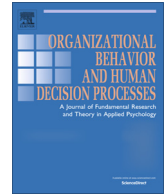




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# It's about time: Divergent evaluations of restrictive policies in the near and distant future



Nathaniel A. Nakashima<sup>a,\*</sup>, David P. Daniels<sup>a</sup>, Kristin Laurin<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Graduate School of Business, Stanford University, 655 Knight Way, Stanford, CA 94305, United States

<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychology, University of British Columbia, 2136 West Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z4, Canada

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## ABSTRACT

When should leaders announce policies that create net benefits for organizations, but also restrict individual member choices? We find that restrictive policies engender more support from stakeholders when they are to be implemented in the distant versus near future (Studies 1 and 2). We find similar results when manipulating construal level instead of temporal distance (Study 3). The effect of temporal distance on attitudes toward a policy is mediated by people's attention to different aspects of the policy (desirability vs. feasibility, pros vs. cons, self vs. other) (Study 4). Furthermore, temporal distance enhances support for policies that are high, but not low, in desirability for the collective (Study 5). The evidence is consistent with Construal Level Theory; we also consider Rational Choice Theory as an alternative perspective. Our findings suggest that leaders who wish to maximize member support for restrictive policies should consider announcing them well in advance of their implementation date.

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## 1. Introduction

In early 2013, Marissa Mayer, the CEO of Yahoo! Inc., set out to make the company's workplace more collaborative and notified employees that in six months they would no longer have the option of working from home (Swisher, 2013). At the time, hundreds of employees worked remotely, and many took their outrage about the new restrictive policy to the press, igniting a firestorm of controversy that called into question Ms. Mayer's leadership ability. Would Yahoo employees have been more receptive to the new policy if they had learned about it later (e.g., two weeks in advance), making the policy's implementation more imminent, or if they had learned about it earlier (e.g., a year in advance), making the policy's implementation more distant?

Restrictive policies, such as the one described above, are prototypically invoked to resolve social dilemmas that pit individuals' immediate interests (e.g., having the flexibility to work from home) against the broader interests of the collective organization (e.g., promoting collaboration in the workplace). In the present research, we aimed to understand how people's evaluations of a new restrictive policy will vary as a function of the amount of time between when it is first announced and its date of implementation. In particular, we focus on organizational and system-level policies that

constrain the personal freedoms of individual members in order to advance collective goals. After describing the importance of understanding stakeholders' attitudes toward restrictive policies, we review evidence and theory from Construal Level Theory (CLT; Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010) which suggests that, because of the different features people attend to when they are temporally near versus distant from an object, the most affected people will respond less favorably to a new restrictive policy the sooner it is implemented. We distinguish this perspective from Rational Choice Theory (RCT, see Frederick, Loewenstein, & O'Donoghue, 2002; Read, 2004), which also concludes that people will be less supportive of restrictive policies that are implemented sooner, but for different reasons.

### 1.1. Generating support for restrictive policies

Whether restrictive policies are effective at resolving social dilemmas within organizations often depends on the level of support they receive from individual members. For example, when organizations want to ensure compliance with restrictive policies, one strategy is to enforce them using elaborate monitoring systems. However, this method is often difficult and costly, and a more attractive strategy for the organization would be to generate member support for the policies. Imagine, for instance, a company that wishes to protect its intellectual property and reputation by restricting employees from discussing their work on social media

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [nanakashima@stanford.edu](mailto:nanakashima@stanford.edu) (N.A. Nakashima).

sites. The organization might ask managers to monitor their employees' posts on social media sites, but this would be difficult and time-consuming for managers to do, given ever-growing numbers of social media sites, and places an added burden on them. It would be far more effective to induce employees to spontaneously support the new social media policy.

However, support for restrictive policies may be difficult to generate: Members may sometimes take into account a policy's expected benefit for the organization, but they will always take into account how the policy will affect them personally, and may hesitate to support a policy that would significantly restrict their freedoms. To return to our example, employees would almost certainly find reasons to object to such an infringement on their rights to privacy and free speech. Indeed, social scientists have highlighted several psychological barriers to organizational change that can undermine the implementation and effectiveness of new restrictive policies, stimulating a growing body of research on the factors that facilitate or hinder support for such policies (e.g., Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012; Laurin, Kay, Proudfoot, & Fitzsimons, 2013).

For instance, one psychological barrier to organizational change is loss aversion (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Tversky & Kahneman, 1992): Even when a policy is expected to produce more gains than losses, stakeholders often resist it because, psychologically, the losses loom larger than the gains (Milkman, Mazza, Shu, Tsay, & Bazerman, 2012). Another psychological barrier is the fixed pie bias (Bazerman & Neale, 1983; Thompson & Hastie, 1990): People assume that a social policy that results in a gain for others is likely to result in a loss for themselves. In an organizational context, if employees assume that new policies are designed to produce net benefits for the firm, the fixed pie bias means they may also assume it will result in net costs for themselves. These barriers may result in negative evaluations of restrictive policies, and in some cases may even produce reactance, whereby organizational members will exaggerate the value they place on the newly-restricted freedoms, fueling their outrage about the policies in question (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981).

Fortunately, even though such psychological barriers are ubiquitous and strong (Bazerman, Baron, & Shonk, 2001), they can be overcome by psychological solutions (e.g., Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). For instance, previous research has found that people are more supportive of a restrictive policy when they are told that it is certain to come into effect (Laurin et al., 2012) and when their attention is directed away from the restrictive nature of such policies (Laurin et al., 2013). The current research highlights one factor—implementation time—that can systematically influence support for new restrictive policies, and specifies when and why this occurs.

## 1.2. Temporal distance, construal level, and evaluations of restrictive policies

How will individual stakeholders' evaluations of a new restrictive policy vary as a function of the amount of time between when it is first announced and its date of implementation? Construal Level Theory (CLT; Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010) posits that temporal distance systematically changes the features that people attend to when evaluating attitude objects, such as actions and events (Fujita, Eyal, Chaiken, Trope, & Liberman, 2008). In particular, previous CLT research finds that when people evaluate attitude objects that are temporally distant, they attend to the object's *high-level* features, which include how desirable it is, its pros, and the way it will affect broad categories of others. In contrast, when people evaluate attitude objects that are temporally near, they attend to the object's *low-level* features, which include how feasible it is, its cons, and the way it will affect specific others (Eyal, Liberman, Trope, & Walther, 2004; Liberman & Trope, 1998; Stephan,

Liberman, & Trope, 2010). Thus, people will evaluate an attitude object more favorably in the distant future when its *high-level* features are more positive: When it is desirable, has many pros, and has positive implications for others in general. Conversely, they will evaluate an attitude object more positively in the near future when its *low-level* features are more positive: When it is feasible, has few cons, and has positive implications for specific others. In the sections that follow, we explore how each of these high- versus low-level features might operate in the context of restrictive policies, and use that as the foundation for predicting how temporal distance will influence people's evaluations of restrictive policies.

### 1.2.1. Desirability versus feasibility

The desirability of an attitude object, such as a restrictive policy, refers to its goal or *why* the policy is implemented. Feasibility refers to the means by which its goal will be achieved or *how* the policy will be carried out. Whereas CLT posits that the desirability of a policy is a high-level construal feature, the feasibility of a policy is a low-level construal feature (Liberman & Trope, 1998). Thus, when people are evaluating a restrictive policy that is set to occur in the distant future, they tend to think more about its desirability, or the goal it intends to achieve and less about its feasibility, or the manner in which it will be achieved (Liberman & Trope, 1998). We expect prototypical restrictive policies, those aimed at resolving social dilemmas, to be highly desirable because they generally aim to achieve important goals for the collective (e.g., promoting a collaborative workplace environment). In addition, we expect that prototypical restrictive policies appear somewhat negative in terms of feasibility, since the manner in which the goal is achieved involves constraining individuals' personal freedoms (e.g., in our ongoing example this might involve the loss of scheduling flexibility that stems from being able to work remotely). Given this analysis, we expect that, at least for stakeholders who are motivationally involved—who stand to be personally restricted by the new policy—their evaluations of prototypical restrictive policies will be more positive in the distant versus near future because they are attending more to the desirability versus feasibility of the policies.

Although our analysis is centered on the prototypical restrictive policy, it is worth noting that restrictive policies come in other forms as well. That is, even though the goal of the policy may always seem desirable from the organization's perspective (indeed—if it did not, then why implement it?), there may be times when it appears undesirable from a motivationally involved stakeholder's perspective. Imagine, for example, an organizational policy that forces employees to work weekends to squeeze more productivity out of them, at the expense of increasing rates of burnout, or that forces employees to hire men and not women, citing employee compatibility but risking a lawsuit that could cripple the company. In such cases, the restricted employees might not view the goals as being particularly desirable. However, in order to seem better from a temporally proximal perspective, the policy would also have to seem feasible—it would have to seem more positive from a feasibility perspective than from a desirability perspective. Realistically, it is likely unusual that a modern organization implements a policy so undesirable and simultaneously so easy to implement from the employee's perspective that they would evaluate it more positively in the near future.

### 1.2.2. Pros versus cons

CLT proposes that arguments against an attitude object are subordinate to arguments for the object because it must first have pros before people will consider its cons: For example, if there is no reason to implement a policy, then people need not try to identify any reason why *not* to do it (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Since pros represent a higher level of construal than cons, it follows that temporal

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