



Employer safety obligations, transformational leadership and their interactive effects on employee safety performance [☆]



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ABSTRACT

We examine the moderating effect of safety-specific transformational leadership on the relationship between perceived employer safety obligations and employee safety performance behavior and attitudes. Drawing on social exchange theory, and using data from a cross-sectional (N = 115) and a longitudinal (N = 140) sample of trade employees, we show that perceived employer safety obligations are positively associated with employee safety compliance, safety participation and attitudes. Safety-specific transformational leadership was positively and significantly associated with employee safety compliance, safety participation and safety attitudes. Leadership also acted as a moderator such that the relationships between perceived employer safety obligations and the safety outcomes (safety compliance, safety participation, safety attitudes) are stronger when safety-specific transformational leadership is high, as opposed to when low. We provide theoretical and practical implications stemming from this study and suggest directions for future research aimed at improving safety performance behavior and attitudes within organizations.

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1. Introduction

There is a growing interest in both organizational and leader influences on safety performance behavior (Katz-Navon et al., 2005; Nahrgang et al., 2007; Hofmann et al., 2003). Although it has been well established in the literature that leadership is an important antecedent of employee safety performance behavior in organizations (Clarke, 2013), little is known about the role leadership plays in predicting safety performance when combined with other organizational safety influences. One organizational safety influence that has recently been identified as being important for understanding safety performance is perceived safety obligations within organizations (Walker and Hutton, 2006), which are described as employee perceptions and beliefs about workplace safety responsibilities that may be derived from societal and organizational influences (Burt et al., 2012; Walker and Hutton, 2006).

Empirical evidence indicates that employees hold beliefs about safety obligations in their workplace (Walker, 2010). Drawing on

psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1989), social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and the concept of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), Walker and Hutton (2006) demonstrated that employees will reciprocate perceived employer safety obligations with positive safety behavior. In contrast, when employees perceive that employers do not fulfill safety obligations, they are less obliged to reciprocate with positive safety behaviors or fulfill their perceived employee safety obligations. Walker and Hutton's (2006) research provides qualitative evidence of reciprocity between perceived employer and employee safety obligations. Similarly, reciprocity between management and employees has also been demonstrated in studies examining leader-member exchange and safety performance behavior such that employees reciprocate high quality relationships with their supervisor by engaging in positive safety behaviors (Hofmann and Morgeson, 1999; Hofmann et al., 2003).

The purpose of this research is to build on the notion of safety reciprocity between employers/leaders and employees to gain an understanding of how perceived employer safety obligations and safety transformational leadership affect employee safety performance behavior and attitudes. Specifically, this study advances prior research in several ways. First, we build on qualitative research by quantitatively examining the effects of perceived employer safety obligations on employees' safety performance

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behavior and attitudes. Second, we examine the main and interaction effects of perceived employer safety obligations and safety transformational leadership behavior on safety outcomes. We empirically evaluate the hypothesis that leaders who engage in safety transformational leadership enhance any positive effects of perceived employer safety obligations on employee safety performance behavior and attitudes. Third, using both cross-sectional and longitudinal designs, we base our analyses on two samples, one of trade apprentices and one comprised of community college trade students completing an on-the-job practicum. Empirically testing our hypotheses using different samples allows for a comparison of findings to determine if our expected outcomes remain stable across samples.

We focus on two types of safety performance behavior, namely, safety compliance and safety participation (Neal et al., 2000). Safety compliance involves carrying out required behaviors that maintain workplace safety such as following safety procedures and wearing protective safety equipment. Safety participation includes extra-role behaviors that indirectly contribute to developing a safe work environment such as voicing concerns about safety (Tucker and Turner, 2015), employee initiative to voluntarily participate in safety activities and programs (Cree and Kelloway, 1997), helping co-workers with safety problems, promoting the safety programs and policies, attending safety meetings (Neal et al., 2000). The important distinguishing factor between the two forms of safety performance behavior is that compliance involves in-role task-related behavior, whereas safety participation involves extra-role behaviors that are voluntary and initiated by employees (Clarke and Ward, 2006). Substantial empirical evidence demonstrates that both types of safety performance behavior are associated with fewer work-related accidents and injuries (see meta-analytic studies by Clarke, 2006, 2013).

Lastly, we are interested in employee safety attitudes, defined as an individual's beliefs and feelings about safety (Neal and Griffin, 2003). Safety attitudes reflect an employee's views about the importance of safety and should be distinguished from the well-researched concept of safety climate, which is described as shared perceptions of organizational safety practices and policies (Neal and Griffin, 2003, 2006; Zohar, 2000). The beliefs employees hold about workplace safety have been found to be shaped by non-work social influences (i.e., parental safety attitudes) (Kelloway et al., 2005) and organizational influences (i.e., employee beliefs about management's concern for safety) (McLain, 2014).

2. Perceived employer safety obligations

Research based on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) in the safety literature suggests that positive safety attitudes and behavior result through the reciprocation of social influences experienced within organizations (Hofmann et al., 2003; Hofmann and Morgeson, 1999). According to psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1990), which draws on social exchange theory, the reciprocation of positive safety attitudes and behavior may also result from transactional (i.e., employer provides safety resources) and relational influences (i.e., employer concern for safety) within an organization (Walker, 2010). Employees develop beliefs or perceptions about employer safety obligations (and employee safety obligations to the employer) during the term of employment (Walker and Hutton, 2006). When employers fulfill safety-related obligations and transactional responsibilities, such as providing safety training and properly maintaining equipment, it signals to employees that their safety and well-being is valued within the organization. Perceived organizational priority on safety and concern for employee well-being may be considered an implied obli-

gation for employees to reciprocate safe work behaviors (Hofmann and Morgeson, 1999; Kath et al., 2010). Nahrgang et al.'s (2007) meta-analysis of safety antecedents and outcomes showed a positive relationship between organizational safety activities (i.e., opportunities aimed at enhancing employee safety knowledge, safety leadership, and social support) and employee safety behavior, providing support for the notion of safety reciprocity between employers and employees.

Hypothesis 1a. Perceived employer safety obligations are positively associated with safety compliance.

Hypothesis 1b. Perceived employer safety obligations are positively associated with safety participation.

Hypothesis 1c. Perceived employer safety obligations are positively associated with safety attitudes.

3. Transformational leadership and safety performance behavior

There is a growing body of evidence supporting the positive association between transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) and employee safety performance behavior (Clarke, 2013). Behaviors that are characteristic of transformational leadership have been shown to be associated with both employee safety participation and compliance. Clarke's (2013) meta-analysis showed that both transformational and transactional leadership were significantly associated with safety compliance and participation. The data indicate that transformational leadership has a stronger association with safety participation than with safety compliance. Similarly, results from a meta-analysis by Christian et al. (2009) showed that leaders have a stronger influence on employee safety participation than safety compliance.

The relationship between the specific facets of transformational leadership and employee safety behavior has also been examined. For example, through leader-employee social interactions, employees observe their leader's behavior and interpret such behavior as being reflective of the priority the leader places on safety (Zohar and Tenne-Gazit, 2008). Results from a randomized intervention field study conducted by Zohar and Polachek (2014) suggest that when leaders communicate the safety priorities in daily meetings (characteristic of transformational leadership), employee reports of perceived priority of safety increase, and subsequently perceptions of safety climate level and employee safety behavior increase (Zohar and Polachek, 2014). Hoffmeister et al. (2014) examined the impact of the facets of transformational and transactional leadership on apprentice and journeymen safety behavior. The results showed that idealized influence (i.e., evoking trust, respect, being a role model of safety) predicted safety compliance behavior in both the apprentice and journeymen samples. In terms of safety participation, idealized influence, inspirational motivation (i.e., communicate vision for safety, inspire safety behavior) and contingent reward predicted apprentice safety participation. In the journeymen sample, the results showed that the global measure of leadership predicted safety participation and no specific facet of transformational leadership was influential on safety participation. The research suggests that transformational leadership, particularly idealized influence, is an important determinant of both safety compliance and safety participation.

Hypothesis 2a. Perceived safety transformational leadership will be positively associated with safety compliance.

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