The effects of authentic leadership on followers' ethical decision-making in the face of temptation: An experimental study

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Abstract

The present research investigates the impact of authentic leadership on followers' morality, operationalized as ethical decision-making, in the face of temptation. This experiment finds that authentic leadership and temptation interacted to affect individuals' ethical decision-making. Specifically, authentic leadership significantly inhibited individuals' from making unethical decisions in the face of temptation, whereas followers of neutral or less authentic leaders were more likely to succumb to temptation. Authentic leadership did not have a significant impact on ethical decision-making when temptation was absent. Further, results showed a significant moderated-mediated effect whereby the interactive effect of authentic leadership and temptation on individuals' guilt appraisal was mediated through the nature of the ethical decision. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: Authentic leadership, Temptation, Ethical decision making, Guilt

1. Introduction

Research on behavioral ethics in organizations has increased dramatically in the last two decades, with the majority of that research focused on aspects of ethical judgment/decision-making (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). From this research, we know that moral processing is influenced not just by individual differences (good and bad apples) but the context in which individuals are embedded, such as culture, climate and other organizational phenomena (good and bad barrels) (Treviño & Youngblood, 1990; Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010). However, surprisingly little empirical research has examined how exemplary leadership (e.g., authentic and ethical leadership) – a potentially important contextual factor – relates to followers' (un)ethical decisions and behaviors (Brown & Mitchell, 2010). Some research, while limited, has shown that leaders have effects on follower ethical processing. For example, leaders' levels of cognitive moral development, through role modeling and social learning, can affect that of followers (Dukerich, Nichols, Elm, & Vollrath, 1990); leadership style can influence which ethical frameworks followers' use to process ethical dilemmas (Schminke & Wells, 1999; Schminke, Wells, Peyrefitte, & Sebora, 2002); and ethical leadership is positively related to followers' organizational citizenship behaviors (Avey, Palanski, & Walumbwa, 2011; Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). Further, ethical leadership has positive influences on followers' ethical thoughts and behaviors, both directly as well as indirectly, through the positive influences ethical leaders have on building ethical cultures across multiple levels in organizations (Schaubroeck et al., 2006).
Authentic leadership, in particular, has been positively related to followers’ levels of moral courage, and through that mechanism, their ethical behavior (Hannah, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2011). There is a void of experiments, however, testing the effects of leader behaviors on follower ethical decision-making. To build upon this literature, we formulate and test a model assessing the influence of authentic leadership, as a potentially important contextual factor, on followers’ ethical decision-making under varying conditions of moral temptation.

Dynamic organizational contexts expose followers to numerous temptations, requiring the inner fortitude to restrain oneself from taking “ethical shortcuts” or pursuing self-gain over the good of the larger collective (Monin, Pizarro, & Beer, 2007). For example, high pressure organization contexts that prioritize performance over other values tend to have higher rates of unethical behavior (e.g., Robertson & Rymon, 2001). We propose that through displaying moral perspective, transparency and other aspects of authenticity that authentic leaders will activate followers’ moral perspectives and thereby reduce their inclinations to make unethical decisions in the face of temptations as suggested by Hannah, Lester, and Vogelgesang (2005). By moral perspective, we refer to the activation of identity-based structures (e.g., values) and self-regulatory structures that promote ethical decisions and behaviors.

Authentic leadership is defined as “a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development” (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008, p. 94; for a recent comprehensive review, please see Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011). We chose to focus on authentic leadership because from its early theoretical development the construct was conceptualized with the assumption that such leaders would raise the moral perspective of followers (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Hannah et al., 2005). Yet this premise has not to our knowledge been directly tested, at least not in an experimental design. Yet, Brown and Mitchell (2010) proposed that because of its “strong emphasis on the ethical dimension of leaders, future research linking authentic leadership to important ethics-related outcomes is promising” (p. 586).

Finally, we assess how authentic leadership, through its effects on followers’ ethical decisions in the face of temptation, influences followers’ guilt appraisals. Guilt appraisal entails the process whereby an individual determines the extent of guilt they experience for contemplating or performing a given unethical act, based on the way the individual construes and interprets the act and evaluates their behavioral response, such as their motivations for and level of causal agency in the act (Roseman, 1984; Roseman, Spindel, & Jose, 1990; Scherer, 1988). Left unfettered, individuals who make unethical choices tend to morally disengage from those choices (Bandura, 1999). Moral disengagement occurs when individuals use strategies to rationalize, justify, or downplay their causal role or the negative consequences or immorality of their unethical choices (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Importantly, when individuals discount or justify an unethical choice or their personal agency in the act through using moral disengagement strategies, they are in turn less likely to experience guilt related to that action (Bandura et al., 1996; Roseman et al., 1990). As described above, we expect that the followers of more as opposed to less authentic leaders will tend to make more ethical decisions, and thus will have little reason to employ moral disengagement strategies. When both groups (i.e., those that chose the ethical and unethical actions) are appraising the level of guilt they would experience for committing the particular unethical act in question, we therefore expect them to report different levels of guilt. Specifically, those who previously made the unethical choice will be more likely to have morally disengaged and will thus report lower levels of appraised guilt as compared to those that previously made the ethical choice, when the latter appraises the guilt they would experience if they too were to make the same unethical choice. This suggests that the moderated effects of authentic leadership on appraised guilt are mediated through its effects on followers’ ethical choices. Understanding this process is important as self-sanctions such as guilt are critical for controlling future ethical behavior (Bandura, 1999; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007; Tenbrusel & Messick, 2004), and are related to unethical phenomena such as cheating, theft, and unethical negotiation behavior (Cohen, 2010; Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011).

In summary, as shown in Fig. 1, we propose that exposure to temptation is positively related to followers’ unethical decision-making, but that this main effect is moderated by the level of authentic leadership, such that at higher levels of authentic leadership the effect of temptation on unethical decisions is significantly reduced. Further, we test a moderated-mediated effect whereby the interactive effect of authenticity and temptation on appraised guilt is partially mediated through the nature of the ethical decision. Specifically, we propose that when authentic leadership is low, the negative effect of temptation on guilt is mediated through making an unethical decision. That is, when authentic leadership is low, followers will be more likely to make
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