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Coping with challenge and hindrance stressors in teams: Behavioral, cognitive, and affective outcomes

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to utilize the challenge–hindrance framework to examine the discrete and combined effects of different environmental stressors on behavioral, cognitive, and affective outcomes at the team level. Results from 83 teams working on a command and control simulation indicated that the introduction of a challenge stressor positively affected team performance and transactive memory. The introduction of a hindrance stressor negatively affected team performance and transactive memory and positively affected psychological withdrawal. When the hindrance stressor was combined with the challenge stressor, teams exhibited the lowest levels of performance and transactive memory, and the highest levels of psychological withdrawal. These effects were due to the adoption of specific coping strategies by team members. Implications are discussed, as well as limitations and directions for future research.

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In teams, stress can be defined as the process whereby "certain environmental demands... evoke an appraisal process in which perceived demand exceeds resources and results in undesirable physiological, psychological, behavioral, or social outcomes" (Salas, Driskell, & Hughes, 1996, p. 6). A number of memorable real-world incidents have illustrated the negative, sometimes disastrous, effects of stress in teams (see Cannon-Bowers & Salas, 1998; Driskell, Salas, & Johnston, 1999; Weick, 1993). Although such accounts have primarily been anecdotal in nature, significant empirical evidence has accumulated highlighting the harmful effects of stress on team processes and performance (e.g., Cannon-Bowers & Salas, 1998; Driskell & Salas, 1991; Driskell et al., 1999; Ellis, 2006).

While such response-based studies have helped to identify the types of reactions teams have under stress, the complex nature of the process requires a multi-faceted investigation (see Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001). Recently LePine and his colleagues (see Boswell, Olson-Buchanan, & LePine, 2004; Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, & Boudreau, 2000; LePine, Podsakoff, & LePine, 2005; Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007) developed a theoretical model for examining the differential effects of various environmental demands: the challenge–hindrance framework. Based on transactional theories of stress (e.g., Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), this framework classifies environmental stressors as either challenges or hindrances. Stressors that are considered by employees to be challenging or potentially rewarding will exhibit positive effects on attitudes and performance, while stressors that are perceived as a hindrance will exhibit negative effects.

At the individual level, LePine and his colleagues (see LePine et al., 2005) have consistently found support for the positive effects of challenge stressors and the negative effects of hindrance stressors on a variety of outcomes. We believe that team members will appraise and respond to challenge and hindrance stressors in a homologous fashion (see Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981), leading to similar effects at the team level of analysis. Therefore, the first purpose of this study was to test the discrete effects of challenge and hindrance stressors on behavioral, cognitive, and affective outcomes in teams. Examining multiple team-level outcomes provides a broader and more complete conception of team effectiveness and viability (e.g., Hackman, 1987; Kozlowski & Bell, 2003). In terms of behavior, we focus on team performance. Regarding team cognition, we examine transactive memory, defined as a team's cooperative division of labor for learning, remembering, and communicating relevant team knowledge (e.g., Wegner, 1987). In terms of affect, we focus on psychological withdrawal, occurring when team members attempt to mentally distance themselves from their team and task (Hulin, 1991). We expect that the introduction of a challenge stressor will positively affect team performance and transactive memory and negatively affect psychological withdrawal. The introduction of a hindrance stressor, on the other hand, will negatively affect team performance and transactive memory and positively affect psychological withdrawal.

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The challenge–hindrance framework is based on transactional theories of stress (e.g., Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and assumes that the differential effects of challenge and hindrance stressors are due to the adoption of different coping strategies. More specifically, individuals respond to challenges with problem-solving coping and to hindrances with avoidant coping. We argue that, while coping originates in individual team member behavior, the construct follows a composition model of emergence (see Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). By interacting with teammates and monitoring their activities, team members' behavior converges and a collective coping strategy emerges. That is, we expect that, while the content and meaning of the construct remain consistent, coping will exhibit shared team-level properties. Therefore, the second purpose of this study was to examine coping as a team-level mechanism underlying the effects of challenge and hindrance stressors on behavioral, cognitive, and affective outcomes in teams.

However, while we believe the challenge–hindrance framework is applicable in teams, LePine and colleagues failed to address one important issue – what happens when both types of stressors are present at the same time? Many of the real-world incidents involving teams under stress result from a combination of stressors present in the environment. Therefore, the final purpose of this study is to extend the challenge–hindrance framework to situations where teams face a combination of challenge and hindrance stressors. Although the framework implicitly suggests that challenge stressors may act to offset the negative effects of hindrance stressors, we expect that, based on transactional theory, the combination of challenge and hindrance stressors will lead instead to higher levels of avoidant coping and significant decrements in behavior, cognition, and affect at the team level when compared to situations where only a hindrance stressor is present.

The challenge–hindrance framework

The challenge–hindrance framework classifies workplace stressors associated with positive (i.e., challenge) and negative (i.e., hindrance) outcomes for employees (e.g., LePine, LePine, & Jackson, 2004; LePine et al., 2005). Challenge stressors are "work-related demands or circumstances that, although potentially stressful, have associated gains for individuals", while hindrance stressors are "work-related demands or circumstances that tend to constrain or interfere with an individual's work achievement, which do not tend to be associated with potential gains of the individual" (Boswell et al., 2004, p. 166). This framework runs counter to previous stress models such as the Yerkes–Dodson Law, which suggests that it is the level of stress, not the type of stressor, that matters (see Mandler, 1982; Miller, 1978; Yerkes & Dodson, 1908).

What distinguishes the challenge–hindrance framework from other stress models is its foundation in the transactional theory of stress (e.g., Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which focuses on the psychological mechanisms of appraisal and coping that make up the stress process in an individual (Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001). According to this theory, stressors are encountered, perceived and assessed by an individual, resulting in strain or "the individual's psychological, physical, and behavioral response to stress" (Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001, p. 14). A person's primary appraisal of a situation is the recognition that a stressor has meaning to the self, in the form of potential harm or benefit. The secondary appraisal is then concerned with identifying the appropriate coping response to the specific stressor. If a stressor is perceived as beneficial (i.e., challenge), a cognitive problem-solving method of coping is used, resulting in increased motivation and effort. If a stressor is assessed as negative or harmful (i.e., hindrance), an emotional coping approach is taken, such as avoidance, resulting in decreased motivation and engagement (Dewe, Cox, & Ferguson, 1993; Lepine et al., 2005). Though examples of both types of stressors are associated with strain and feelings of exhaustion, they have been demonstrated to have independent and opposite effects on employee attitudes and behavior (e.g., Boswell et al., 2004; Kushnir & Melamed, 1991; LePine et al., 2004).

Cavanaugh et al. (2000) and Boswell et al. (2004) first classified specific organizational stimuli as challenge or hindrance stressors. Challenge stressors include such factors as time pressure, and increased work load, job scope, and responsibility. Though stressful, these types of demands are considered by employees to be opportunities to learn and achieve. Hindrance stressors, on the other hand, include stimuli such as role ambiguity, role conflict, politics, and red tape. These stressors also result in high levels of strain and are appraised negatively by employees as barriers to achieving personal goals.

In two recent meta-analyzes, LePine et al. (2005) and Podsakoff et al. (2007) classified existing stress research within this challenge–hindrance framework, finding that though both types of stressors resulted in psychological strain, challenge stressors were positively, and hindrance stressors negatively, related to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, motivation and performance. LePine et al. (2005) suggest that these stressors differentially affect motivation through expectancy perceptions. Challenge stressors are associated with increased motivation, as individuals believe that greater effort will enable them to manage increased demands and achieve their goals. Hindrance stressors, on the other hand, are perceived as insurmountable barriers to goal achievement that cannot be overcome through hard work, leading to a decrease in motivation.

While primary and secondary appraisal processes associated with challenge and hindrance stressors have been clearly explicated at the individual level, we wish to extend the model to the team level. As noted earlier, team-level constructs originate in individual cognitions and behavior. We propose that the primary and secondary appraisal processes match the requirements necessary for a multi-level homologous model, where constructs are isomorphic and linkages are functionally equivalent (see Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999; Rousseau, 1985). First, we believe that the theoretical processes linking constructs are similar in nature at the team level. Team members, like individuals, perceive environmental demands in terms of their potential harm or benefit. Team members appraise the situation as an opportunity for growth or mastery (challenge) or a possible barrier to achieving their goals (hindrance). Researchers suggest that because stress appraisals are embedded in the social context of the team, team members will process environmental stimuli in a relatively similar manner (Drach-Zahavy & Freund, 2007; Hobfoll, 2001). As team members interact and share their perceptions and concerns, their appraisals converge with other team members struggling to make sense of emergent, unfamiliar demands. Cognitive appraisals tend to converge due to analysis and discussion, while affective appraisals become more similar by emotional contagion (Gump & Kulik, 1997). Based on their primary appraisal, team members then engage in coping behavior.

Second, we argue that coping behavior will evidence composition (i.e., sharing or homogeneity). When faced with challenge stressors, as team members appraise the situation as an opportunity and cope with active problem-solving and increased effort, the interdependent nature of the team will lead them to share this problem-solving focus with each other through purposeful discussion, as they work together to develop new solutions and maintain high levels of motivation (Chen & Kanfer, 2006). When faced with hindrance stressors, coping composition relies on the continuous internal monitoring that develops within interdependent teams (e.g., Kozlowski, Gully, Nason, & Smith,

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