Human Resource Management Review 21 (2011) 331–341

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Human Resource Management Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/humres

Implications of core self-evaluations for a changing organizational context

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Core self-evaluations
Personality
Organizational change
Career success

ABSTRACT

There is a need for individuals who have the confidence and assertiveness to adapt to and create positive change in contemporary organizations. The concept of core self-evaluations provides one way to conceptualize this requisite positive self-construal. This article begins by covering the concept of core self-evaluations, highlighting what has been learned about the relationship between core self-evaluations and attitudes, motivation, performance, and career progress. After this review, implications of the core self-evaluation construct for challenges in contemporary organizations are reviewed. Specifically, the potential importance of core self-evaluations for creative performance, transformational leadership, coping with organizational change, and managing "boundaryless" careers is discussed.

The transformation of industrial age into the information and services age has created dramatic changes in the manner in which organizations are structured and managed. The traditional notion of the "job" with a fixed set of tasks has eroded significantly, to be replaced with a collection of constantly varying work demands that call for general competencies (Bartram, 2005). This transformation of the workplace means that understanding the functioning of organizations in the future will depend more heavily on understanding the people who make up these organizations than on understanding a static hierarchy of formal roles. In such organizations, employees cannot be purely reactive in hopes of ascending through a career path based on seniority; they need to create new possibilities for themselves and the organization as a whole (De Vos & Soens, 2008; Hall, 1996). Employees must act independently, as shapers of their own work environments and careers.

Researchers in the area of positive psychology have described an equally dramatic shift away from research that examines the negative aspects of personality, and toward research that investigates human capacity for growth, development, creativity, resilience, and happiness (Bonanno, 2004; Roberts, 2006). A failure to account for these positive sides of life means that we will have only a partial understanding of the functioning and capabilities of the human person. This positive perspective means that in understanding the functioning of individuals, we need not just only know about the characteristics that predispose people to worry, anxiety, and depression, but also understand those characteristics that lead to successful management of one's environment. For organizational research, this means devoting at least as much time to topics like motivation, satisfaction, learning, and adaptation as is spent on topics like stress, conflict, withdrawal, and turnover (Luthans, 2002).

Tying together these seemingly disparate themes, the current review describes how the positive psychology perspective on personality traits has implications for a changing organizational context. Research has started to identify people who fit an active, positive, and agentic profile. This research has come to revolve around a set of *core self-evaluations*. Although there is a considerable body of research illustrating the usefulness of core self-evaluations as a predictor of attitudes, motivation, and behavior, there has not been much attention to the implications of core self-evaluations for the management of organizations. Our goal is to review the research that has been conducted on these constructs to date with an eye toward application in changing organizations. The review will begin with the foundations of core self-evaluation research, and its relationship with other areas of

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doi:10.1016/j.hrmr.2010.10.003

personality. After reviewing this foundational material, there will be a discussion of how core self-evaluations are related to job attitudes, motivation and job performance, and career success. Then we will discuss questions regarding the measurement and malleability of core self-evaluations, which raises questions about how core self-evaluations might be managed in organizational settings. Finally, we discuss the potential implications of core self-evaluations for four topics especially important in a changing organizational context: creative performance, transformational leadership, adapting to change, and boundaryless career management.

1. What are core self-evaluations?

The first description of core self-evaluations came from Judge, Locke, and Durham (1997), who argued that a key characteristic that differentiates people from one another is the fundamental evaluations we make about ourselves and how we relate to our environment. These fundamental beliefs are called "core self-evaluations." People who have positive core self-evaluations see themselves positively across a variety of situations, and approach the world in a confident, self-assured manner. They believe that they are capable of solving problems (high self-efficacy), worthy of respect and regard (high self-esteem), in control of and responsible for what happens to them (internal locus of control), and prone to be optimistic and free from doubts and worries (high emotional stability) (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2002; Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998).

Several studies have demonstrated that these characteristics of self-efficacy, self-esteem, internal locus of control, and emotional stability tend to be closely related to one another. For example, one investigation compiled the findings from a large number of previous studies and found that these four traits were correlated, on average, at $r = 0.64$ which is comparable to the correlations between alternative measures of other personality traits (Judge et al., 2002). Other research has applied factor analysis to demonstrate that these four characteristics show up as a single construct, with much shared variance across measures (Erez & Judge, 2001; Judge, Bono, & Locke, 2000; Judge, Locke, et al., 1998). At the same time, these traits tend to be correlated to a similar degree and in the same direction with outcomes like subjective well-being, job satisfaction, and job performance (Judge et al., 2002). Erez and Judge (2001) and Judge et al. (2002) found that putting these four traits together did a better job of predicting outcomes than using the traits separately as predictors.

How do core self-evaluations relate to other personality scales? If core self-evaluations are redundant with other established personality traits, there is likely to be little practical utility in studying them. Some have argued that core self-evaluations could be a little more than a combination of three of the Big Five traits (Schmitt, 2004). Indeed, Judge et al.'s (2002) investigation found that the sub-traits of core self-evaluations are substantially correlated with extraversion and conscientiousness. However, the magnitude of these correlations was comparable with the correlations of neuroticism with the other Big Five traits. Thus, core self-evaluations appear to be distinct from other commonly used personality measures. More importantly, other research shows that when used as a predictor in regression equations along with the Big Five traits, core self-evaluations remain predictive of important outcomes like job satisfaction and job performance (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003).

Core self-evaluations are understood to be personality traits, and as such, to understand what core self-evaluations are, it is first necessary to understand exactly what a personality trait is. There are several key characteristics that differentiate personality traits from more ephemeral mental states (McCrae et al., 2000; Roberts, O'Donnell, & Robins, 2004). First, traits must possess the quality of temporal invariance—that is, they must not vary greatly within the same person over a long period of time. A person's traits measured early in life should be similar to levels of those same traits many years later. Second, traits must be observed across a variety of situations. A trait should influence a person to behave in certain characteristic ways whether the situation is going to school, behaving at work, and in one's non-work time. By implication, we should expect that individuals who are high in a trait-like core self-evaluations will show some consistency in behavior long after they have been hired, and in a variety of jobs and work roles.

So are core self-evaluations traits? There are several streams of research that help to answer this question. Most research suggests that the core traits that make up core self-evaluations are not readily amenable to substantial, global changes. There is considerable evidence of rank-order stability in neuroticism (Soldz & Vaillant, 1999) and self-esteem (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003) over time. There is also evidence from the field of behavioral genetics suggesting that there is a substantial heritability for the sub-traits of self-esteem (Neiss, Sedikides, & Stevenson, 2002), locus of control (Pedersen, Gatz, Plomin, Nesselroade, & McClearn, 1989), and neuroticism (Viken, Rose, Kaprio, & Koskenvuo, 1994). Future research will surely be needed to verify the extent to which core self-evaluations are stable across the life course, but if these studies of sub-traits are any indication, it appears highly likely that the trait-like nature of core self-evaluations will be supported.

Besides the evidence showing long-term stability in the sub-traits, emerging evidence based on the direct measures of core self-evaluations has also begun to appear. One study has demonstrated that core self-evaluations measured in childhood and early adulthood are related to job attitudes in middle adulthood, demonstrating the longitudinal robustness of the trait (Judge et al., 2000). We will show evidence in the careers section of the paper also demonstrating that core self-evaluations measured early in life are predictive of major life outcomes many years in the future, again suggesting that there are certain invariant characteristics that are having their impact over time.

Do these core self-evaluations really matter? There has been considerable controversy regarding this issue. Self-help gurus exalt the power of a positive self-concept, flooding bookstore shelves with titles such as: *Love Yourself, Heal Your Life*; *Be Who You Want, Have What You Want;* and *Success and the Self-Image*. One book notes: "If you have a positive, healthy self-image, you'll expect the best of yourself, and your consciousness will create that in reality" (Taylor, 2006, p. 124). On the other hand, after an extensive review of the self-esteem literature, Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, and Vohs (2005) commented positive self-regard