



Regulatory focus trickle-down: How leader regulatory focus and behavior shape follower regulatory focus



Russell E. Johnson^{a,*}, Danielle D. King^b, Szu-Han (Joanna) Lin^c, Brent A. Scott^a, Erin M. Jackson Walker^d, Mo Wang^e

^a Department of Management, Michigan State University, United States

^b Department of Psychology, Michigan State University, United States

^c Department of Management, University of Massachusetts Amherst, United States

^d Department of Psychology, Louisiana State University, United States

^e Department of Management, University of Florida, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 November 2015

Revised 15 March 2017

Accepted 23 March 2017

Available online 31 March 2017

Keywords:

Leadership

Regulatory focus

Transformational leadership

Transactional leadership

ABSTRACT

Regulatory focus is critical at work and is shaped by cues in the environment. We examine how supervisor regulatory foci can activate analogous foci in subordinates. We test this idea across five studies. In Study 1 we find that supervisor regulatory focus predicted change in new hires' regulatory focus in the first three months after organizational entry. In Studies 2 and 3 we find that leaders' regulatory foci had unique effects on leadership behaviors, and that these behaviors primed subordinates' regulatory foci. Specifically, transformational behavior is linked to promotion focus, management by exception behavior to prevention focus, and contingent reward behavior to both foci. In Study 4 we find that leader regulatory focus relates to follower regulatory focus via the mediating effects of the aforementioned leader behaviors. Finally, in Study 5 we additionally find that contingent punishment mediates the relationship between leader and follower prevention focus and that weak regulatory foci increase the likelihood of laissez-faire leadership. Taken together, these results reveal how leader regulatory focus and behavior can be leveraged to shape the motivation of followers.

Published by Elsevier Inc.

1. Introduction

Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1998) purports that people regulate their behavior during goal pursuit via two fundamental and independent strategies. One strategy involves a promotion focus, such that people approach ideal goal states and are concerned with the quantity and speed of work accomplishments. The second strategy involves a prevention focus, where behavior is motivated by obligation and people are concerned with security and quality. Distinguishing between these foci is important because they have unique effects on affect, cognition, and behavior (Lanaj, Chang, & Johnson, 2012). For example, employees with a strong promotion focus emphasize accomplishment and innovation, whereas those with a prevention focus emphasize safety and minimizing inefficiencies (Förster, Higgins, & Bianco, 2003; Lin & Johnson, 2015; Wallace, Johnson, & Frazier, 2009). These unique outcomes suggest that it is advantageous for companies to have employees with a particular regulatory focus, depending

on current goal pursuits. For example, a company with a current emphasis on new product innovation would benefit by maximizing a promotion focus, whereas maximizing a prevention focus would be desirable for reducing workplace accidents. An important question that naturally follows, then, is how can the regulatory focus of employees be effectively shaped at work?

One answer to this question may be through leadership. As a result of their prominence and position in the organizational hierarchy, leaders' behaviors toward followers represent particularly salient interpersonal cues that influence followers' self-concept and motivation (Lord & Brown, 2004; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; Stam, van Knippenberg, & Wisse, 2010). Given that promotion and prevention foci are dynamic and context-specific, leaders may be able to shape their followers' regulatory foci via their language and behavior (Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Kark & Van Dijk, 2007). In fact, leaders' own regulatory focus may even influence the behaviors they enact toward their followers (Hamstra, Sassenberg, Van Yperen, & Wisse, 2014), thus triggering a trickle-down process whereby the effects of leader regulatory focus on follower regulatory focus are mediated by leader behavior.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: johnsonr@bus.msu.edu (R.E. Johnson).

With this in mind, the goal of our investigation is to integrate Higgins' (1997) regulatory focus theory with Bass and Avolio's (1997) full-range theory of leadership in order to illuminate whether and how leaders can change the regulatory foci of their followers. As a start, we draw from a conceptual model (Kark & Van Dijk, 2007) that positions leaders' promotion and prevention foci as antecedents of transformational and transactional behaviors, respectively, and transformational and transactional behaviors as elicitors of followers' promotion and prevention foci, respectively. While this model provides a nice foundation for our theorizing, we extend it in several respects. First, Kark and Van Dijk's (2007) coverage of transactional behavior was limited to management by exception, yet transactional leadership also encompasses contingent reward (Bass, 1985). Contingent reward is "as universal as the concept of leadership itself" (Bass, 1997, p. 132), and its absence from Kark and Van Dijk's model is surprising because, as we elaborate below, contingent reward has qualities that map onto promotion focus (e.g., attaining desired rewards) and prevention focus (e.g., fulfilling exchange-based obligations). Contingent reward may therefore have ties to *both* foci, thereby giving leaders a way to have 'the best of both worlds.' Although the elicitation of both promotion and prevention foci in followers may be desirable in some instances, current research has only considered leader behaviors that influence one or the other focus (e.g., Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Lawrence, & Roberts, 2008).

Two other potentially relevant leader behaviors – contingent punishment and laissez-faire – are also conspicuously absent from Kark and Van Dijk's (2007) model. Despite receiving less attention than contingent reward (Podsakoff, Bommer, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006), contingent punishment nevertheless has implications for prevention focus because it directs followers' attention to failures to meet minimal standards for quality and safety. While laissez-faire leadership might not seem relevant *prima facie*, this non-responsive style may manifest when leaders have weak regulatory foci and/or followers' own regulatory foci may weaken when guidance and feedback are lacking. Thus, a key contribution is that we offer a more nuanced and accurate understanding of the intersection of regulatory focus and leadership by teasing apart the unique roles played by management by exception, contingent reward, contingent punishment, and laissez-faire behaviors. Importantly, these leader behaviors serve as the mechanisms through which leaders' regulatory foci trickle down to influence followers' regulatory foci, which Kark and Van Dijk stopped short of proposing in their model.

We conducted five studies, relying on a mix of correlational and experimental methods and data collected from multiple sources and at different times, to test core tenets of Kark and Van Dijk's (2007) model and our extensions to it. To date, this model has yet to be directly tested, thus an empirical examination of its propositions represents a needed step in verifying the role of regulatory focus in leadership processes. In the process of doing so, we also ruled out other leader characteristics (e.g., personality traits, goal orientation) and behaviors (e.g., initiating structure, consideration) and contextual factors (e.g., company values) that pose as alternative explanations for regulatory focus trickle-down effects. Overall, our investigation extends theory and practice on both regulatory focus and leadership by highlighting how leaders, through their behavior, can effectively trigger desired regulatory foci in followers.

2. Theoretical overview

2.1. Regulatory focus theory

Regulatory focus theory posits there are two fundamental self-regulation systems (Higgins, 1998). One system regulates the

achievement of gains (promotion focus), whereas the other system regulates the avoidance of losses (prevention focus). Although both foci aid goal accomplishment, they represent unique means that involve different behaviors and emotions. A *promotion focus* aims to bring people's actual selves in alignment with their ideal selves (i.e., maximal goals based on aspirations of who one desires to be; Kark & Van Dijk, 2007). This focus sensitizes people to the presence and absence of gains (e.g., bonuses, promotions), which motivates an eagerness strategy concerned with maximizing gains and avoiding non-gains. A promotion focus also emphasizes change, prompting approach-oriented behaviors centered on innovating, acquiring, and taking risks (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Gamache, McNamara, Mannor, & Johnson, 2015). When people are promotion focused, their emotional experiences range from activated positive emotions like excitement (when a gain is attained) to low activation negative emotions like dejection (in the presence of a non-gain; Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997).

A *prevention focus*, in contrast, aims to match people's actual selves with their ought selves (i.e., minimal goals based on felt responsibilities and obligations) and push them away from feared selves (i.e., avoidance goals based on unwanted self-attributes; Kark & Van Dijk, 2007). This focus sensitizes people to losses (e.g., errors and injuries), which motivates a vigilance strategy aimed at preventing loss. A prevention focus also emphasizes stability and conservatism, prompting avoidance-oriented behaviors centered on security and risk aversion (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Gamache et al., 2015). When people are prevention focused, success (i.e., avoiding a loss) elicits low activation positive emotions like quiescence, and failure (i.e., experiencing a loss) elicits high activation negative emotions like anxiety (Higgins et al., 1997).

Two other characteristics deserve mention. First, it is possible for people to have high levels of both foci, just one focus, or neither focus (Lanaj et al., 2012). This is because the two foci involve unique self-guides (ideals vs. oughts), frames (gains vs. losses), goals (maximal vs. minimal), and emotions (excitement vs. anxiety). This gives rise to the possibility that a leader may exhibit multiple leader behaviors if s/he has high levels on both foci. Although this might appear to prohibit leaders from being consistent in their behavior and thus reduce their effectiveness (cf. Johnson, Venus, Lanaj, Mao, & Chang, 2012), quite the opposite is true. For example, leaders can simultaneously exhibit both transformational and transactional behaviors to augment their effects (Bass, 1985; Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

Second, regulatory focus operates as both a trait and state, thus people can be predisposed toward a particular strategic orientation, which can nevertheless be overridden in the presence of salient situational cues (Brockner & Higgins, 2001). However, the effects of regulatory focus tend to be comparable across trait and state levels. With respect to our model, we do not distinguish between leaders' trait and state regulatory focus because the hypothesized effects on behavior are not expected to differ.¹ As for follower regulatory focus, it is best thought of as a state in our model because it is shaped by leader behavior, a salient situational cue. However, repeated exposure over time to the same leader behaviors can establish a relatively stable work-based regulatory focus in followers (Lanaj et al., 2012).

2.2. Transformational and transactional leader behavior

We suspect that regulatory focus is particularly relevant for four types of leader behavior: transformational, contingent reward, management by exception, and contingent punishment (Hamstra

¹ We test this assumption by examining both trait (Study 2 Sample A) and state (Study 2 Sample B) foci.

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