A new substitute for leadership? Followers' state core self-evaluations

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ABSTRACT

In this experimental study we integrate transformational leadership theory with recent theoretical considerations and research on core self-evaluations (CSE) in a contingency approach to leadership. We analyze to what extent high state CSE may represent a substitute for transformational leadership in terms of its influence on follower motivation and performance. In a 2×2-design the relationship between transformational leadership and followers' motivation and performance is compared for followers with high versus low state CSE. Participants (76 students) were randomly assigned to four groups. High or low state CSE was activated through a priming manipulation. After that, participants were presented with a written vignette of a transformational or a nontransformational leader who instructs them to perform the subsequent task, a word-search puzzle. Results reveal that followers' state CSE moderated the relationship between transformational leadership and followers' motivation and performance. As expected, followers' state CSE represents a substitute for transformational leadership. Results are discussed for leadership research and management practice.

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1. Introduction

The identification of contingencies determining whether preventive or intervening actions are effective is an important goal in clinical, psychoeducational, and business settings. Knowledge on such contingencies may help to streamline treatments and to spare program resources. Evaluations of intervening programs and treatments commonly report that they are more beneficial for those with low baseline levels in a given resource. As an example, a clinical intervention designed to strengthen individuals' self-efficacy and foster positive self-evaluations may be more effective for those with lower self-efficacy levels because there is more potential for a gain (Haney & Durlak, 1998).

Due to their positive impact on a number of valuable outcomes (Chang, Ferris, Johnson, Rosen, & Tan, 2012) positive self-evaluations represent an important individual resource also in organizational settings. In organizations, similar to an intervention, transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) may strengthen employees' self-worth and self-efficacy in order to raise their motivation and consequently improve their performance (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). Accordingly, just like the abovementioned intervention, transformational leadership should be more beneficial for followers with low baseline levels in these self-evaluations. When followers' self-evaluations are currently low, a boost in motivation and performance through transformational leadership should be larger as there is much potential for a boost. In contrast, when followers' self-evaluations, and as a consequence, their motivation to perform well, are already high at a given time there is not much potential for a gain. Therefore, they are not in need of a transformational leadership style. This may render followers' self-evaluative states a potential substitute for leadership, a situational contingency of leadership effectiveness.

In the present study we focus on followers' current core self-evaluations (*state CSE*; Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2004, 2011) as a substitute for transformational leadership by analyzing its moderating influence on the links between transformational leadership and

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followers' motivation and performance. Although several studies (e.g., De Vries, Roe, & Taillieu, 2002; Ehrhart & Klein, 2001) increasingly focused on the influence of follower characteristics (e.g., need configurations, values) on perceptions of and reactions to a transformational leader's behavior, research on interactions between leadership behavior and follower characteristics is still scarce. Specifically, the potential role of these characteristics as substitutes for leadership went largely unnoticed until now. Further, literature has mostly analyzed the role of follower characteristics for subjective outcomes like followers' leader-oriented (e.g., sympathy, satisfaction, commitment; Felfe & Schyns, 2006, 2010) and work-related attitudes (e.g., organizational commitment, work engagement, and job satisfaction; Walumbwa, Lawler, Avolio, Wang, & Shi, 2005; Zhu, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2009). Similar to interventions, the knowledge of follower characteristics that may influence leadership effectiveness can be quite beneficial. Leaders who know about the substituting effect of followers' state CSE may spare their resources and direct their transformational behaviors more target-oriented, and thus more efficiently, towards those followers who actually need a motivational uplift.

Proposing that followers' positive self-evaluations may represent a substitute for transformational leadership (e.g., House, 1971; Kerr & Jermier, 1978), and hence a situational contingency inherent in followers, we conceptualize CSE as a state-based construct. The idea of a state-based conceptualization of CSE (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2004, 2011) is quite new and may, at first glance, seem contradictory to the original conceptualization of CSE as a stable trait (Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997). However, researchers in the field of personality psychology do widely agree by now that there is a considerable amount of both within- and between-person variability in personality constructs. That is, intra- and interindividual differences (i.e., traits and states) are not mutually exclusive but represent two sides of the same construct (e.g., McNiel & Fleeson, 2006; Mischel, 2004). Accordingly, Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller (2011) recently stated that people's self-evaluations may significantly fluctuate around an otherwise relatively stable set point. Hence, focusing on state CSE as a personal contingency of leadership effectiveness may also render valuable insights for recent CSE theory and research.

In sum, the aim of the present study is twofold. Firstly, by linking transformational leadership and followers' state CSE in a contingency approach we strive to identify a 'new' substitute for transformational leadership while accounting for recent research on the role of follower characteristics in the leadership process. Secondly, by focusing on a state-based conceptualization of CSE we also account for recent developments in CSE theorizing and research. Until now, only one study demonstrated that individuals' CSE is malleable and can be influenced through experimental manipulation (Schinkel, Van Dierendonck, & Anderson, 2004). Overall, by advocating state CSE as a new substitute for leadership we may re-stimulate the discussion of a seemingly forgotten contingency perspective on leadership while accounting for recent considerations on state CSE as an important individual resource in organizational settings.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. Transformational leadership, motivation, and performance

Transformational leadership has been one of the most popular leadership paradigms of the last decades (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). At the heart of the behavior-oriented model of Bass (1985; Bass & Avolio, 1995) is the assumption that transformational leaders motivate, inspire, and "transform" followers' needs, values, and motives towards a collective, higher-order goal. Transformational leadership consists of the following five dimensions (Bass & Avolio, 1995): idealized influence attributed, idealized influence behavior, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. According to Bass (1985), transformational leaders communicate an attractive vision and ideological goals and express confidence in followers' capabilities to achieve these goals. By acting in accordance with their communicated high performance standards and values transformational leaders serve as role models and cause followers to develop a deep sense of commitment and trust in their actions. Transformational leaders also stimulate creativity and careful problem solving in their followers by, for example, encouraging them to challenge existing assumptions and to take on new perspectives (Bass, 1990). As a consequence of these behaviors, followers are willing to work hard in order to realize the vision and perform beyond expectations. In accordance with Bass' theory several meta-analyses (e.g., Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996) give evidence to the importance of transformational leadership for both subjective and objective performance criteria.

As an approach to explain *how* transformational leaders positively impact follower performance Shamir and colleagues (1993) stress the importance of motivational mechanisms as mediators of transformational leadership effectiveness. Transformational leaders enhance followers' self-esteem and self-efficacy and, as a consequence, their motivation to perform well (Bandura, 1997) by setting high performance goals while showing confidence and faith in followers' competencies. Through this, followers come to believe that they can accomplish the task so that they persist in their efforts and overcome significant obstacles (Bass, 1985). Further, transformational leaders increase followers' intrinsic motivation by emphasizing higher ideological values and elevating the significance of the task. As a consequence, followers view their jobs as more meaningful and significant and are more motivated to perform well. Past research has confirmed a number of motivational mechanisms that are able to explain the positive effect of transformational leadership on follower performance, such as self-efficacy (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Liao & Chuang, 2007), intrinsic motivation (Charbonneau, Barling, & Kelloway, 2001), and extra effort (Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002). The positive relationship between transformational leadership and follower motivation has also been supported by Judge and Piccolo's meta-analysis (2004). Thus, based on past theory and research, we suggest:

Hypothesis 1a.

Transformational leadership will have a positive effect on followers' performance.