



Research paper

Matchmaking in organizational change: Does every employee value participatory leadership? An empirical study

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ABSTRACT

Although leadership is generally considered an important lever to increase commitment during organizational change, empirical research has yet to unravel many of the underlying mechanisms. In this paper, we propose that the impact of participative leadership on affective commitment to change will be contingent on employees' orientation toward leadership. In our empirical study in two police organizations, we find evidence that followers' orientation toward leadership is a useful interacting variable. Participative leadership lowers affective commitment to change for individuals with high dominance orientation. In contrast, participative leadership increases affective commitment to change for employees with high development orientation toward leadership. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

1. Introduction

The present study analyzes the effect of participative leadership on affective commitment toward two mergers in police organizations. These mergers have been the first large-scale organizational transformations since the reform of the Belgian Police in 2001 (Lemmens, 2011), and are critically followed by the entire Belgian police as they are considered the first of many to come. Due to the retirement of the baby boomers, maintaining the local police forces at their current strength would increase the financial contribution of the Belgian municipalities with, on average, 17.07 percent by 2017, *ceteris paribus* (Van Heddeghem, 2012). As a result, many police forces consider mergers to reduce operational costs. They aim to integrate staff functions such as finance and human resources, and generate synergies through economies of scale for primary functions such as intervention, neighborhood policing and crime investigation.

Studies in the field of organizational change are increasingly focusing on individual workers, as employees have been found to play an essential role in determining the success of organizational change (Donahue & O'Leary, 2012; Oreg et al., 2013). Our study considers affective commitment to change, which previously has been associated with multiple positive outcomes such as supportive behavior during the change, overall job satisfaction and retention (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002; Neves, 2009; Rafferty & Restubog, 2010). For the police, as for other public organizations, the benefits of affective commitment to

change go beyond the added value to the organization. The positive effects may contribute to people's experiences with government services, and hence might affect the perception of the agency as a legitimate entity (Vigoda-Gadot & Beeri, 2012).

Leadership of change is probably one of the most critical levers to achieve successful organizational transformation (Ahn, Adamson, & Dornbusch, 2004; By, 2005; Schweizer & Patzelt, 2012). Effective leadership practices are required to successfully introduce changes to inspire, motivate and empower those who are affected (Herold, Fedor, Caldwell, & Liu, 2008). Participative leadership during organizational change has generally proved an effective way to increase employees' supportive behavior during organizational change (de Poel, Stoker, & van der Zee, 2012). The strength of the relationship between participation and positive outcomes, however, has been found to differ, depending on the selected moderator (Lines & Selart, 2013; Vakola et al., 2013). Follower perspectives on the relevance and value of leadership have been advanced as a powerful lens to be entered into the equation (Blom & Alvesson, 2014). In the current study, we posit that the impact of participative leadership on affective commitment to change will depend on employees' orientation toward leadership, or the reflection of individuals' beliefs about the nature of leadership (Hiller, 2005). Our results indicate that participative leadership lowers affective commitment to change for individuals with high dominance orientation who associate leadership with authority and a formal leadership position. In contrast, participative leadership enhances affective commitment to

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change for employees with high development orientation toward leadership who view leadership as a skill that can be developed independent of any formal assignment.

The current research aims to advance the literature in at least three ways. First, although leadership is considered a key variable during organizational change (By, 2005), the growing number of studies that integrate the leadership and organizational change literatures still have to unravel many of the dynamics through which leadership can enhance the success of organizational change (Bommer, Rich, & Rubin, 2005; Herold et al., 2008; Hill et al., 2012; Nemanich & Keller, 2007; Oreg & Berson, 2011). We introduce orientation toward leadership as a novel moderator to offer a more profound understanding of the relationship between participative leadership and affective commitment to change. Second, leadership has primarily been studied from a leader perspective, with followers receiving less attention (Junker & van Dick, 2014). We advance orientation toward leadership as a powerful moderator from a follower-centered leadership perspective. Third, our research is relevant for public organizations. Insight into organizational change in a policing context will not only be interesting for other safety and security organizations, but also for other public administrations as they operate under similar political, legal and budgetary constraints.

In the first part of the article, we develop hypotheses on the moderated effect of participative leadership on affective commitment to change. We introduce three orientations toward leadership as possible moderators: dominance, developmental and shared. Next, we describe our research design, data and measures. The results of our regressions are then presented. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for theory and practice, and conclude with reflecting upon the study's limitations.

2. Affective commitment to change and participative leadership

The model in Fig. 1 summarizes the hypotheses central to the current study. Below, we introduce our model, step by step.

In the literature, affective commitment to change is steadily gaining ground as a critical success factor for effective organizational transformation (Meyer & Hamilton, 2013). Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) define commitment to change as “a force (mind-set) that binds an individual to a course of action deemed necessary for the successful implementation of a change initiative.” In their three-component model, which received considerable empirical support (Choi, 2011), they identify affective commitment to change as the “desire to provide support for the change based on a belief in its inherent benefits”, continuance commitment to change as “a recognition that there are costs associated with failure to provide support for the change”, and normative commitment to change as “a sense of obligation to provide support for the change” (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002, p. 475). In our research, we study affective commitment, as this dimension has been found to be the most effective in generating support for the organizational change (Meyer & Hamilton, 2013). Additionally, in a previous study, transformational leadership and change leadership were found to positively impact affective commitment to change (Herold et al., 2008).

Participative leadership has been defined as “shared influence in decision-making by a superior and his or her employees” (Somech, 2003, p.1003). During organizational change, we can translate this to workers having input regarding the proposed change (Wanberg &

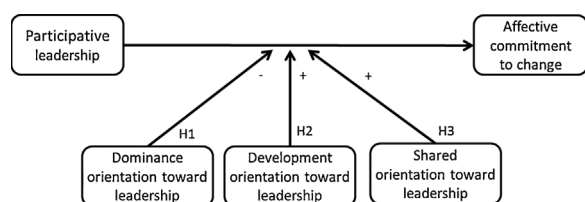


Fig. 1. Research framework.

Banas, 2000). Participative leadership is generally associated with beneficial outcomes such as increased readiness for change, and greater change acceptance of and higher overall support for the change (Holt, Armenakis, Feild, & Harris, 2007; Oreg, Vakola, & Armenakis, 2011; Russ, 2011; Wanberg & Banas, 2000). These results may be explained by at least three underlying dynamics. First, workers actively involved in designing, planning and executing the change have the opportunity to influence the outcome of the change, which provides them with a sense of agency and control. Second, the interactive process during participation creates the opportunity for voicing concerns and for the consideration of input, which will affect the perception of fairness and the feeling of being respected (Korsgaard, Schweiger, & Sapienza, 1995). Third and last, participation facilitates organizational sense making by triggering employees to change their existing attitudes and beliefs through the interaction with change agents and other change recipients. It challenges individuals to open up and not to interpret communication based on existing predispositions (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

However, research results are mixed and several studies fail to find a direct effect of participative leadership (Kim & Schachter, 2015; Lam et al., 2015). Based on follower-centered leadership research (Junker & van Dick, 2014), we posit that individual-level interacting variables are at play and that follower characteristics impact this relation. Previous research demonstrated, for example, the impact of an individual's controllability attributional style, self-efficacy and idiocentrism on the effectiveness of participative leadership (Huang, 2012; Lam et al., 2002). This research suggests that follower psychological predispositions might be used to explain employees' attitudes toward change and leadership.

3. Orientation toward leadership as a potential moderator

There is abundant research of the effect of leaders on followers, but much less attention has been given to the effect of followers on the leadership relation, and ultimately on leadership effectiveness (Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014). Followers will compare leadership with their implicit expectations, and adjust their attitudes and behaviors depending on the outcome of this comparison (Junker & van Dick, 2014). Hence, followers' orientation toward leadership could be a cornerstone to understand the effect of participative leadership. In line with follower-centered research, we propose that followers may react differently to participative leadership because of different cognitive structures. As Singer (1974) stated, "While the necessity for determining a 'one best' leadership style for the 'composite worker' is understandable from a financial and expediency standpoint, to assume that all workers desire participation opportunities is to lack sensitivity to individual needs – the antithesis of the humanization that ardent proponents of participation advocate." (p. 359) Several empirical studies underscore this line of thought, and the following three illustrate the findings. First, Neumann (1989) found that 67 per cent of the employees chose not to participate in organizational decision-making processes. Second, Wanberg and Banas (2000) indicate that employees low in resilience do not enjoy opportunities for participation. Third, Maynard et al., 2007 report that some workers even actively resist the implementation of involvement-based processes.

We propose that differences in orientations toward leadership, influencing a person's leadership preferences, will impact the effect of participative leadership on affective commitment to change. According to [Hiller \(2005\)](#), leadership involves processes and actions, and individuals are likely to have differing views about which ones are important, and which ones should characterize leadership. These views or orientations toward leadership, which can be translated into implicit theories or paradigms, will impact the way individuals perceive and recognize leadership. Very much like implicit leadership theories, orientation toward leadership focuses on a framework that exists in the eye of the beholder, which can differ across individuals. But while

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