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An exploration of the interactive effects of leader trait goal orientation and goal content in teams[☆]



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ABSTRACT

We address the intersection of leadership and goals by exploring how leader goal orientation and goal content work together when they result in matches and mismatches in teams. Our study utilized a sample of 48 teams that were randomly assigned to either a learning or a performance goal on a complex, computerized decision-making task. We found some support for our compensatory predictions as it concerns a joint focus on learning and performance on team performance. In terms of team learning, we found the highest levels among teams assigned learning goals and with leaders low on performance orientation. We found the lowest levels of team learning among teams assigned learning goals and with leaders high on performance orientation. In terms of team task commitment, we found positive effects for leader learning orientation and negative effects for leader performance orientation, but no joint effects for leader goal orientation and goal content.

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In recent years, there has been increased interest in the intersection of leadership, goals, and goal-setting (Colbert & Witt, 2009; Dragoni, 2005; Seijts & Latham, 2005; Zaccaro & Klimoski, 2002). Morgeson, DeRue, and Karam (2010), for example, are among a number of scholars who have highlighted the role leaders play in establishing performance expectations and setting team goals. Even more recently, Krasikova, Green, and LeBreton (2013) argued that goals and goal pursuit are the core elements that put into motion leadership processes.

Recently, theoretical and empirical attention has been devoted specifically to exploring situations in which leaders have goals that may or may not be consistent with those of the units they lead (e.g., Colbert, Kristof-Brown, Bradley, & Barrick, 2008; Vancouver, Millsap, & Peters, 1994). For instance, drawing on a congruence perspective, Colbert et al. (2008) explored and found evidence of positive attitudinal and organizational performance implications when CEOs agreed with their top management teams on the importance of various types of goals, which they labeled “dyadic goal importance congruence.” Work such as

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this is important because it draws attention to the fact that while a unit's (e.g., team's or organization's) goals often reflect those of its leader (Schein, 1965), this is not always the case. Over two decades ago, Vancouver et al. (1994) argued that the implications of shared or mismatched goals that leaders and their teams pursue is an important topic. Yet, a review of the literature indicates that there remains a number of unanswered questions regarding the interplay between leadership and goals/goal-setting. Of particular interest are the potential benefits of having leaders and work teams pursue compensatory goals (Kozlowski & Bell, 2006; Seijts, Latham, Tasa, & Latham, 2004).

In their theoretical model highlighting the role of leaders in team goal pursuits, Peterson and Behfar (2005) suggested that compensatory goals have the potential to benefit teams. According to the authors, teams are regularly faced with a variety of conflicts, trade-offs, and tensions (e.g., task vs. relationship focus, cooperation vs. competition, group vs. individual goals, etc.). They argued that teams perform sub-optimally when they favor one side of the tension or emphasize one goal over another. They went on to suggest that successful team performance (or what the authors also label *team regulation*) results from teams effectively balancing competing goals, or motives—motives that often result from multiple individuals exerting influence on the team. Leaders often have a high degree of influence on their teams and can serve as a critical leverage point to the extent that they help their teams balance different goals. According to Peterson and Behfar, leaders can do this by promoting awareness among the team about the goals the team members appear to be pursuing relative to the ones the leaders themselves want pursued. Leaders may also explicitly set their own standards and goals for their team and then push members to make changes so that the team pursues the goals the leader wants them to pursue. Interestingly, scant empirical attention has been devoted to exploring how leaders' goals work in tandem with those of their teams, in particular when those goals diverge.

The purpose of this article is to examine the extent to which leaders' and teams' goals work together to affect a range of outcomes when their teams fail to regulate (i.e., when they focus exclusively on one particular type of goal). We explicitly focused on learning and performance goals because this distinction is perhaps the most obvious and salient type of goal tension in work organizations (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989; Kozlowski & Bell, 2006; Seijts et al., 2004). We also focused on learning and performance goals because scholars have long argued that task performance—especially on complex tasks—is a function of both learning and performance.

In exploring the intersection of leader and team goals, we focused explicitly on leader trait goal orientation, which recent theory and research (Dragoni, 2005; Dragoni & Kuenzi, 2012) suggests represents an important antecedent of the goals that leaders promote in team settings. In this way, we add to the growing literature that has discussed trait goal orientation as a distal yet critical driver of leaders' goals in team settings (e.g., Hendricks & Payne, 2007; Porter, 2008). Goal orientation refers to goal preferences in achievement situations (Dweck, 1986). As a dispositional variable, goal orientation predicts and explains not only the tasks people choose, but also how they behave when faced with opportunities for knowledge or skill acquisition and demonstrating competence (e.g., Colquitt & Simmering, 1998; Steele-Johnson, Beauregard, Hoover, & Schmidt, 2000). Although more complex conceptualizations have emerged (e.g., VandeWalle, 1997), goal orientation can be generally divided into two broad, distinct types: performance orientation and learning orientation. Individuals high on *performance orientation* have a strong desire to pursue activities to impress others and focus on the outcome of their performance, while those high on *learning orientation* focus on ways to master tasks in order to develop their competence, acquire new skills, and learn from the task experience (Brett & VandeWalle, 1999; VandeWalle, Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1999). Leaders' trait goal orientation represents a form of dispositional goal orientation that has scarcely been explored in teams (Porter, 2008). According to Dragoni (2005), leader trait goal orientation influences teams and team outcomes via the climate it creates within teams. Specifically, leaders transmit their beliefs to their followers by modeling for—and signaling to—followers the behaviors and practices that they support. Over time, members are expected to learn what is accepted and valued, resulting in an established team-level climate (see also Gully & Phillips, 2005 and Kozlowski & Doherty, 1989).

We focus specifically on interactions between leaders' trait goal orientation and the content of the goals that their teams independently pursue. Goal content can be thought of as “competence-related environmental emphases,” which have long been the focus of scholars who study achievement-related situations (Ames, 1992; Ames & Archer, 1988; Murayama & Elliot, 2009). Examples of how goal content can be made salient include general classroom practices, messages in classroom settings and framing and structural features in work setting training (Gully & Phillips, 2005; Kozlowski & Bell, 2006). Finally, goal content is often manipulated to promote either learning and skill goals or performance goals (Barron & Harackiewicz, 2001; Kozlowski & Bell, 2006; Winters & Latham, 1996), corresponding with the two broad types of goal orientation. Thus, team goal content may or may not match up with the goals leaders promote within their teams due to their personal trait goal orientations. Our study allows us to explore situations in which the compensatory effects that Peterson and Behfar (2005) suggested could occur, whereby leaders may help their teams strike a balance—in this case a balance between learning and performance.

In this study, we assigned teams to one of two goal content conditions: learning or performance. Both learning and performance were critical aspects of team effectiveness in the complex decision-making task in which the teams worked, making our examination of both outcomes appropriate. We assessed each team's leader on both trait learning and performance goal orientation, which then allowed us to examine the interactive effects between the trait goal orientations of those leaders and their teams' goal content conditions. We focused specifically on the potential compensatory effects on team learning and team performance and whether or not consistency between leaders' goal orientation and teams' goals would promote team task commitment.

By exploring the intersection of leader trait goal orientation and team goal content, we make three important contributions to the literature. First, we address the call to explore the interplay among goal orientation, goals, and goal-setting (Kozlowski & Bell, 2006; Seijts et al., 2004). Although not interchangeable (Seijts et al., 2004), goal orientation and goal content are conceptually

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