and destructive leadership. When task difficulty is low, or when negative emotions do not overwhelm attentional resource capacity, then self-regulation is effective, giving rise to constructive leadership. We test our model with 161 leaders in the field and find good support for our model in the prediction of transformational leadership and abusive supervision as specific examples of constructive and destructive leadership.

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Introduction

For many years organizational scholars have focused predominantly on *constructive* forms of leadership, which encompass pro-subordinate and pro-organization leader behaviors (Aasland, Skogstad, Notelaers, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2010; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). More recently, scholarly attention has shifted to anti-subordinate or destructive forms of leadership (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007), such as petty tyranny (e.g., Kant, Skogstad, Torsheim, & Einarsen, 2013) and abusive supervision (e.g., Mawritz, Folger, & Latham, 2014), which describe leaders who bully, harass or humiliate subordinates (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007). There are good reasons for this shift in focus, as mounting evidence suggests that destructive leadership harms the mental and physical health of employees and degrades organizational performance (Aasland et al., 2010; Hershcovis & Rafferty, 2012; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Given the individual and organizational harm attributed to destructive leadership, it is imperative that we better understand why a leader might demonstrate destructive rather than constructive forms of behavior. Armed with such knowledge, organizations could implement strategies to reduce the prevalence and impact of destructive leadership.

The contemporary view holds that negative contextual factors like organizational injustice and abuse from higher-level managers lead to destructive forms of leadership, for example, abusive supervision (Hershcovis & Rafferty, 2012; Tepper, 2007). In addition, a number of leader dispositions such as anger, anxiety and poor self-regulation have been linked to destructive leadership (Kant et al., 2013; Krasikova, Green, & LeBreton, 2013; Mawritz et al., 2014). In reviewing this evidence, Krasikova et al. (2013) argue that destructive leadership is the product of both contextual and dispositional factors (see also Eubanks & Mumford, 2010a). In particular, they propose that destructive leadership is a response to goal blockage when leaders lack sufficient psychological resources, such as attention or emotional self-regulation (Krasikova et al., 2013). Goal blockage occurs when leaders experience difficulty

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achieving their goals, however Krasikova et al. (2013) argue that the likelihood of displaying destructive versus constructive leadership in response to goal blockage depends on a leader's characteristics and contextual factors.

By incorporating goal blockage and psychological resources in their proposal, Krasikova et al. (2013) answer recent calls to enhance leadership theory by integrating contextual and dispositional factors (see Avolio, 2007; Zaccaro, 2012). In addition, their focus on goal blockage highlights the difficult and demanding nature of managerial work in modern organizations (Joosten, van Dijke, Van Hiel, & De Cremer, 2014). Senior leaders in particular often face ill-defined and multi-faceted problems that threaten the survival of the organizations they lead (Hambrick, 1989; Sherman, Hitt, DeMarie, & Keats, 1999). Furthermore, many operate in a globally connected environment where deadlines are tight and vast quantities of information compete for their attention. Paradoxically, decision-making becomes more difficult and stressful when more information is available, options for action increase and outcomes are crucially important (Hambrick, Finkelstein, & Mooney, 2005; Miller & Cohen, 2001). Such dynamic and demanding work environments have been associated with proactive forms of behavior (Parker, Bindl, & Wu, 2013; Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006) and transformational leadership (Bass, 1990b; Bass & Avolio, 1997). This raises an important question: In what way does difficult or demanding work increase the chance of destructive leadership in some leaders but not others?

While Krasikova et al. (2013) describe some of the factors associated with destructive leadership, they do not explain the *process* by which the depletion of psychological resources leads to destructive leadership (e.g., Dinh & Lord, 2012). We extend their proposal in the present study to argue that constructive leadership is more likely when there is a sufficient level of psychological resources. We suggest that reducing the adverse impact of destructive leadership starts with understanding the process by which psychological resources, namely, attention and self-regulation, influence leader emotions and behavior. Such insight could inform the selection and development of organizational leaders, particularly for demanding and stressful roles.

This paper has two key objectives: (1) to present a process model of self-regulation and leadership, particularly one that describes how a self-regulatory mechanism is related to either transformational leadership (i.e., constructive leadership) or abusive supervision (i.e., destructive leadership); and (2) to demonstrate how this self-regulatory mechanism can be operationalized and tested in a field experiment utilizing common paper-and-pencil measures. Our central tenet is that sufficient attentional resource capacity is necessary for effective self-regulation and transformational leadership during demanding performance tasks, whereas insufficient attentional resource capacity leads to abusive supervision and heightened negative emotions in the same situation. We next make four important points in relation to psychological resources (i.e., attention and self-regulation) that are central to our proposal.

First, we focus on attention and draw specifically from Beal, Weiss, Barros, and MacDermid (2005), who argue that *attentional resources* serve as "an 'engine' specifically for the act of self-regulation" (p. 1058). Accordingly, we argue that effective self-regulation requires sufficient attentional resource capacity. Second, we conceptualize self-regulation as a state-like construct, varying in strength over time (e.g., Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007), and not as a trait-like or static construct (see Cervone, Shadel, Smith, & Fiori, 2006). Third, the labels self-regulation and self-control are often used interchangeably; however, self-control is typically considered to be a "deliberate, conscious, effortful subset of self-regulation" (Baumeister et al., 2007, p. 351). Self-control is typically defined as "exerting control over one's actions and inner states so as to bring them into line with meaningful standards such as goals, values and expectations" (Bertrams, Englert, Dickhauser, & Baumeister, 2013, p. 669). However, we are primarily concerned with the self-regulatory mechanism that determines one's *capacity* to exercise self-control (e.g., Cervone et al., 2006) and not a leader's conscious or deliberate acts of self-control (e.g., Tsui & Ashford, 1994). Finally, like others, we hold that self-regulation is highly adaptive and enables leaders to "engage in goal-directed behavior to bring about long-term desirable outcomes" (Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010, p. 495).

We structure our introduction in the following way. First, we briefly describe transformational leadership and abusive supervision, which are examples of constructive and destructive leadership used in our study. Following Krasikova et al. (2013), we also examine leader characteristics (i.e., attentional resources, self-regulation and negative emotions) and negative contextual factors as likely antecedents of both forms of leadership. Next, we introduce the context-appropriate balanced attention model (CABA; MacCoon, Wallace, & Newman, 2004) and explain how a neurocognitive (brain-based) attentional mechanism regulates leader cognitions, emotions and behavior. This model is well suited to our purpose because it explains the automatic process by which negative emotions interfere with the allocation of limited-capacity attentional resources during a demanding performance task. We explain how this process leads to self-regulatory impairment, heightened negative emotions and destructive leadership.

Theory and hypotheses development

The antecedents of transformational leadership and abusive supervision

Organizational leaders are often pressured to respond rapidly and accurately to work tasks and frequently make decisions based on scarce or unreliable information. Such decision-making can be demanding and stressful, particularly when a leader's decisions impact followers and the organization. Effective leadership under such dynamic and demanding conditions requires leaders who are proficient, adaptable and proactive (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007). Transformational leadership is a well-established form of constructive leadership often associated with proactive behavior during dynamic and demanding situations, for example, organizational change or crisis (Bass, 1990b; Franke & Felfe, 2011; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990). Transformational leaders motivate others by providing them with a value-laden vision, intellectual stimulation, inspirational communication, supportive leadership and personal recognition (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004).

However, some leaders may be vulnerable to cognitive overload and stress in dynamic and demanding situations, demonstrating few if any constructive leadership behaviors (Eubanks & Mumford, 2010b). Aggressive or hostile behavior could be one possible reaction from leaders who feel threatened in such situations (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). This behavior reflects "abusive supervision,"