



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

North American Journal of Economics and Finance



Linking transformational leadership and core self-evaluation to job performance: The mediating role of felt accountability

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Felt accountability
Transformational leadership
Core self-evaluation
Job performance

ABSTRACT

This study examined the mediating effects of felt accountability (FA) on the effect of both transformational leadership and core self-evaluation (CSE) on task performance (TP) and contextual performance (CP). Structural equation modeling and Analysis of Moment Structures were used to analyze data collected from questionnaires distributed to 302 supervisor–employee dyads. The concept of FA is based on a social contingency model of accountability, which is distinct from feelings of responsibility or obligation in organizational research. Our hypotheses for the mediating role of FA were supported by the data, except that the mediating effect of FA on the relationship between CSE and CP was not supported. We discuss the implications of these results for research and practice in organizations.

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1. Introduction

Considerable research is required to empirically reexamine the widely held assumption that accountability is an organizational panacea. We echo the claim of Ferris et al. (2009): “Our

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understanding of accountability antecedents, processes, and outcomes is woefully deficient” (p. 528). The common *a priori* rationale for this statement was expressed by Lerner and Tetlock (1999), as follows: “all we need to do is hold the rascals accountable” (p. 270).

A prevalent problem-solving-oriented social consensus is that accountability is an essential mechanism for social and personal control (Frink & Ferris, 1998). However, because practitioners stress performance outcomes, the failure to demonstrate a clear connection between accountability and job performance impedes the advocacy of accountability and its implementation in real organizational settings. We argue that a crucial and implicit proposition of accountability research is that the impacts of accountability mechanisms on member behavior are essential for improved organizational performance.

In addition, individual performance of an organization is contingent, *inter alia*, on the interplay of leaders and the dispositional characteristics of employees. Transformational leadership (TL; Carter, Armenakis, Field, & Mossholder, 2013) and core self-evaluation (CSE; Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997), therefore, may affirm that conditions of accountability affect employee behavior in organizational settings (Frink & Ferris, 1998, p. 1260). This affirmation contains broad implications for the emergence of felt accountability (FA) and job performance and can enrich our understanding of their roles in the performance management process.

The purpose of the present study was to determine the underlying psychological process of FA in the relationships among TL, CSE, and job performance. Furthermore, the study was intended to fill the gap in the literature regarding FA and its empirical connection to job performance. We discuss both the theoretical and practical implications of our findings, which include TL, CSE, FA, and job performance theories. In addition, we argue for a process perspective of the mediating role of FA in response to a need for a comprehensive understanding of the antecedents and consequences of FA (Frink et al., 2009).

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. Characteristics and effect of felt accountability

Accountability is ubiquitous in organizations and social systems, and is conceptualized as a perceived likelihood that the behaviors of an individual or group will be evaluated by some salient audience, and that the evaluation will result in either rewards or sanctions received by the individual or group (Hall et al., 2003, p. 33). The perspective of integrating accountability with role theories (Frink & Klimoski, 1998, 2004; Frink et al., 2008) suggests that the characteristics of accountability in social and organizational systems require shared norms and rules to guide individual behavior. FA is therefore considered to bind social systems or serve as a mechanism for maintaining systems and structures (Frink et al., 2008). Thus, felt accountability is viewed as an internal pressure leading individuals to comply (Ferris et al., 2009, p. 519).

In contrast with the traditional superior–subordinate or “vertical” relationships, other accountability mechanisms are “horizontal,” as in the relationships between peers, partners, clients, and independent bodies (Schillemans, 2010). Thus, FA derives from multiple sources. For example, employees are expected to be accountable to their superiors, colleagues, clients, and other stakeholders (Hall, Bowen, Ferris, Royle, & Fitzgibbons, 2007). Consequently, under the “web of accountability” (Frink & Klimoski, 1998) the joint impact of multiple mechanisms may create “redundant accountability” (Schillemans, 2010).

Instead of examining each of the multiple sources and identifying their individual effects from a multi-level or meso-level perspective among the redundant forms of accountability, Hall et al. (2007) suggested that accountability can be thought of as a subjective representation of the context. Nevertheless, FA research integrates the impact of intrapsychic processes (Lerner & Tetlock, 2003) into a conceptual framework to enhance the linkages of individual behavior with the larger organizational and social institutional context.

Specifically, the concept of FA is based on the social contingency model of accountability (Tetlock, 1985, 1992), which is distinct from the feeling of responsibility or obligation in organizational research (Frink & Ferris, 1998; Frink et al., 2008; Hall et al., 2007). Felt accountability is subjective and internal in

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