



Followers feel valued – When leaders' regulatory focus makes leaders exhibit behavior that fits followers' regulatory focus ☆☆☆



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Leader regulatory focus leads to transformational versus transactional behavior.
- Fit between leader and follower regulatory focus leads to followers feeling valued.
- Transformational–transactional behavior elicited leader–follower regulatory fit.

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ABSTRACT

When do followers feel valued by their leader? We propose that leaders' regulatory focus can make followers feel valued when leaders' regulatory focus is the same as followers' regulatory focus, that is, *when* there is regulatory fit between leaders and followers. We further propose that the reason *why* this occurs is that leaders' regulatory focus impacts on their transformational–transactional leadership, and these behavioral styles in turn also differentially fit followers' regulatory focus. Results from a group experiment supported these expectations. Followers felt valued by their leaders when the two parties' regulatory foci fit, and this effect resulted from leaders' transformational and transactional leadership behavior.

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Introduction

Leader–follower relationships are crucial in the social coordination process of leadership. Traditionally, however, it has been the leader who was placed in the most central position within this process. Yet, the process only functions properly when followers provide their crucial input. After all, leadership attains its goals indirectly through the efforts of followers. This implies that leaders who are able to make followers feel valued (accepted and important) are likely to be effective leaders. Yet, under which circumstances and for what reason might followers come to feel that their leader values them? A traditional answer to

this question is that some leaders simply express more appreciation (e.g., by giving compliments or rewards; Bass, 1985; House, 1971). However, not all followers are the same and not all followers benefit from the same type of leader (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005). Taking this into account, we propose a novel answer to the question of what makes followers feel valued by considering that an experience of value could arise from *regulatory fit* (Higgins, 2000) between a leader's regulatory focus and a follower's regulatory focus. A driving force in such leader–follower regulatory fit may be the behavioral style of leadership that arises from the leader's own regulatory focus (Kark & van Dijk, 2007).

Specifically, we propose that promotion-focused leaders tend to exhibit a more transformational style of leadership behavior. We further suggest that these transformational leadership behaviors outwardly exemplify promotion-oriented goal-pursuit strategies to followers. Therefore, a promotion-focused, transformational leader may provide regulatory fit for promotion-focused followers. In contrast, we propose that prevention-focused leaders tend to exhibit a more transactional style of leadership behavior. These transactional leadership behaviors

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outwardly exemplify prevention-oriented goal-pursuit strategies to followers. Therefore, a prevention-focused, transactional leader may provide regulatory fit for prevention-focused followers (see Fig. 1).

Regulatory focus theory

Higgins (1997) suggested that two distinct systems operate depending on whether nurturance or security needs guide self-regulation. 'Ideal' self-regulation aims at nurturance and refers to end-states reflecting hopes and aspirations. This first type of self-regulation involves a *promotion* focus, a concern with advancement and accomplishment, and coincides with 'eager' strategies. 'Ought' self-regulation aims at security and refers to end-states that reflect responsibilities and obligations. This second type of self-regulation involves a *prevention* focus, a concern with safety and security, and coincides with 'vigilant' strategies (Crowe & Higgins, 1997). These broad strategic orientations of eagerness and vigilance tend to elicit specific responses at the cognitive and behavioral levels (Scholer & Higgins, 2011), which we propose, may have consequences for transformational and transactional leadership (Kark & van Dijk, 2007).

On the one hand, promotion focus leads individuals to construe information globally (Förster & Higgins, 2005), suggesting that they have a long-term temporal perspective, a tendency to look at the big picture, and that they deal naturally with novel events (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Promotion focus implies that goals related to ideals (Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994) is associated with optimism (Hazlett, Molden, & Sackett, 2011) and a focus on positive outcomes (Sassenberg, Ellemers, & Scheepers, 2003). Promotion focus heightens readiness to take risks (Hamstra, Bolderdijk, & Veldstra, 2011) and concern for development and progress (Higgins, 1997). Finally, promotion focus comes with a preference for change over stability (Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999), a tendency toward innovation and creativity (Friedman & Förster, 2001), and a preference for goal attainment over goal maintenance (Brodtscholl, Kober, & Higgins, 2007).

On the other hand, prevention focus leads individuals to construe information locally (Förster & Higgins, 2005), suggesting that they have a short-term perspective, a tendency to look at the details, and that they deal naturally with familiar events (cf., Trope & Liberman, 2010). Prevention-focused individuals are concerned with doing what they ought to do (Higgins et al., 1994), living up to responsibilities (Higgins, 1997), and meeting minimal standards (Keller & Bless, 2008). Prevention focus leads to avoidance of mistakes and negative outcomes (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins et al., 2001), creates a tendency toward goal maintenance over goal attainment (Brodtscholl et al., 2007), and a preference for stability over change (Liberman et al., 1999).

Transformational–transactional leadership behavior

Leadership is basically a process of influence directed at goal-attainment (House, 1971; Stogdill, 1950); leadership behaviors may, therefore, be seen as goal-directed strategies. Transformational

leadership involves a collection of behavioral strategies such as displaying conviction and trust, voicing an attractive and optimistic vision of the future, challenging followers, providing meaning to their work, stimulating followers to express their ideas and opinions, and considering followers as individuals with needs, abilities and aspirations (Conger, 1999). In addition, communicating high performance expectations, exhibiting confidence in followers' ability to reach goals, and taking risks are generally seen as transformational behaviors (Ehrhart & Klein, 2001). In contrast, transactional leadership (Bass, 1985; House, 1971) consists of a collection of behavioral strategies such as setting up clear rules of transaction with followers, monitoring and correcting followers' performance, and enforcing rules and regulations to avoid mistakes. In other words, transactional leadership concerns leaders' behavior aimed at follower compliance with the leader and with group rules, by setting up clear rules for exchange between leader and follower and by correcting inappropriate behavior or performance (Yukl, 1998). Accordingly, a distinct collection of behaviors or behavioral strategies seems to make up these two styles. Further research into these styles shows a number of even more specific examples, which suggest how these styles may be behavioral instantiations of promotion focus or prevention focus.

On the one hand, transformational leadership might be predicted by a promotion focus: several specific transformational behaviors overlap with promotion-oriented behavioral strategies, such as providing an abstract and ideal-focused vision of the long-term future, stimulating new ways of working, and facilitating change (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; Sosik & Dionne, 1997). Transformational leadership communicates with optimism (Berson, Shamir, Avolio, & Popper, 2001), and holds high expectations and confidence in followers' ability to reach goals (House & Aditya, 1997). Additionally, transformational leadership behavior includes a tendency to take risks (Spangler & House, 1991), and a tendency to give followers the freedom and autonomy to develop themselves (Bass, 1985). Finally, transformational leadership facilitates change, innovation, and goal attainment (Howell & Avolio, 1993; Jung, Chow, & Wu, 2003).

On the other hand, transactional leadership might be predicted by a prevention focus: several transactional behavioral aspects are similar to prevention-oriented behavioral strategies, such as focusing on short-term task-specific success, scrutinizing details of followers' behavior, and aiming to maintain stability (House, 1971; Sosik & Dionne, 1997). Transactional leadership sets up and enforces clear rules for exchange (Bass, 1985; House, 1971), aims at follower compliance with norms (Mohart, Herzog, & Tomczak, 2009) and concerns itself with followers living up to minimal performance standards (Bass, 1985). Finally, transactional leadership implies closely monitoring and correcting followers' performance and mistakes (Masi & Cooke, 2000) and focusing on preserving the status quo (Oke, Munshi, & Walumbwa, 2009).

In sum, the analogies in the two disparate areas of research may be taken as evidence suggesting that transformational versus transactional leadership may be behavioral instantiations of promotion-focused self-regulation versus prevention-focused self-regulation in a leadership context. Uncovering that promotion focus inclines leaders toward exhibiting transformational leadership behavior, while prevention focus inclines leaders toward exhibiting transactional leadership would be interesting in its own right. Yet, the links discussed above – between regulatory focus and leadership styles – may also have implications for *followers*, due to, as we suggest next, the potential for these leadership styles to create regulatory fit.

The regulatory fit of transformational–transactional leadership behavior

According to the regulatory fit hypothesis (Higgins, 2000), pursuing goals using strategies that match individuals' dominant orientation (or anticipating to do so) feels 'right'. This regulatory fit implies that a situation sustains (rather than disrupts) individuals' motivational orientation, which heightens motivational intensity and increases the value

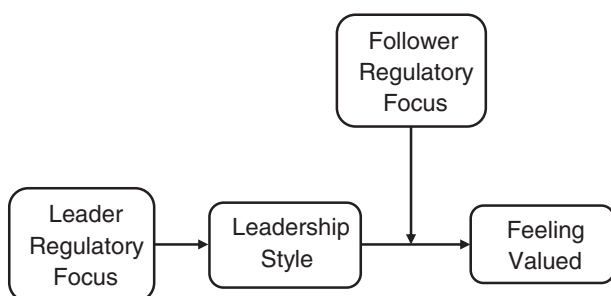


Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

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