



Do leaders reap what they sow? Leader and employee outcomes of leader organizational cynicism about change

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ABSTRACT

Despite increased attention given to the attitude of organizational cynicism, few studies have examined the impact of leader cynicism in organizations. The present study sought to investigate relationships between leader cynicism about organizational change (CAOC) and outcomes relevant to both the leader (performance and organizational citizenship behavior ratings) and his/her employees (employee organizational commitment and CAOC). Using data from 106 manufacturing managers, leader CAOC was found to negatively influence both leader and employee outcomes. Of particular importance, transformational leader behavior was found to fully mediate these relationships and thus served as an important explanatory mechanism. A discussion concerning the potential consequences of these findings for organizations is provided.

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The last decade has witnessed increased scholarly attention paid to the construct of organizational cynicism. Organizational cynicism is generally defined as an attitude of “contempt, frustration, and distrust toward an object or multiple objects” (Andersson, 1996, p. 1397). This general attitude is known to be theoretically and empirically distinct from dispositional constructs (Bateman, Sakano, & Fujita, 1992; Guastello, Rieke, Guastello, & Billings, 1992; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989) including but not limited to trait cynicism (Johnson & O’Leary-Kelly, 2003; Stanley, Meyer, & Topolnysky, 2005), negative affectivity, and skepticism (Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997; Wanous, Reichers, & Austin, 1994). Further, organizational cynicism has been shown to be malleable (e.g., Bommer, Rich, & Rubin, 2005) and “susceptible to change by exposure to factors in the environment” (Andersson, 1996, p. 1397). In this sense, organizational cynicism cannot be simply attributed to feelings that “negative people bring into the organization” but is “shaped by experiences in the work context” (Johnson & O’Leary-Kelly, 2003, p. 640–641). Such experiences can include organizations achieving consistently poor results, layoffs, repeated failed change efforts, psychological contract violations, and excessive executive compensation (Andersson & Bateman, 1997; Davis & Gardner, 2004; Wilhelm, 1993).

The preponderance of research examining organizational cynicism suggests that cynicism has important and prolonged negative effects on individual and organizational effectiveness. For example, organizational cynicism has been associated with decreases in organizational citizenship (Abraham, 2000; Andersson & Bateman, 1997), job satisfaction, organizational commitment (Abraham, 2000; Reichers et al., 1997), motivation, and intent to create change (Stanley et al., 2005; Wanous, Reichers, & Austin, 2000). Thus, it appears that organizational cynicism is often associated with a certain level of toxicity in organizational environments.

Yet, a close examination of the extant literature reveals studies exclusively focused on the effects of cynical employees to the large neglect of cynicism among managers. Such neglect is rather unfortunate as managers occupy positions that provide them the legitimate role and potential to influence both the attitudes and behaviors of numerous people (Bass, 1990). Thus, the magnitude of a manager’s cynical attitude can have far-reaching negative effects both for him/herself and the people he/she leads (Bommer,

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Rubin, & Baldwin, 2004). With this in mind, we examine the specific consequences of leader cynicism and the mechanisms through which it is associated with key leader and employee outcomes.

From these examinations, we sought to make an important contribution in at least three ways. First, only a single study to date has examined the impact of leader cynicism and effective leadership (Bommer et al., 2004). Thus the current study seeks to add to this research by investigating the relationship between leader cynicism and transformational leader behavior. Second, we provide the first foray into understanding consequences of leader cynicism for leaders; that is, leader-level outcomes of leader cynicism. Third, we examine a potential mediating mechanism through which leader cynicism is conveyed, representing a novel contribution to the current literature. We begin by discussing a form of cynicism most germane to leadership, cynicism about organizational change (CAOC), and how this more specific form of cynicism relates to a primary function of leadership, facilitating change. We next develop hypotheses concerning direct relationships between leader CAOC and both leader and employee outcomes. Lastly, we discuss and test transformational leader behavior as a mediating mechanism through which leader CAOC is transmitted to both leader and employee outcomes.

1. Leadership and organizational cynicism

One central role of leadership is to facilitate organizational change efforts by acting as both change strategist and implementer (Kanter, Stein, & Jick, 1992). In this role, leaders undertake responsibilities such as communicating a change vision and coordinating the execution of such change. As organizations continue to rely on employee adaptability to remain competitive (Van Knippenberg, Martin, & Tyler, 2006), the ability to effectively lead change will likely remain a key requirement as well as a distinguishing feature of effective leadership (Bass, 1990; Bryman, 1992). Within the realm of leading change, scholars often address issues related to overcoming employee resistance. In fact, most models of organizational change explicitly address employee resistance and view cynicism as a key indicator of such resistance (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999). Interestingly, Piderit (2000) noted that the majority of research on resistance is developed from the perspective of “those in charge” of change (i.e., employees as resisters) and thus, largely ignores the role of resistance among management. Yet, what happens when attitudes antithetical to change emanate not necessarily from employees, but rather from those centrally charged with leading change such as managers?

1.1. Cynicism about organizational change

Describing an attitude antithetical to change, a specific form of organizational cynicism known as cynicism about organizational change (CAOC) has been proffered (Wanous et al., 2000). CAOC is an attitude conceptually related to, but more narrowly defined than general organizational cynicism. While general organizational cynicism has been conceptualized as a broad feeling that one's organization lacks integrity (Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998) and generalizes to multiple objects (Andersson, 1996), CAOC represents a more targeted form of cynicism regarding organizational change and is anticipatory in nature (Wanous et al., 1994). Specifically, CAOC entails an individual's pessimism about future change and contempt for those responsible for previously failed change. Similar to the more general construct of organizational cynicism, CAOC is shaped by organizational experiences, susceptible to external factors (Bommer et al., 2005; Wanous et al., 2000), and divergent from dispositions such as negative affectivity (Wanous et al., 2000).

Much like their direct reports, leaders are also organizational members and subject to work experiences that shape their attitudes. As such, it is reasonable to believe that despite their critical role in change efforts, leaders too may develop cynical attitudes about change (Reichers et al., 1997). It should be noted that if a central role of leadership is to facilitate and support organizational change, then a focus specifically on change-related cynicism like CAOC is particularly salient (Stanley et al., 2005). That is, such a focus should facilitate increased attitude–behavior consistency known to optimize prediction (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). As Zimbardo and Leippe (1991) note, attitude–behavior consistency is achieved when the attitude is strong and clear, relevant to the behavior of the situation, strongly linked to cognitions or affective responses, and highly important to the individual. This consistency forms a behavioral intention to act (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Thus, leaders holding negative attitudes towards the organization such as CAOC should be expected to exhibit more negative behavioral intentions (Andersson & Bateman, 1997) resulting in negative behavior that is likely linked to leader and employee outcomes.

2. Leader outcomes of leader CAOC

Leader CAOC may have important consequences for leaders themselves with respect to how they are viewed by their superiors. Leaders with high CAOC are likely to believe that their peers and superiors are incompetent and responsible for (perceived or real) failed change efforts (Dean et al., 1998). In addition, leaders with a high CAOC attitude possess feelings of frustration, anger, or contempt for the organization's approach to change and may express their discontent to others (Davis & Gardner, 2004). These negatively held beliefs are very likely to lead to negative behavior on the job (Ajzen, 1991), such as withholding participation or talking negatively about a proposed change effort.

As such, a leader with high CAOC would likely be viewed as providing significant resistance to change efforts; resistance that is antithetical to the key role leaders play in facilitating organizational change (Kanter et al., 1992). As Wanous et al. (2000) remarked, “... if there is widespread cynicism about change in a particular organization, it seems likely that even the most sincere and skillful attempts at organizational change will be impeded by the prevailing cynicism” (p. 134). Supporting this assertion, (Wanous et al., 2000) found that leaders highly cynical about change were less likely to demonstrate motivation to engage in change-oriented

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