Discussion paper

Both angel and devil: The suppressing effect of transformational leadership on proactive employee's career satisfaction

Jiannan Li [a],*, Bocong Yuan [b]

[a] *Lingnan College, Sun Yat-sen University, West Xingang Rd. 135, Guangzhou, China*
[b] *Sun Yat-sen University, West Xingang Rd. 135, Guangzhou, China*

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper empirically examined the effect of hotel employees' proactive personality on career satisfaction and the suppressing moderation effect of transformational leadership on this relationship.

Results of multisource and time lagged data from 75 team supervisors and 464 subordinates showed that proactive personality positively predicted career satisfaction. Moreover, the bright side of transformational leadership had direct positive moderation effect on the relationship between proactive personality and career satisfaction, while the dark side had indirect negative moderation effect on such relationship through its influence on LLX (i.e., leader–leader exchange). With the opposite effects of these two sides counteracting each other, the total moderation effect of transformational leadership became nonsignificant, that is, the suppressing effect happened to transformational leadership. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings were discussed.

1. Introduction

As a critical factor to promote innovative hotel service (Tang, 2015), proactive personality of hotel employees has attracted cumulative attention. Previous studies on proactive hotel employees mainly focus on their tendency to conduct service innovation to provide customers with unique, personalized and memorable experience (e.g., Chen, 2011; Chen and Kao, 2014; Tang, 2015). However, scare attention has been paid to whether proactive hotel employees who select, create, and influence the work situation (Bateman and Crant, 1993) are better at managing satisfying careers. For the hotel industry suffering from high turnover rate, this topic can be particularly important, since employees with higher career satisfaction are more willing to stay at organizations they work for (Joo and Park, 2010), and devote themselves to their industry (Goulet and Singh, 2002). Thus, in view of theoretical and practical implications, it is necessary to investigate the relationship between proactive personality and career satisfaction in the hotel industry.

In the present study, we propose that proactive hotel employees are more likely to have satisfying careers on account of their tendencies to take career management behaviors to strongly influence

their work situations, including exhibiting innovation, displaying "voice" or speaking up, possessing political skill of the organization and showing career initiative. Unfortunately, proactive employees do not necessarily display their proactivity to manage satisfying careers. Based on the trait activation theory (Tett and Guterman, 2000), the expression of proactive personality requires arousal of that trait by trait-relevant situation cues. Thus whether the proactive hotel employees will take career management behaviors actively depends on some boundary conditions which activate or constrain proactive personality to manifest as behaviors actively influencing work situations.

For hotel employees, the proximal social context at work is the team they work for in which the leadership style of their supervisor influences the distribution of important job resources (Wanasika et al., 2011). Whatever the hotel employees would like to do, they have to rely on the resources support and thus the leadership style of team leaders is very likely to serve as the boundary condition under which proactive hotel employees would be motivated or suppressed to take management behaviors that induce career satisfaction. Transformational leadership is attracting more and more attention from researchers and practitioners in the hotel industry (e.g., Wang et al., 2014). The existing literature has found that transformational leaders in the hotel industry can encourage their subordinates to exhibit innovation in service delivery (e.g., Slåtten and Mehmetoglu, 2015; Wang et al., 2014), help them achieve greater performance (Brown and Arendt, 2010) and improve their

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: ljiann@mail3.sysu.edu.cn (J. Li), gp04ybc@mail3.sysu.edu.cn (B. Yuan).

well-being (e.g., Kara et al., 2013). In the present study, we try to further advance the understanding about the positive impact of transformational leadership and propose that transformational leadership would also serve as the boundary condition to activate proactive personality of hotel employees to manifest as career management behaviors.

However, what's interesting and complex is that transformational leadership has two sides, the bright side and dark side (Tourish, 2013). The existing research of hospitality management has mainly discussed its bright side (e.g., Kara et al., 2013; Slåtten and Mehmetoglu, 2015; Wang et al., 2014), but its dark side has long been ignored by scholars, not just ones in the field of hospitality management. Since doing right in booming time is often easier than in the economic downturn, the underlying dark side that always exists is often covered up in booming time by extraordinary achievements of transformational leadership (Tourish, 2013). With the obvious decision failures of leaders in well-known organizations resulting in the recent economic misfortune (De Villiers, 2014), the dark side has begun to surface. From here on, the prevailing belief that transformational leadership is always a good thing has begun to be challenged by its dark side characterized by authoritarian tendencies (i.e., boastfulness, self-center and addition to power and superiority; Tourish, 2013). Thus, it is necessary to form an integrated framework to investigate the comprehensive roles of both sides of transformational leadership. In this paper, we are inspired to think about how the two sides of transformational leadership play their roles simultaneously in the expression of proactive personality.

As the compliance from subordinates is the prerequisite of motivation or inspiration from transformational leaders (Basu and Green, 1997), it is not surprising to find that the transformational leaders would turn to repress their subordinates who question them even though their opinions could be beneficial. Accordingly, those proactive hotel employees who have chosen to stay at the teams led by transformational leaders are more willing to accept the characteristics of transformational leadership, then they would benefit from the motivation, and at the same time suffer from the negative influence of authoritarian tendencies. Since proactive employees accept the two sides of transformational leadership, it could be hard for them to suffer from the direct repression caused by doubts against their leaders. According to this, the dark side of transformational leadership is more likely to indirectly constrain the expression of proactive personality through another way, rather than directly repress its expression. Considering the nature of authoritarian tendencies, we argue that this indirect moderation effect on relationship between proactive personality and career satisfaction could be realized through its influence on LLX (i.e., leader–leader exchange). In the age of teamwork, it could be hard for transformational leaders to win recognition from their supervisors due to their authoritarian tendencies (i.e., boastfulness, self-center and addition to power and superiority). Thus the quality of LLX with their own supervisors would be lower (Dienesch and Liden, 1986; Liden and Graen, 1980), and then the resources they receive from their own supervisors are less than those with high-quality LLX receive (Ilies et al., 2007; Wayne et al., 1997; Zhou et al., 2012). In turn, their subordinates could suffer from relative paucity of resources and thus would damp their expression of proactive personality.

In this paper, we propose that the bright side would directly activate proactive personality to manifest as career management behaviors, while the dark side would indirectly constrain expression of proactive personality through its negative influence on LLX (i.e., leader–leader exchange). As direct and indirect moderation effects of transformational leadership have opposite directions, these two opposite effects could counteract each other, whereupon the suppressing effect comes into being (Cliff and Earleywine, 1994; Shrout and Bolger, 2002; Tzelgov and Henik, 1991). That is to say, transformational leadership would have suppressing moderation effect on proactive personality – career satisfaction relationship through the interaction of two sides. To capture these mechanisms, we delineate a cross-level moderation model linking transformational leadership to the relationship between proactive personality and career satisfaction (see Fig. 1).

2. Theory framework and hypotheses

2.1. The bright and dark side of transformational leadership

Transformational leaders are more effective than transactional leaders in shifting values, beliefs, and needs of followers (Kuhnert and Lewis, 1987). They can sharply enhance the meaning and value of outcomes for them, motivate them to do beyond what are originally expected to do, even in some cases induce them to transcend self-interest for organizational goals (Bass, 1985).

Idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individual consideration, and intellectual stimulation are the critical means used by transformational leaders collectively to motivate their followers (Avolio and Bass, 2004). Specifically, "attaining charisma in the eyes of their followers is central to succeeding as transformational leaders" (Bass, 1990: 21). They act as the role model, display power and confidence, whereby their followers identify with them, internalize their values and beliefs and behave in accordance with them (Avolio et al., 1999). Further, transformational leaders tend to form a compelling vision of the future and motivate people to embrace it (Resick et al., 2009), they inspire and excite followers to believe in their own capability to make great accomplishment with extra effort (Bass, 1990). Additionally, transformational leaders are individually considerate. They pay close attention to differences among their followers, act as mentors to help who need to grow and develop, such as offering personalized developmental feedback (Bass, 1990; Rank, 2006). With being high in intellectual stimulation, transformational leaders are willing to promote creativity and reframe problems by encouraging followers to think out of the "box" and by enhancing generative and exploratory thinking (Sosik et al., 1998).

However, in any kind of social system, the inspired leadership can do as much harm as good (Keeley, 1995). Some advocates of transformational leadership allow that there is dark side that the risk can be as large as the promise (Howell and Avolio, 1992). It is pointed out that the charisma, as core of transformational leadership, has the potential to evolve into boastfulness, self-center and addition to power and superiority (De Villiers, 2014; Tourish, 2013), and is thus likely presented as another image. Similarly, Bass (1990) also finds the behavioral patterns of transformational leaders involve excessive self-importance and self-admiration, a tendency to exaggerate achievements, pursuit of power and success, intolerance towards criticism and compromise, and labels these as "authoritarian tendencies".

As such, the dangerous potential of authoritarian tendencies needs to be well recognized. On the one hand, in the pursuit of power and superiority, transformational leaders tend to spend much more time and energy conducting impression management rather than hard-working of running the organization (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999; Keeley, 1995). There is a possibility, in some cases, that they put self-interest above collective good of their followers and goals of organization (Tourish, 2013). On the other hand, transformational leaders are over confident about their insight in pivotal decisions-making. It is inevitable that some valuable feedback probably suffers from underestimation, leading to the decisions made by them more likely out of touch with reality (De Villiers, 2014).