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Leader-employee congruence of expected contributions in the employee-organization relationship

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ABSTRACT

Employees' expected contributions can be incongruent with those of their leader. We examine the congruence effect of leaders' and employees' expected contributions on job satisfaction. Results of cross-level polynomial regressions on 947 employees and 224 leaders support the congruence effect. When expected contributions are congruent, employees are more satisfied with their job. Our findings suggest that employees enjoy high challenges, as long as these challenges are in harmony with the expected contributions of their leaders. Employees are less satisfied with their jobs both when their expected contributions were higher than their leaders' and when their expected contributions were lower than those of their leaders. Beyond the relevance of having high expected contributions, the findings highlight the crucial role played by the congruence of expected contributions of leaders and employees.

Introduction

The extent to which employees need to fulfil in-role and extra-role expectations in their job may differ, sometimes largely, from their leaders. This study looks at how (in)congruence of expected contributions between employees and their leaders affects employees' job satisfaction.

Expected contributions concern in-role performance requirements regarding the quality and quantity of job performance, and extra-role expectations regarding initiative taking, implementing new ideas, and continuous improvements (Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997; Wang, Tsui, Zhang, & Ma, 2003). Such expected contributions can be demanding and detrimental to employee well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). However, high expected contributions are not necessarily a disadvantageous development. High expected contributions can also be motivating (A. Y. Zhang, Song, Tsui, & Fu, 2014), and under these circumstances, employees can be satisfied with their job (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). In this study, we look at the effect of leaders' expected contributions on employees' job satisfaction.

We specifically study the congruence effect of leaders' and employees' expected contributions on employee job satisfaction. Studying congruence addresses the need for research that acknowledges the context in which motivational aspects of job design affect

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employees (Oldham & Hackman, 2010). We follow previous research that points at leaders as a vital part of the daily, social context of employees. Leaders provide employees with the context in which they can reach their challenging goals (Audenaert, Decramer, George, Verschuere, & Van Waeyenberg, 2016). We consider job satisfaction as an important outcome variable, since leadership behaviors and employees' behaviors have been shown to be strongly associated with important work-related attitudes, such as job satisfaction (e.g., Braun, Peus, Weisweiler, & Frey, 2013).

If leaders experience low expected contributions relative to employees, this may result in reduced leader legitimacy, which may lower employees' job satisfaction. That is, if the leader's expected contributions are lower than the employee's expected contributions, then the leader's role may contribute to employee dissatisfaction by being less demanding than the employee's own expected contributions. It is therefore important from both, a research perspective and a practitioner's point of view, to gain more insight into the role of congruence and incongruence of expected contributions for an employee's job satisfaction.

Drawing on theories that stress the relevance of social cognitive processes (Bandura, 1986; Lent & Brown, 2006) and social comparison (Adams, 1965; Festinger, 1954), we make two important contributions. First, we contribute to work on expected contributions by conceptualizing and demonstrating the need for leaders to match employees' expected contributions. Previous research has shown that expected contributions intrinsically motivate employees (A. Y. Zhang et al., 2014), which drives beneficial employee outcomes, such as individual innovation (Audenaert, Vanderstraeten, & Buyens, 2016). Indeed, expected contributions have been shown to matter in the employee-organization relationship (Tsui et al., 1997). Research also indicates that it is important to acknowledge the social environment of employees' expectations. When expectations are consistent among team members, employees are more inclined to trust their leader and perform well (Audenaert, Decramer, Lange, & Vanderstraeten, 2016). However, existing research is silent about the role of the leaders' own expected contributions when examining outcomes from employees' expected contributions. This is an unfortunate gap, as leaders play a crucial role in shaping employees' attitudes, behaviors and feelings, such as satisfaction with their job. Therefore, we study leaders' expected contributions as a crucial extension of the link between employees' expected contributions and job satisfaction. We examine both the effects of congruence and incongruence of expected contributions. Second, we also contribute to work on leader-follower congruence. Literature on leader-follower congruence has focused on characteristics and mutual expectations. For instance, previous research found that congruence of personality (Z. Zhang, Wang, & Shi, 2012) and congruence of empowerment role expectations enhance employee attitudes and behaviors (Humborstad & Kuvaas, 2013). We extend this literature by focusing on the organization's expected contributions from the employee and the leader. What is more, by studying how a leader's expected contributions affect an employee's job satisfaction, we extend the longstanding literature stream that studies how leaders affect employees' job satisfaction in the leadership literature on leader-follower relationships (Aryee & Zhen Xiong, 2006; Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982; Harris, Wheeler, & Kacmar, 2009).

Theory and hypothesis development

Leader-employee congruence of expected contributions and job satisfaction

Locke (1976: 1300) defined job satisfaction as 'a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences'. We propose that this emotional state is also linked to the job of the leader and the congruence with one's own job. Building on social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), Lent and Brown (2006) have developed the social cognitive model of job satisfaction (Lent & Brown, 2006). This model proposes that goal and efficacy relevant environmental stimuli engender a cognitive process of self-efficacy, outcome expectations and felt progress in goal pursuit. Expected contributions reflect environmental stimuli that affect employees 'through cognitive processes underlying intrinsic motivation to meet prescribed goals and behavioral requirements' (A. Y. Zhang et al., 2014: 811). We build further on social cognitive theory to argue that congruence of expected contributions affects job satisfaction.

The social environment may provide goal and efficacy relevant resources and barriers which are likely to figure prominently in the job satisfaction process (Lent & Brown, 2006). Whereas goal-relevant resources prompt satisfaction, 'goal-thwarting conditions may have the opposite effect' (Lent & Brown, 2006: 242). The resources and barriers from the social environment affect job satisfaction because they impact employees' beliefs about their capacity to perform the required tasks successfully (i.e., self-efficacy), as well as their beliefs about whether they will reach the expected outcomes. In addition, the social environment and the beliefs about self-efficacy and expected outcomes also impacts goal progress. Taken together the social environment and its resulting cognitive mechanisms are vital to job satisfaction.

An important source of goal-relevant resources or barriers from the social environment is the leader. A leader that functions as a well-trained role model may enhance observational learning (Bandura, 1986). Role models are also well-placed to provide relevant performance feedback (Lent & Brown, 2006). Leaders are perceived as a competent and worthy role model (Yaffe & Kark, 2011) that employees find them 'worthy of identifying with and imitating' (Conger & Kanungo, 1987: 642). Such legitimate leaders are inclined to be perceived as meaningful, predictable and trustworthy. In contrast, when leaders are not considered as legitimate, employees do not perceive them as meaningful to their work (Suchman, 1995). Leaders are perceived as legitimate when their work's expected contributions are perceived to be just relative to the expected contributions of one's own role (Yaffe & Kark, 2011). This principle of legitimacy is particularly important because leaders communicate what the organization expects from employees. Expected contributions are managed throughout multiple leader duties such as performance planning, performance appraisal, promotion, assigning training, authorizing raises and benefits (Audenaert, Decramer, George, et al., 2016). When expected contributions of employees and leaders are congruent, leaders are more inclined to be regarded as a legitimate party to play their role as a supervisor that steers performance, such as through the provision of performance feedback and encouragement. Such worthy role models have the

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