The effects of construal level and small wins framing on an individual's commitment to an environmental initiative

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A B S T R A C T

Organizations are increasingly focused on improving the environmental sustainability of their operations, products, and services. To implement sustainability initiatives, organizations often seek commitment from their members to volunteer discretionary time and effort toward reaching the initiative's goals. This research sought to understand whether construal level and small wins strategy might affect goal commitment toward a sustainability initiative. Using a scenario-based 2 × 2 factorial design experiment with 133 university students, we manipulated construal level and small wins strategy while measuring participants' environmental concern, perceptions of organizational efficacy, and goal commitment. Goal difficulty, gender, and age were included as control variables. Individuals with higher environmental concern had higher commitment to the organization's initiative, but this relationship was moderated, with both a high level of construal and the use of small wins strategy strengthening that relationship. Perceived organizational efficacy was also found to increase goal commitment, and women exhibited greater goal commitment than men.

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The world community is increasingly focused on the natural environment and humanity's role in affecting its condition, including the impact of public and private organizations. In response, organizations are implementing initiatives to develop more environmentally sustainable operations and products, reducing their use of natural resources, and eliminating emissions and waste streams. In addition to meeting stakeholder demands, many organizations are finding that pursuing environmental initiatives provides economic benefits. To carry out environmental sustainability initiatives, organizations often seek commitment from their members to volunteer discretionary time and effort toward reaching environmental goals. Indeed, the success of these initiatives frequently depends upon the commitment and actions of organization members (Gould-Williams & Davies, 2005; Podsakoff, Ahearne, & MacKenzie, 1997; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000; Walz & Niehoff, 2000).

The aim of this research is to obtain a better understanding of what elicits goal commitment from organization members in the context of environmental sustainability initiatives. To our knowledge, there has been no empirical research on the extent to which an individual's level of environmental concern influences their goal commitment to an organization's environmental sustainability initiative. Furthermore, little is known about what actions managers can take to frame environmental initiatives in a way that promotes organization members becoming more committed to helping support them. The lack of knowledge in this area represents an important theoretical gap that we seek to address. We examine the effect of four factors on goal commitment in the context of environmental sustainability: construal level (CL), small wins strategy (SWS), environmental concern (EC), and organizational efficacy (OE). We briefly define each factor below.

CL is associated with psychological distance and can influence people's perceptions and decisions. High CL is associated with abstract thinking and low CL is associated with more concrete thinking (Trope & Liberman, 2000). SWS refers to presenting a large problem in a way that makes it appear more tractable by approaching it as a series of smaller problems (Weick, 1984). EC refers to an individual's attitudes and values regarding the Earth's

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natural environment. OE in our context refers to an individual's judgment of an organization's capability to be successful in meeting its environmental sustainability goals.

We theorize that EC and perception of OE will influence an organization member's goal commitment toward an organization's environmental sustainability initiative. Further, we posit that construal level and small wins strategy will moderate the relationship between EC and goal commitment.

1. Relevant theory and hypotheses

1.1. Goal commitment

Goal commitment is conceptualized as the intention to extend effort toward attaining a goal, persistence in pursuing the goal over time, and an unwillingness to lower or abandon that goal (Hollenbeck & Klein, 1987; Locke & Latham, 1990). Participants' stated goal commitment toward an organization's environmental sustainability initiative is the dependent variable in this research and hereafter we refer to it simply as commitment.

1.2. Environmental concern

Environmental concern refers to an individual's attitudes and values regarding the Earth's natural environment. The term has referred to a wide range of environmentally related perceptions, emotions, attitudes, beliefs, values, intentions, and behaviors (Bamberg, 2003; Dunlap, 2008; Xiao & Dunlap, 2007; Xiao, 2011).

The most-used measure of general environmental beliefs is the New Environmental Paradigm (NEP) scale (Xiao, 2011). The NEP scale is intended to measure an individual's environmental beliefs by contrasting the belief in individualism, laissez-faire government, progress, material abundance, growth, the efficacy of technology, and a view of nature as something to be subdued (Dunlap, 2008) with a belief in ecological limits to growth, the importance of maintaining the balance of nature, and rejection of the anthropocentric notion that nature exists primarily for human use (Dunlap & Van Liere, 1978; Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig, & Jones, 2000). Appendix A provides more information on the NEP scale and the actual measurement items.

Little is known about the extent to which an individual's level of EC influences commitment to an organization's environmental sustainability initiative. We hypothesize that individuals who have a greater EC will state a greater commitment to an environmental sustainability initiative.

H1. Individuals with a higher level of environmental concern will have higher levels of stated goal commitment in the context of environmental sustainability initiatives.

1.3. Construal level

CL describes how framing the psychological distance of an object affects one's perception of it. Psychological distance is a subjective mental construction of how near or distant an object is from the self in the present. Distance can be spatial distance, temporal distance, social distance or hypotheticality. These four distances have a similar effect on one's construal and therefore a similar effect on one's conceptions and decisions.

Distal objects are construed at higher levels and perceived in more abstract terms, where the focus tends to be on central features that capture the overall essence of an issue or an object, with secondary and incidental features being disregarded. Proximal objects are construed at lower levels and perceived in more concrete and specific terms, where the focus is on specific details that may not represent the essence of a situation or an object (Liberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2000, 2010; Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007).

1.3.1. CL, evaluation and decision-making

CL theory provides insight into the distinction between desirability concerns and feasibility concerns related to goal-directed behavior (Trope et al., 2007). Desirability concerns pertain to the value ascribed to reaching some end state, whereas feasibility concerns pertain to the means used to reach this state. When making a decision about an action, one contrasts desirability and feasibility. As psychological distance increases, the desirability of the action's end state, a high-level construal, should receive greater weight over practicality and the means used to achieve the end state, a low-level construal (Agerström & Björklund, 2009; Kivetz & Tyler, 2007; Trope et al., 2007).

1.3.2. CL and values-based decisions

Personal values are relatively abstract and decontextualized, and inherently have a high construal. When making decisions about distal situations, people's values take priority, and they are more likely to commit to values-consistent behaviors. As people get psychologically closer to the situation, their decisions are increasingly influenced by feasibility concerns and they are more likely to commit to behaviors less consistent with their personal values and more consistent with practicality, effort, and other, more immediate, aspects of the decision (Agerström & Björklund, 2009; Eyal, Sagristano, Trope, Liberman, & Chaiken, 2009; Fujita, Eyal, Chaiken, Trope, & Liberman, 2008; Thompson & Stoutemyer, 1991; Trope & Liberman, 2010).

We theorize that framing an environmental initiative in a psychologically distal manner will draw attention to high-level (values-based, primary, desirability, goal-relevant) aspects versus low-level (incidental, concrete, feasibility, goal-irrelevant) aspects of the initiative. In this study, we chose to manipulate construal through temporal distance.

In the context of an organization's environmental sustainability initiative, a high-level construal will focus attention on the environmental values and desirability of the initiative. Thus, a high CL should strengthen the relationship between EC and commitment.

H2. Construal level will moderate the effect of environmental concern on goal commitment such that the effect of environmental concern on commitment is stronger when construal level is high than when construal level is low.

1.4. Small wins strategy

SWS focuses on the psychological effect of defining the magnitude of a problem and its solution. Thinking about the magnitude of a large problem and how to address it can create an incapacitating level of stress. SWS involves presenting a large problem in a way that makes it appear more tractable by framing it as a series of smaller problems.

The Yerkes-Dodson (YD) Law describes an inverted "U-shaped" relationship between the level of stress on the X-axis and the level of performance on the Y-axis. If a problem is defined as too small or easy relative to one's capability, it will be perceived as trivial, create a very low level of stress, and will not motivate action and performance. If a problem is defined as too large or difficult relative to capability, people can become overwhelmed