



## Leader reinforcement, behavioral integrity, and subordinate outcomes: A social exchange approach

Timothy R. Hinkin <sup>a,1</sup>, Chester A. Schriesheim <sup>b,2</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Hotel Administration, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853-6901

<sup>b</sup> School of Business Administration, University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL 33124-9145

### ARTICLE INFO

Editor: Leanne Atwater

#### Keywords:

Leader reinforcement  
Omission  
Behavioral integrity

### ABSTRACT

Measures of leader reward and punishment omission and behavioral integrity have demonstrated sound psychometric properties and interesting relationships in recent studies. In this study, the psychometric properties of these new measures are first examined, supporting previous findings. Hypotheses and theoretical models incorporating these constructs, along with contingent reward and punishment, are developed and tested using a social exchange theory framework and a sample of 456 workers in 15 Northeastern U.S. restaurants. It was found that contingent reward, contingent punishment, and reward omission impact perceptions of behavioral integrity. It was also found that trust partially mediates the relationship between behavioral integrity and subordinate perceptions of organizational commitment and satisfaction (but not leader effectiveness). Limitations of the study are discussed and directions for future research are suggested.

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What constitutes “good” leadership has been and continues to be examined from a wide variety of perspectives. One of the most commonly studied aspects of leadership has been leader contingent reward and punishment behavior, most commonly referred to as leader contingent reinforcement behavior (Podsakoff, Bommer, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006). Contingent reward is characterized by managers actively responding to good performance by acknowledging it and administering a positive consequence (e.g., praising the individual). Contingent punishment is characterized by letting individuals know when their work is not up to standard and delivering a negative consequence (e.g., administering a reprimand).

The study of leader-provided contingent reinforcement was begun in the early 1970s by researchers such as Reitz (1971) and Sims and Szilagyi (1975) and was actively pursued in the following two decades using a variety of instruments. This line of research ultimately resulted in the development of the Leader Reward and Punishment Questionnaire in the early 1980s (LRPQ; Podsakoff, Todor, Grover, & Huber, 1984; Podsakoff, Todor, & Skov, 1982) and research in this vein has continued to this day (e.g., Podsakoff et al., 2006; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008).

Beginning a decade later and employing a somewhat different perspective, there has also been a substantial amount of research using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire's (MLQ; Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1993) measures of contingent reward and active management by exception (the active monitoring of subordinate performance and the initiation of corrective action in response to deviations from expectations). Research using both the LRPQ and MLQ measures has consistently found contingent reward to be positively and strongly related to satisfaction with supervision and perceptions of supervisor performance, while contingent punishment and active management by exception have typically shown weak positive or non-significant relationships with subordinate outcomes (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Podsakoff et al., 2006).

E-mail addresses: [trh2@cornell.edu](mailto:trh2@cornell.edu) (T.R. Hinkin), [chet@miami.edu](mailto:chet@miami.edu) (C.A. Schriesheim).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 607 255 2938.

<sup>2</sup> Tel.: +1 305 284 3758.

Paradoxically, although there is a substantial literature on leader contingent reinforcement, much less is known about what happens when this contingency is missing—that is, when people perform well or poorly and there is no reaction from their supervisor (Howell & Costley, 2001). Although the MLQ includes a measure of laissez-faire leadership, this dimension is conceptualized as occurring when leaders are generally passive, disinterested, and withdrawn from organizational matters (Bass & Avolio, 1993). It does not explicitly measure supervisor lack of responsiveness to good or poor subordinate performance (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008).

Laissez faire leadership, however, has been shown to have harmful effects in a number of studies. For example, the meta-analysis by Dumdum, Lowe, and Avolio (2002) found that laissez-faire leadership had moderately strong negative relationships with ratings of supervisory effectiveness and subordinate satisfaction ( $-.37$  and  $-.53$ , respectively). Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, and Hetland (2007) went so far as to emphatically state that, “laissez-faire leadership is a destructive leadership behavior” (p. 80). Additionally, Judge and Piccolo (2004) came to a similar conclusion based upon their meta-analysis. Finally, and based upon the accumulated weight of evidence, Judge and Piccolo (2004) suggested that, due to the magnitude of the negative relationships between laissez faire leadership and a number of important organizational criteria, “future research should study these behaviors in more detail” (p. 764).

Following this suggestion, Hinkin and Schriesheim (2008) examined one aspect of laissez-faire leadership, focusing on the leader's lack of contingent responses to both good and poor subordinate performance. They termed this lack of response “reward omission” and “punishment omission,” respectively. Their study describes the development of new omission measures and they show that reward omission had strong negative bivariate relationships with subordinate-perceived supervisor effectiveness, satisfaction with supervision, and role clarity ( $r = -.42$  to  $-.63$ ), while punishment omission showed moderately strong negative relationships with these same variables ( $r = -.32$  to  $-.37$ ). In addition, reward omission and punishment omission both augmented the effects of transactional and laissez-faire leadership in “predicting” subordinate-perceived supervisor effectiveness, satisfaction with supervision, and role clarity. Finally, in an additional sample, subordinate-perceived leader reward omission behavior was negatively and significantly related to supervisor-rated subordinate job performance measured three months after the leadership measures had been obtained.

In summary, there has been continuing interest in the study of leader contingent reinforcement behavior over the past three-plus decades, including research that has sought to explore the effects of leaders who are not responsive to subordinate good or poor performance. Unfortunately, however, virtually none of this research has attempted to explain the underlying mechanisms that are at work in this domain. As noted by Podsakoff and his colleagues (Podsakoff et al., 2006), although leader reinforcement behavior has been subjected to considerable investigation, “surprisingly little attention has been given to articulating the reasons why they influence employee criterion variables” (p. 115).

While there are a number of existing theories that may be employed to gain a greater understanding of the effects of leader reinforcement and omission on subordinate outcomes, social exchange theory seems especially useful (for a thorough review, see Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). According to Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005, p. 874), “social exchange theory (SET) is among the most influential conceptual paradigms for understanding workplace behavior” and “theorists agree that social exchange involves a series of interactions that generate obligations.... Within SET, these interactions are usually seen as *interdependent* and contingent on the actions of another person.” In the leadership domain, these interdependent contingent exchanges have often focused on subordinate performance and supervisor responses to it (e.g., Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997).

Since, “one of the basic tenets of SET is that relationships evolve over time into trusting, loyal, and mutual commitments ... [because the] parties must abide by certain ‘rules’ of exchange” (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005, p. 875), a leader's behavioral integrity (the perceived correspondence between words and deeds; Simons, 2002) and the resultant level of trust in the leader would seem to play important roles in these relationships and should probably be examined as part of the process. Although it has been asserted that, “one cannot lead successfully without trust” (Bass, 2008, p. 261), research on behavioral integrity is largely in its infancy and trust in the supervisor, while an obvious potential mediator of subordinate responses to supervisory behavior, has rarely been explored (Pillai, Schriesheim, & Williams, 1999). The purpose of this paper is therefore to offer a social exchange theory explanation of the leader reinforcement and omission process and to integrate several recent streams of research and empirically examine the effects of leader reinforcement, omission, and behavioral integrity—as mediated through trust in the leader—on subordinate outcome variables. Our two primary goals are to begin the process of examining outcome-producing leader reinforcement mechanisms and to add to the very limited research that has examined the effects associated with an absence of leader contingent performance reinforcement (i.e., omission).

## Literature Review and Hypotheses

### *Leader Reinforcement and Social Exchange*

We propose that the effects of leader reinforcement may be best examined using a social exchange theory framework. Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) discuss differences in social exchange theory formulations, and Yukl (2006) considers several versions of social exchange theory but suggests that the work of Hollander and Jacobs is “most relevant as they are explicitly concerned with leadership” (p. 158). Social exchange theory regards social behavior in terms of relative costs and benefits to participants (Jacobs, 1970). Basic to the exchange process is the belief that rewards, such as recognition, will be received for benefits given, such as a hard day's work (Hollander, 1980). If a benefit is provided by one party and no benefit provided in return by the second party, the norm of reciprocity is violated, which can result in negative affective and behavioral responses (Jacobs,

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