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The importance of a multidimensional and temporal design in research on leadership and workplace safety

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ABSTRACT

Current knowledge about relationships between leadership and workplace safety is based mainly on cross-sectional studies focusing on constructive forms of leadership. We suggest that this one-sided attention to constructive leadership and the lack of temporal research designs have restrained our understanding of: 1) the impact of both constructive and destructive forms of leadership on safety, 2) whether and how leadership is related to safety over time, and 3) potential bidirectional associations between leadership and safety. To substantiate these claims empirically, time-lagged relationships between constructive-, laissez-faire-, and tyrannical leadership and psychological safety climate were examined among 683 employees from the offshore petroleum industry. We found that associations with psychological safety climate were dependent upon the types of leadership examined. A bidirectional relationship was established between leadership and psychological safety climate. The findings support the importance of a multidimensional approach and a temporal design in research on leadership and safety.

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Introduction

Leadership has been described as a process of social influence in which one person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task (Chemers, 1997). Due to its strong influence on followers and organizational processes, leadership is claimed to play a critical role not only in relating to goal achievement and efficiency, but also with regard to workplace safety (Barling, Loughlin, & Kelloway, 2002; Christian, Bradley, Wallace, & Burke, 2009; Zohar, 2002). In this it has been suggested that leadership behavior particularly oriented towards the enhancement of safety, promoting change, exemplary safety role-modeling, and a positive leader–member exchange, is especially important for subordinates' levels of perceived risks and safety (Conchie, Taylor, & Donald, 2012; Hofmann, Morgeson, & Gerras, 2003; Nielsen, Eid, Larsson, & Mearns, 2013).

Yet, it can be argued that our knowledge about how leadership behavior is related to safety outcomes is constrained by three conceptual and methodological limitations. First, most studies have focused on constructive forms of leadership only, such as transformational leadership (e.g., Clarke, 2013; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Zohar & Tenne-Gazit, 2008) and ethical leadership (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). Consequently, there is a lack of research on associations between active and passive destructive forms of leadership (e.g., abusive supervision and laissez-faire leadership, respectively) and safety which may be used to supply and contrast the findings on constructive forms of leadership (Kelloway, Mullen, & Francis, 2006). Second, as existing studies are mainly based on cross-sectional research designs (e.g., Barling et al., 2002; Nielsen et al., 2013; O'dea & Flin, 2001), there is a shortage of information

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about the time-lagged impact of leadership behaviors on safety outcomes. Third, research has more or less ignored the potential reversed impact of safety perceptions on subsequent ratings of leadership by subordinates. That is, little is known about whether safety factors may influence leadership evaluations over time. In order to shed light on how these limitations can hamper our understanding of the relationships between leadership and workplace safety, this study will examine associations between leadership and safety by applying a multidimensional perspective on leadership, which includes both constructive and destructive leadership behaviors, as well as a temporal design. In the following sections, we will describe the abovementioned limitations in detail, explain how they influence our understanding of the leadership–safety relationship, and present our study hypotheses.

The one-sided focus on constructive leadership

Workplace safety refers to an organization's policies and procedures for ensuring the safety, health and well-being of employees within the workplace (see Barlow & Iverson, 2005). Although many individual and situational factors may influence workplace safety, theoretical models highlight leadership as especially crucial (e.g., Barlow & Iverson, 2005; Clarke, 2013; Eid, Mearns, Larsson, Laberg, & Johnsen, 2012). This notion is supported by findings from both primary studies (Barling et al., 2002; Nielsen et al., 2013; Zohar, 2002) and meta-analyses (Christian et al., 2009; Clarke, 2013) on leadership and safety showing that organizational and group leadership are associated with a range of safety indicators.

Traditionally, leadership has either been seen from a behavioral perspective in which specific leadership behaviors and their outcomes are captured (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003; Judge & Piccolo, 2004), or from a process perspective where the focus is on the interaction between the leaders and their followers (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012; Ilies, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007; Rockstuhl, Dulebohn, Ang, & Shore, 2012). Combining these perspectives, many definitions of leadership refer to the process of influencing the activities of an organized group towards goal achievement. Highlighting the exchange process between leaders and followers, Bass (1990) suggests that leadership can be seen as an interaction between two or more members of a group that involves a structuring or restructuring of the situation and the accompanying perceptions and expectations of members.

While research has traditionally focused on the process and influence of constructive forms of leadership such as transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006), authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), and ethical leadership (Kalshoven & Boon, 2012), emerging evidence suggests that leaders may also exhibit destructive behavior which undermines subordinates and/or the goal maintenance of the organization (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007; Krasikova, Green, & LeBreton, 2013; Schyns & Schilling, 2013).

Destructive leadership has been defined as "The systematic and repeated behavior by a leader, supervisor or manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organization by undermining and/or sabotaging the organization's goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness and/or the motivation, well-being or job satisfaction of subordinates" (Einarsen et al., 2007, p. 208). In their elaboration on the definition the authors state that destructive leadership can be exhibited through both active and passive behaviors, a categorization which is in line with Buss (1961) distinction between active and passive forms of aggression. Concepts such as abusive supervision (Tepper, 2007), petty tyrant (Ashforth, 1994; Kant, Skogstad, Torsheim, & Einarsen, 2013), and tyrannical leadership (Aasland, Skogstad, Notelaers, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2010) exemplify the active destructive leader. Taken together, these concepts refer to a form of leadership where the leader systematically humiliates, belittles and manipulates his/her subordinates in order to 'get the job done', and typically obtains results not through, but at the expense of subordinates (Einarsen et al., 2007).

Several scholars emphasize that laissez-faire leadership essentially is a type of non-responsive leadership in situations where there may be a need for a leader's attention (Schriesheim, Wu, & Scandura, 2009), and where the followers probably are in need of a leader's help and support (Skogstad, Hetland, Glasø, & Einarsen, 2014). Laissez-faire leadership is the most common example of passive destructive leadership (Buch, Martinsen, & Kuvaas, 2014; Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007; Skogstad, Hetland, et al., 2014), and is defined as the avoidance or absence of leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Laissez-faire leadership has been found to be negatively associated with various attitudinal, behavioral, and well-being outcomes (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008; Skogstad et al., 2007; Skogstad, Hetland, et al., 2014).

Despite relatively high prevalence of both passive and active forms of destructive leadership (Aasland et al., 2010), and the fact that meta-studies have shown that destructive leadership is related to various attitudinal, behavioral and health outcomes (Mackey, Frieder, Brees, & Martinko, 2015; Schyns & Schilling, 2013), there are few theoretical models which have included the destructive aspects of leadership as antecedents of safety and subordinates' perception of the safety at work (Kelloway et al., 2006). Based on the abovementioned findings on relationships between destructive leadership and health and well-being in general, there are, however, strong reasons for also expecting a relationship between destructive leadership and safety outcomes. In the following we will first give a brief summary of the existing theoretical and empirical evidence for how constructive forms of leadership can be related to workplace safety, before we show that many of the same mechanisms may apply for destructive forms of leadership, albeit in an opposite direction.

Constructive forms of leadership have been highlighted as a main antecedent of safety, and especially safety climate, in several theoretical models. For instance, Eid et al. (2012) suggested that authentic leaders foster safety-focused followers through role modeling and social identification. As authentic leaders will instill powerful social processes that may influence individual priorities, embed moral perspectives, and stimulate processes of positive organizational behavior, they are assumed to have an impact on followers' safety perceptions and behavior. Similarly Barling and colleagues (2002) proposed that transformational leadership had both a direct impact, as well as an indirect influence through safety consciousness, on safety climate and thereby on other safety factors.

These theoretical assumptions about constructive forms of leadership as predictors of safety have been substantiated by meta-analytic findings which showed that transformational leadership has a positive association with both perceived safety climate and

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