Leader behaviors and career derailment potential: A multi-analytic method examination of rating source and self–other agreement

Phillip W. Braddy [b,1], Janaki Gooty [a,*,1], John W. Fleenor [b], Francis J. Yammarino [c]

[a] Department of Management, Belk College of Business, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, USA
[b] Center for Creative Leadership, Greensboro, NC, USA
[c] Center for Leadership Studies and School of Management, State University of New York at Binghamton, USA

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ABSTRACT

Based on extensive research that views leadership as a multi-faceted phenomenon, we examined how the relationships between task-oriented and relationship-oriented leader behaviors and career derailment potential vary by observer perspective. We present findings using three different analytical techniques: random coefficient modeling (RCM), relative weight analysis (RWA), and polynomial regression (PR). RCM findings suggest that self-, direct report, peer, and supervisor ratings of leader behaviors differ and are associated with career derailment potential. RWA results indicate that self-ratings matter the least, whereas peer ratings of leader behaviors typically matter the most in predicting career derailment potential. PR analyses indicate that career derailment potential is lowest when self-ratings are lower than other ratings of leader behaviors and/or when self–other ratings converge on higher, rather than lower, ratings of leader behaviors. Implications for leadership and self–other agreement research and professional practice are discussed.

1. Introduction

A variety of theoretical perspectives (e.g., transformational leadership, leader–member exchange, and charismatic leadership) and extensive empirical findings suggest that leaders do not behave in the same manner towards all subordinates (e.g., Bass, 2008; Yukl, 2010) and other organizational members (e.g., peers and supervisors) (e.g., Fleenor, Smither, Atwater, Braddy, & Strum, 2010). Consequently, perceptions of a focal leader's behaviors may vary across rating sources, including supervisors, peers, and/or subordinates (e.g., Bass, 2008; Day, 2000; Yammarino & Dansereau, 2008; Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005; Yukl, 2010). Extending this perspective that leadership could vary systematically by the source of observation, numerous scholars (e.g., Atwater, Ostroff, Yammarino, & Fleenor, 1998; Atwater & Yammarino, 1992; Fleenor, McCauley, & Brutus, 1996; Fleenor et al., 2010) have noted that agreement in leadership ratings across self and others (e.g., peers, subordinates, and supervisors) could predict leadership effectiveness. Other findings suggest support for the usefulness of self–other agreement in leadership development and effectiveness over time (e.g., Smither, London, & Reilly, 2005).

Whereas accumulated prior research on multi-source ratings has focused primarily on the impact of self–other agreement on positive leadership outcomes (e.g., effectiveness and performance), little research has addressed the following questions: (1) Does each source's leader behavior ratings (e.g., peers, direct reports, and supervisors) matter when considering a focal leader's potential for career derailment (or lack of advancement potential)?; (2) Does one of these sources relate to career derailment potential more so

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* Corresponding author at: Department of Management, Belk College of Business, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 9201 University City Blvd, Charlotte, NC 28223, USA.
   E-mail address: jgooty@uncc.edu (J. Gooty).
   [1] The first and second authors contributed equally. Order of authorship is alphabetized.

than the others? For example, does leader behavior towards a particular constituency (e.g., direct reports) contribute to leaders' overall derailment potential more so than their behavior towards another constituency (e.g., peers)?; (3) Whereas previous research has confirmed that self–other agreement predicts positive outcomes such as leadership effectiveness (see Fleenor et al., 2010, for a review), does the same hold true for negative leadership outcomes, such as career derailment potential?; and (4) Are task-oriented leader behaviors or relationship-oriented leader behaviors demonstrated towards a particular constituency (e.g., peers or direct reports) significantly related to others' perceptions of that focal individual's career derailment potential?

In answering these research questions, the current study contributes in three primary ways to the leadership literature on multi-source ratings of leader behavior and self–other agreement. First, we examine the impact of task- and relationship-oriented leader behaviors on career derailment potential. Consistent with prior work (e.g., Gentry, Hannum, Ekelund, & de Jong, 2007; McCall & Lombardo, 1983), we focused on career derailment potential, which is defined as leader behaviors that limit the career advancement of focal leaders (i.e., could result in them being fired or demoted or experiencing career plateau). The majority of previous empirical research in this area has focused on a global leadership skill or behavior as an antecedent to career derailment potential (Gentry et al., 2007). We investigate if a focal leader's peers, direct reports, and supervisors consider the task- and relationship-oriented leader behaviors important for career derailment.

Second, whereas the majority of research on self–other agreement has focused on positive outcomes of leadership rating agreement, such as leadership effectiveness and performance (Hoffman, Lance, Bynum, & Gentry, 2010; Scullen, Mount, & Judge, 2003), little research has examined if undesirable leadership outcomes, such as career derailment potential, could be detected via an understanding of self–other agreement in leadership (see Fleenor et al., 2010). In our study, we specifically examine the influence of multiple sources and the implication of self–other agreement for such derailment-related behaviors. Thus, our second major contribution is the examination of self–other rating agreement on leader behaviors and its consequences for career derailment potential, a negative outcome, as rated by multiple sources.

Third, most studies on self–other agreement use one of many available analytical techniques (e.g., categories of agreement, polynomial regression, or multi-level modeling) to test study hypotheses. These analytic techniques may yield somewhat different findings (see Fleenor et al., 2010), and each analytic approach is suited to answering somewhat different research questions regarding self–other agreement and multi-source ratings in relation to various outcomes. As such, in the current study, we use three different analytical techniques – multi-level random coefficient modeling (RCM) via hierarchical linear modeling (HLM), relative weight analysis (RWA), and polynomial regression along with response surface methodology (RSM) – to test different substantive hypotheses. The use of multiple analytic techniques permits us to demonstrate their applicability as well as the challenges and opportunities for multi-source and self–other agreement research. For example, multi-level modeling via RCM/HLM (e.g., Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992) is useful to model the dependency inherent in ratings from multiple sources that focus on a single individual. Further, it is useful for understanding the relationship, or lack thereof, of each source's ratings of leader behaviors (e.g., self, peer, supervisors) with study outcomes. Relative weight analysis (Johnson, 2000, 2001) provides information on the relative contribution of each rating source toward predicting study outcomes. Finally, PR and RSM (e.g., Edwards, 1994) highlight the importance that similarity or divergence in self–other ratings on leadership has on career derailment potential. Our research question and specific hypotheses are developed next.

2. Hypotheses development

Past research on career derailment potential has indicated that certain behaviors harm organizational functioning via poor interpersonal relationships and difficulty in building and maintaining morale (e.g., Gentry & Shanock, 2008; Gentry et al., 2007; Lombardo & McCauley, 1988). Career derailment potential is defined as behaviors that can stall an individual's career when he/she was expected to go higher in his/her organization (Lombardo & McCauley, 1988). Past research (for a review, see Gentry & Shanock, 2008) has identified five critical behavioral blind spots that contribute to an individual's career derailment potential. They include: challenging interpersonal relationships, inability to lead teams, failure in meeting business goals and objectives, lack of flexibility and adaptability, and a narrow functional orientation and preparedness.

A substantial body of empirical research in behavioral theories of leadership has established that leader behaviors (e.g., initiating structure, consideration, and transformational behaviors) are linked to leadership criteria, such as leader and workgroup effectiveness and follower job satisfaction and commitment (for reviews, see Bass, 2008; Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004; Mumford, Campion, & Morgeson, 2007; Yukl, 2010). Much less is known, however, regarding the impact of such leader behaviors on career limiting outcomes such as derailment potential. Thus, in this study, we explore the impact of two types of leader behaviors, task-oriented and relationship-oriented leader behaviors, which have demonstrated validity with regard to a range of leadership criteria (see Derue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011, for meta-analytic validity coefficients). This two-dimensional conceptualization of leader behaviors is not new and is grounded in extensive research, beginning with the Ohio State studies (Stodgill, 1963) and continuing with Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid studies, Fiedler's contingency model (Fiedler, 1967), and the more recent transformational and transactional leader behaviors (Bass, 2008). Derue et al. (2011) noted that the behavior theories of leadership overlap substantially and could be classified into two main paradigms: (1) task- and relationship-oriented leader behaviors and (2) transformational–transactional behaviors paradigm. Our focus is on the former, as many authors have noted that the first classification is more comprehensive given that transactional leader behaviors are closely aligned with task-oriented behaviors, whereas transformational leader behaviors overlap substantially with relationship-oriented leader behaviors (see Derue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2004; Yukl, 2010).

Task-oriented behaviors encompass those leader behaviors that clarify task-role expectations, shape and direct follower goal-directed behavior, manage individual and team task conflicts and resources, and take corrective actions. These types of