



# Supervisor commitment to employees: Does agreement among supervisors' and employees' perceptions matter?

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## ABSTRACT

Using 322 matched employee–supervisor dyads, we investigate how level and direction of employee–supervisor (dis)agreement on supervisor's affective commitment to the employee relate to organizational commitment, emotional exhaustion, leader–member exchange, and job performance. Results from polynomial regression and response surface analyses indicate that level of employee–supervisor agreement matters: the most beneficial outcomes appear when supervisors and employees agree that the supervisor is highly committed to the employee whereas the least favorable outcomes appear when dyads' members agree that the supervisor has low commitment to the employee. Direction of employee–supervisor disagreement is also important as employee overestimation of supervisor commitment is associated with more favorable outcomes than employee underestimation. However, for two of the outcomes (organizational commitment and emotional exhaustion), the effect of employee–supervisor disagreement was attributable to a main effect of employee perceptions of supervisor commitment. We discuss the implications of these findings for the understanding of employee–supervisor relationships.

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## Introduction

Research has shown that commitment, conceived as “a force that binds an individual to a course of action of relevance to one or more targets” (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001, p. 301), can be experienced in a reciprocal manner by partners within employee–supervisor dyads (Landry & Vandenberghe, 2012). The present study intends to extend this line of inquiry by looking at the potential consequences of relative agreement/disagreement between employees' and supervisors' views of supervisor affective commitment to the employee. Specifically, we examine the consequences associated with the *level* and *direction* of employee–supervisor (dis)agreement about supervisor's affective commitment to the employee. We focus on *affective* commitment, i.e., commitment based on identification with the target's goals and values (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001), because it is particularly relevant to employee–supervisor dyads: human relationships, even in the work context, tend to be tinged with the exchange of affective experiences (Little, Klumper, Nelson, & Gooty, 2012).

Although employee–supervisor agreement has been scarcely studied in the field of commitment, previous research on leader–follower agreement provides indirect evidence that it can make a difference in terms of leadership practices, performance, and other organizational outcomes (e.g., Atwater, Ostroff, Yammarino, & Fleener, 1998; Atwater & Yammarino, 1997; Coglisier, Schriesheim, Scandura, & Gardner, 2009; Sin, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2009). In the current study, we propose that supervisor commitment to an employee (hereafter *supervisor commitment*) and employee's perception of supervisor commitment to him/her (hereafter *perceived*

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*commitment*) may converge to varying degrees among dyads. Researchers in different areas of social sciences such as social exchange theorists (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), proponents of balance theory (Heider, 1958; Newcomb, 1968) and interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), as well as intimate relationships scholars (e.g., Holmes, 2000) have suggested that the achievement of agreement among perceptions of partners' feelings, thoughts, and/or behaviors, makes the relationship more predictable (Swann, 1984) and enhances partners' well-being. In contrast, disagreement among partners' perceptions may lead to uncertainty and misunderstandings that affect the relational dynamics. Following this view, we predict that when employees and supervisors agree and perceived and supervisor commitment are high, we should witness the most favorable consequences, whereas the opposite is expected when partners agree and perceived and supervisor commitment are low. Disagreement between supervisor commitment and perceived commitment in either direction (i.e., the employee underestimates or overestimates supervisor commitment) is expected to yield a mix of favorable and unfavorable consequences.

Research on dyadic relationships (e.g., Atwater & Yammarino, 1997; Atwater et al., 1998; Coglisier et al., 2009; Holmes, 2000; Sin et al., 2009) has generally emphasized that (dis)agreement about the partner's feelings, thoughts, and/or behaviors has implications in three areas: (a) which affective reactions are developed, (b) how one perceives or feels in connection with the relationship, and (c) how one behaves and performs (e.g., in the work context). These three domains represent the proximal areas influenced by employee–supervisor (dis)agreement because they are natural extensions of the relationship dynamics (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Accordingly, we look at how relative agreement between supervisor commitment and perceived commitment relates to outcomes reflecting the above domains. First, we examine how agreement between supervisor and perceived commitment relates to organizational commitment and emotional exhaustion. Because supervisors are agents of the organization, supervisor commitment may partly represent the organization's commitment to employees (Erdogan & Enders, 2007). As regards emotional exhaustion, we suspect that employee–supervisor disagreement may cause uncertainty about the future of the relationship and create a stressful situation that drains personal resources. Second, we examine the relationship between employee–supervisor agreement and leader–member exchange (LMX). As commitment may enhance the quality of social exchanges (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), LMX should relate to the relative agreement among partners on supervisor commitment. Third, we consider job performance as it represents an important outcome of commitment (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001).

Employee–supervisor (dis)agreement is also relevant to practice. As research on leader–follower agreement has shown (e.g., Allen & Eby, 2008; Atwater & Yammarino, 1997; Coglisier et al., 2009), favorable outcomes tend to accrue when partners have convergent views of the exchange relationship. When supervisors are committed to employees and employees hold convergent views of this commitment, supervisors will be encouraged to offer support and resources to employees, and employees will react positively to their own, convergent perception of this commitment. Such circumstances create the conditions for a virtuous circle: the relationship will be of higher quality, performance will be facilitated, and employees will feel attached to the organization and protected against emotional exhaustion. In contrast, employee–supervisor disagreement may have negative consequences. Employees who overestimate supervisor commitment may be overconfident and vulnerable to negative consequences such as being bypassed for a promotion (Coglisier et al., 2009), but in a sense may also be psychologically protected against the harmful effects of having a supervisor who is not committed. Conversely, employees who underestimate their supervisor commitment may experience feelings of anxiety (Coglisier et al., 2009) and uncertainty about the prospects of their relationship. All in all, agreement among employees' and supervisors' views of supervisor commitment should facilitate the timely allocation by supervisors of resources essential to the development of the relationship, provide a stronger basis for employees' identifying the pathway through which they can develop their potential, and ease employees' contribution to organizational goals.

### Employee–supervisor agreement about supervisor commitment

Although employee commitment to the supervisor has been widely studied (e.g., Becker, 1992; Becker, Billings, Eveleth, & Gilbert, 1996; Siders, George, & Dharwadkar, 2001), *supervisor commitment* to the subordinate has received far less attention. Atwater, Waldman, Atwater, and Cartier (2000) investigated supervisor commitment to subordinates as a group rather than to specific subordinates, while Landry and Vandenberghe (2012) examined a multidimensional model of supervisor commitment in the context of supervisor–employee dyads. Related research on mentoring also examined mentors' commitment to the relationship (Allen & Eby, 2008; Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006; Poteat, Shockley, & Allen, 2009). However, *employees' perceptions* of their supervisor's commitment may differ from supervisors' reports of their commitment. Indirect support for this construct can be found in the mentoring literature where protégés' perception of mentor commitment and mentors' perception of protégé commitment have been found to be linked to mentoring relationship quality (Allen & Eby, 2008; Poteat et al., 2009). Similarly, research on interpersonal relationships found the perception of one's partner commitment to have implications for relationship satisfaction and well-being (Arriaga, Reed, Goodfriend, & Agnew, 2006; Weigel, 2008a, 2010).

The above evidence suggests that the distinction between *perceived commitment* and *supervisor commitment* is worth making. Moreover, there are theoretical reasons to believe that employee–supervisor agreement about supervisor commitment is associated with more positive outcomes. For example, social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Dabos & Rousseau, 2004) stresses the importance of mutuality and reciprocity for the development of high-quality social exchange relationships. Similarly, both balance theory (Heider, 1958; Newcomb, 1968) and interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) state that people are motivated to achieve agreement in their perceptions of themselves and their partners in order to maintain a state of cognitive balance, which would also help making the relationship more predictable (Swann, 1984) and ensure partners' well-being. Finally, research on intimate relationships (e.g., Holmes, 2000) suggests that harmonious relationships require some alignment among partners' perceptions. However, it is worth noting that both *level* and *direction* of agreement among partners have consequences. When employees

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