High performance work practice implementation and employee impressions of line manager leadership

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ABSTRACT

Human resource management (HRM) research has documented the importance of high performance work practices (HPWPs) to organizations, and recent efforts have argued for increasing attention to the role of line manager implementation of HPWPs. To date, research in this area has focused largely on the organizational or employee implications of HPWP implementation, ignoring the process through which implementation affects outcomes. In this article, we use theory on impression formation to describe the perceptual process through which line manager implementation of HPWPs facilitates the formation of different employee impressions of manager leadership styles. We argue that this process is contingent upon employee attributions of implementation intent, which are influenced by the interaction of employee affective and attributional tendencies with line manager implementation style (i.e., political skill). Our conceptualization of this process contributes to HRM research by demonstrating the benefits of integrating it with leadership theory, as well as identifying the role of interpersonal perceptual processes in the effects of HPWPs.

1. Introduction

Human resource management (HRM) research has documented the positive impact high performance work practices (HPWPs) have on firm performance (Combs, Liu, Hall, & Ketchen, 2006; Cooke, 2007; Kaufman & Miller, 2011; Sirmon & Hitt, 2009). Recently, scholars have noted that although HRM departments are responsible for developing and adopting HPWPs the actual implementation often falls to line managers within the organization (Sikora & Ferris, 2014). The degree to which HPWPs are implemented has been argued as key to the realization of their positive impact (Becker & Huselid, 2006; Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Sikora & Ferris, 2014; Sikora, Ferris, & Van Iddekinge, 2015). This line of research has noted variance in the degree to which adopted HPWPs are implemented, and argued that this variance can be explained by both organizational and line manager factors (e.g., Sikora et al., 2015; Sikora & Ferris, 2014). Further, research has found that line manager characteristics and abilities also affect the perceived effectiveness of HPWP implementation and, consequently, individual and organizational outcomes (Bos-Nehles, Van Riemsdijk, & Kees Looise, 2013; Gilbert, De Winne, & Sels, 2015).

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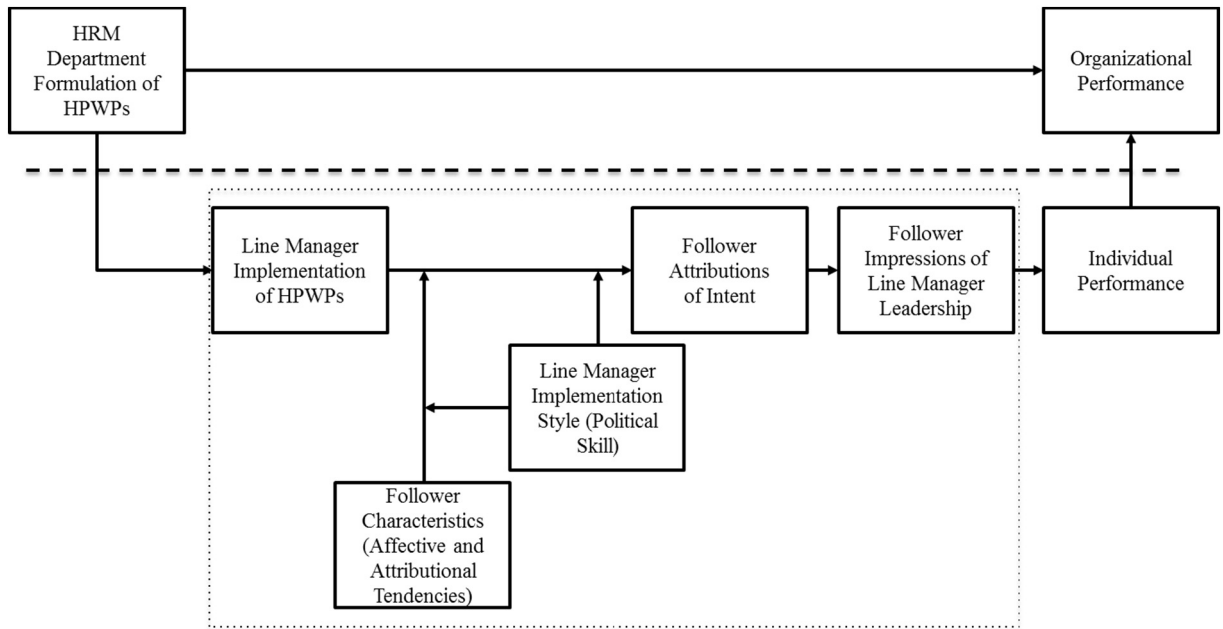
Fig. 1. Factors affecting line manager HPWP implementation and the resulting impressions of leadership.

Interestingly, little research has explored line manager HPWP implementation through the lens of leadership. Some research has argued that HPWPs exist along a spectrum from transactional to traditional to transformational in nature (Carrig, 1997). In their contingency framework for HR practice delivery, Lepak, Bartol, and Erhardt (2005) elaborated on this conceptualization, arguing that although "certain HR practices may be considered transactional or transformational in nature, there is likely to be some fluidity to the specific HR practices that fall within each of these" (p. 144). They suggested this fluidity is dependent on organizational goals for the practice, and whether the practice is core to organizational objectives.

We agree with previous research, in that we view designations of the HPWPs and transactional-transformational intersection as fluid. However, we believe that it is the implementation of the practices, rather than their content, that determines the transactional-transformational designation. Additionally, we suggest the transactional-transformational designation more appropriately describes the labeling of those who implement the practice, rather than the practice itself. Scholars have recognized that although HRM develops practices aligned with organizational strategy, perceptions of these practices and their intent can vary (e.g., Den Hartog, Boselie, & Paauwe, 2004), and these varied perceptions can affect HRM's intended outcomes (Kuvaas, 2008).

Thus, we argue that employee impressions of leadership result from the implementation of HPWPs, and are dependent upon employee perceptual processes and line manager implementation style. That is, we argue that unique characteristics and qualities of both managers and employees interact in a complex process, through which employees develop attributions of manager intent, and then develop impressions of line managers as transactional or transformational leaders. Using impression formation theory (Kunda & Thagard, 1996), we examine the perceptual processes that occur between HPWP implementation and follower impressions of line manager leadership. Fig. 1 presents a model that displays our conceptualization of this process, as well as its position within the broader HPWP literature. Specifically, the bulk of our theory focuses on the portion of the model contained within the dashed box, which suggests that follower characteristics (i.e., affective and attributional tendencies) and line manager implementation style (i.e., political skill) play important roles in the development of employee attributions of line manager intent, and, in turn, the impressions of line manager leadership that result from HPWP implementation.

However, we recognize that this process is embedded within a relationship between HPWP formulation and individual and organizational outcomes. Thus, we position our theoretical process within the HR devolution literature, which recognizes that line managers often are responsible for implementing HPWPs formulated by the HRM department (e.g., Gilbert et al., 2015). Further, we also discuss the implications of this process within the broader HPWP literature, by explaining the effects of impressions of line manager leadership on subsequent individual and organizational performance.

Given the well-documented effects of leadership impressions on individual, group, and organizational outcomes (e.g., Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012; Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999), we believe there is value in the investigation of the effect of HPWP implementation on employee impressions of line manager leadership. Becker and Huselid (2006) called for "more theoretical work on the 'black box' *between* the HR architecture and firm performance" (p. 900), and scholars have acknowledged that doing so requires better integration of the micro and macro domains (Coff & Kryscynski, 2011; Huselid & Becker, 2011; Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011). Luthans and Sommer (2005) noted the theoretical gaps in our understanding of the mechanical links between HPWPs and outcomes, and we suggest that exploring the interpersonal processes involved in leadership impressions formed due to HPWP implementation helps to address part of the "black box" through the integration of more macro (i.e., HPWPs) and micro (i.e., leadership