



## Leadership and stress: A meta-analytic review



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### ABSTRACT

Stress has been implicated as an important determinant of leadership functioning. Conversely, the behavior of leaders has long been argued to be a major factor in determining the stress levels of followers. Yet despite the widespread acknowledgement that stress and leadership are linked, there has been no systematic attempt to organize and summarize these literatures. In the present, we meta-analytically review the relationship between three leadership constructs (transformational leadership, leader-member exchange, and abusive supervision) and stress and burnout. Our analyses confirm that leader stress influences leader behavior and that leadership behaviors and leader-follower relationships are significant determinants of stress and burnout in subordinates. We build on these results to suggest new avenues for research in this domain as well as discussing how these results can inform practice with regards to leader development.

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### Introduction

In many ways, stress and leadership are inextricably linked with one another. Some have argued that it is only in moments of great crisis that heroic leadership can be displayed (Bryman, 1993; House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991). Others argue that such crises are instances where the true character of a leader may shine through (Hannah, Uhl-bien, Avolio, & Cavarretta, 2009) or that moments of extreme stress can serve as crucibles for the development of leadership skills (Bennis & Thomas, 2002; Kolditz, 2007). It has also been argued that such events are precisely when leadership is most needed, because the presence of leaders who can handle stressful events effectively make for more efficient decision-making and group fitness (Van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008). And it is crucial to know that your leader can handle stress well because leaders face a great deal of stress (Day, Sin, & Chen, 2004) and there is a burgeoning literature documenting not only how stress can impact leadership, but also how leaders can alternatively be a source of stress or source of relief from stress. In this paper, we meta-analytically review the literature concerning stress and leadership, both looking at leader stress as an antecedent of leadership behaviors and follower stress as a consequence of leadership behaviors.

As noted above, it seems intuitive to link leadership with stress. The Bass Handbook of Leadership (Bass & Bass, 2008) devotes an entire chapter to discussing the role of stress as both an antecedent and a consequence of leadership. More recently, *The Leadership Quarterly* devoted a special issue to the role of emotions in leadership processes (Connelly & Gooty, 2015). And yet at the same time, major reviews of the leadership literature have largely ignored the subject of stress. For example, recent meta-analyses

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of LMX (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Martin et al., 2015), transformational leadership (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996), and abusive supervision (the perception of a supervisor's sustained engagement in hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors, excluding physical contact; Mackey, Frieder, Brees, & Martinko, *in press*; Tepper, 2000; Zhang & Liao, 2015) have all failed to address leader stress as a potential antecedent of leader behaviors or follower stress as potential consequence. Nor have recent meta-analytic reviews of constructs such as job stress and burnout addressed leadership styles as a potential antecedent (e.g. Cole, Walter, Bedeian & O'Boyle, 2012; Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999). However, not all reviews have ignored this topic. For example, a recent meta-analysis of destructive leadership (Schyns & Schilling, 2013) found a fairly robust relationship between abusive supervision and follower stress ( $r = 0.31$ ) on the basis of 12 studies. Another review of abusive supervision (Mackey et al., *in press*) found similar effects for job tension and follower emotional exhaustion. But, on the whole, although the subject of how stress and leadership interact has been widely studied, it has not been brought together in such a way as to inform future scholarship in terms of the relative size of the relationship between leader stress and leadership behaviors or which forms of leadership are most associated with follower stress. Moreover, empirical evidence remains unclear regarding the strength of this relationship. The literature has remained fragmented, focusing on either 1) leadership stress and its impact on leader behaviors or 2) leader behaviors and their impact on follower stress, with no integration. Without integration and a comprehensive review, it is impossible to accurately assess this process. To address this, as well as recent calls for more research investigating the role of emotional experiences in leadership processes (Rajah, Song, & Arvey, 2011), we will review the nature of stress, what role it might play in determining leadership behaviors, and how leadership behaviors can act to buffer or induce stress in those around them. We will then make suggestions as to how the field might make use of these findings moving forward.

### *Stress and burnout*

Stress refers to the physiological and/or psychological arousal that occurs when an individual perceives a threat to something of value to them and that threat taxes or exhausts the resources they have available to confront it (Hobfoll, 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; LePine, Lepine & Jackson, 2004). In the workplace, these typically take two forms: job stress and interpersonal stress (Fiedler, 1992). Job stress comes from the nature of the task itself (e.g. complexity, difficulty level) and the conditions the individual is operating under (e.g. time pressure, working conditions). Interpersonal stress comes from being in conflict with others or feeling that one must meet the demands or expectations of others. Regardless of the source, most stressors can be said to be stressful as a result of the potential threat being either unpredictable, uncontrollable, or both (Cohen, 1980). In addition, the more that an individual values a resource or relationship, the more stress that is likely to occur when that resource or relationship is threatened (Fiedler, 1992). Consequently, considerable psychological and material resources are often spent in an effort to either adapt to or reduce these stressors (Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, & Xanthopoulou, 2007).

Although stress researchers have argued that moderate levels of stress can be useful for activating behaviors and cognitions, too much stress tends to be detrimental to the individual's physical and psychological health (e.g. Cohen, Janicki-Deverts, & Miller, 2007; Kalimo et al., 2000; Melamed et al., 2006; Srivastava & Krishna, 1991). In situations where individuals are subjected to prolonged periods of stress (and subsequent extended resource expenditure), burnout is likely to occur (Maslach, 1982, Maslach & Jackson, 1981). That is, as stress mounts, the individual must increasingly divert psychological resources to combat its negative effects until those resources are exhausted and the individual feels overwhelmed and no longer able to cope with work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Halbesleben & Leon, 2014; Hobfoll, 1988, 1989).

Burnout includes three primary symptoms: emotional exhaustion (feeling emotionally overwhelmed by one's work), depersonalization (also known as cynicism or disengagement, defined as detachment or indifference from others at work), and reduced personal accomplishment (also referred to as professional efficacy, which is the tendency to evaluate one's efforts and achievements negatively; Maslach, 1982, Maslach & Jackson, 1981). It is often considered a process with these symptoms increasingly manifesting themselves as stress accumulates. That said, there is no consensus regarding the order that these symptoms are likely to manifest themselves (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993).

In terms of problems at work, stress and burnout have been associated with reduced job performance and job satisfaction (Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004; Gilboa, Shirom, Fried, & Cooper, 2008; Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Sullivan & Bhagat, 1992), increased withdrawal and turnover (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000), higher rates of accidents (Murphy, DuBois, & Hurrell, 1986), and drug and alcohol use (Frone, 2008; Harris & Heft, 1992). Given the commonalities of the causes and consequences of stress and burnout, we anticipate that both constructs and their facets will relate to leadership in a similar fashion.

### *Leader stress as a cause of leadership behaviors*

As noted above, it often seems like leadership becomes most necessary when things are going poorly. Consequently, it should be no surprise that leaders often report being under considerable stress. The Center for Creative Leadership reports that 88% of leaders say that work is the primary source of stress in their lives (Campbell, Baltes, Martin, & Meddings, 2007). One reason for this is that leaders face a great deal of potential sources of stress (Day, Sin, & Chen, 2004; Hunter, Tate, Dziewieczynski & Bedell-Avers, 2011). Evolutionary accounts of leadership suggest that despite having access to greater resources, individuals in leadership positions can experience greater amounts of stress because they are more likely to encounter threats or challenges from both inside and outside one's social group (de Waal, 1982; Mazur, 1985; Van Vugt et al., 2008). Other have argued that

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