

Leader Behaviour affecting Well-Being at Work

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Abstract

Leader behaviour has a significant impact on employee behaviour, performance and well-being. Extant theory and research on leadership behavior has predominantly focused on employee performance, treating employee well-being (typically measured as job satisfaction) as a secondary outcome variable related to performance, rather than as an important outcome in itself. From a criterion perspective, the narrow focus on job satisfaction doesn't fully capture the concept of employee well-being, which is multi-dimensional. The purpose of this paper is to focus first on the main ideas about leadership theory and behavioural approaches to it, and then turn the attention to processes by which leadership behaviour (i.e., change, relational, task, passive) affects employee well-being. Five mediator groupings (social-cognitive, motivational, affective, relational, identification) have been identified by extending the criterion space for conceptualizing employee well-being (i.e., psychological: hedonic, eudaimonic, negative; and physical).

Keywords: Behavioural Approach, Leadership, Pathways, Employee Well-Being.

Introduction

One of the fascinating questions is why someone is considered to be an effective leader. Theories and research on leadership has long tried to understand leadership in ways that help the selection of people who are likely to be good bosses and the training and development of their skills. Leadership focus on individuals with legitimate authority in organisations to make decisions about the others, by dealing with the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what actions to do and how it can be done effectively, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives (Yukl, 2002). Many of the different theories show relations with performance and satisfaction and support the need of organisations to select and promote individuals into management positions. The role of manager is to contribute to the effective use of physical and human resources. Therefore, an effective manager should be a good leader.

Many studies have been conducted on how the distribution of decision-making influence between superiors and subordinates is related to the performance and satisfaction of individuals and work groups. One important study in this area (Lewin et al., 1939) gives a classification of leader behaviour, based on the sharing of decision making between a leader and a follower, which has continued to be reflected in much of today's work (Tosi& Pilati, 2011; Robertson& Barling, 2014).

Scholars of organisational behaviour have been intrigued by the potential benefits that positive emotions enhanced by the leader have to offer to workers. They have shown how experiences that foster emotions, such as interest, joy, pride and appreciation, promote adaptive qualities that help people work together. The benefits of positive emotions contributing to a dynamic process of individual and organisational change, serve as a mechanism to achieve transformative cooperation (Vacharkulksemsuk et al., 2011). In an organisational setting, transformation is a shift in how people think, observe, and interpret their organisation and their role within it; cooperation is viewed as an association of people who work together to achieve mutual benefits as a result of their shared actions.

The relationship between leadership behaviour and well-being can be considered as a process and differential processes can take many forms. An array of leadership behaviours may influence a particular

component of well-being through different mediational pathways, and the same leadership behaviour may have differential effects on a variety of well-being through alternative mechanisms.

The main purpose of the paper is to discuss a conceptual model of leadership behaviour and mechanisms through which leadership behaviour affects employee well-being. The theme of the behavioural approach to leadership examines how what a leader does is related to leader effectiveness (Tosi & Pilati, 2011). Following from Kelloway et al. (2012) leadership is a process of social influence that is enacted by designated individuals who hold formal leadership roles in organisations. This is a process of influence on individuals to make them understand and accept the decisions and actions to be undertaken, by facilitating individual and collective efforts to achieve common goals.

Qualitative data from organizational literature on leadership and employee well-being have been analyzed. In particular, the leadership theory, behavioural approaches, management styles and mediator pathways have been examined in order to explain the processes by which leader behaviour impacts employee well-being.

Leadership and Employee Well-Being

In early research leadership was emphasized as a set of personal traits of persons identified as bosses. Personality, as the aptitude to act in a particular way, is related to a person's ability. In the following study, leadership has been studied as behaviour, designed to help people to reach their objectives. In the 1960s the focus shifted toward contingency theories that considered various situations in which different leadership styles would be effective. These theories systematically account for how situational factors might result in different interactions between what leaders do and their effectiveness. Effective leadership behaviour depends on the situation in which leader and followers have a relationship.

More recently attention has been directed towards the leadership process, an approach that focusses not only on what the leader is (trait) or what the leader does (behaviour) but also on the critical dimensions of the interaction between the boss and the followers that lead to boss's influence. The process theories explain the processes by which a relationship develops between leaders and subordinates (Tosi & Pilati, 2011).

Extant theory and research on leadership behaviour has predominantly focused on employee performance, treating employee well-being (typically measured as job satisfaction) as a secondary outcome variable related to performance, rather than as an important outcome in and of itself. From a criterion perspective this narrow focus on job satisfaction does not fully capture the concept of employee well-being, which is multi-dimensional.

Well-being has acquired a broader meaning, involving the physical (general health, health-related behaviours), and psychological (mental illness, stress, self-efficacy, self-esteem, affective well-being) health at work (De Simone & Franco, 2023). Well-being tends to be a broader concept that takes into consideration the "whole person". Beyond specific physical or psychological symptoms related to health, well-being should be used as appropriate to include context-free measures of life experiences (life satisfaction, happiness), and within the organisational research to include job-related experiences (job satisfaction, job attachment), as well as more facet-specific dimensions.

Leaders can affect their subordinates' well-being through several paths: they serve as role models for their subordinates and can model (un) healthy and (un) safe working practices; leaders' power to reward or "punish" their subordinates assumes considerable importance for employee well-being; and the decision leaders make can produce additional stress for their subordinates (e.g. assigning an abundance of tasks to one employee can result in role overload), or enhance the quality of their work experiences. It is through these mechanisms that leaders affect employees' well-being (Robertson & Barling, 2014).

Leadership Behaviour

Leadership is inherently a process affecting employee well-being through mediators. From a theoretical perspective, one of the primary ways in which leader behaviour can influence employee well-being is through the resources that leaders can provide to their followers via their behaviours. Conservation of resource theory (COR), stating that individuals are motivated to acquire and reinvest

resources, to grow these further, and protect them in order to avoid losses, is one lens to understand these processes (Hobfoll, 1989). This theory has been widely applied to understand processes leading to well-being, in particular stress, burnout and exhaustion. More specifically, leaders can enable resources that affect well-being by shaping the work environment through opportunities for rewards; autonomy, skill discretion and being a source of social support themselves (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Through the social interaction with leaders, followers form beliefs about themselves and their work environment (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and their ability to acquire and build resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014).

Leadership behaviour can be categorized into *Task-oriented*, *Relational-oriented*, *Change-oriented* and *Passive Leadership or Laissez-faire* (Yukl et al. 2002; Yukl, 2013).

Leadership behaviours are also associated with transactional leadership (Bass & Bass, 2008) such as contingent reward and management-by active exception, initiating structure, boundary spanning and directive styles such as task-oriented. The relational-oriented category includes leadership behaviours such as participative and empowerment leadership. Leadership behaviours are described as supportive and relational-oriented as they generally tap into the core of relationship-oriented leadership. This behaviour is typical of leaders who consult with subordinates on appropriate matters, set goals with them, and allow them some influence in the decision-making process. The goal sharing between leader and followers engenders a positive climate, which serves in turn to increase organisational identification and to develop stronger relationships at work that then foster higher levels of organisational growth and performance (De Simone, 2014).

In a study of employees in mental health services, healthy organisational climate correlated with good work outcomes, positive employee work attitudes, intentions to stay with the organisation, and overall organisational performance (Aarons & Sawitzky, 2006).

Change-oriented leader behaviours comprise transformational, charismatic and inspirational leadership. Transformational leadership is composed of four dimensions (Bass & Avolio, 1994). The first one, idealized influence, refers both to the characteristics that followers attribute to the leader, as well as behaviour the leader engages in related to being a role model and doing the right thing. A leader with strong values, who also acts in accordance with these, would score highly on this dimension. The second dimension, inspirational motivation, relates to broadly communicating a positive vision and holding high expectations. Intellectual stimulation, the third dimension, involves being open to new ways of accomplishing tasks and encouraging others to be creative in their thinking. Finally, individual consideration, the fourth dimension, focuses on a leader who enhances employees, spends time coaching and developing their skills, cares, and is compassionate.

Passive styles are characterized by management by exception-passive and laissez-faire. In passive leadership leaders are disengaged, and often avoid and deny responsibility even in the face of dire situations (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Leaders allow the group to have complete autonomy. They rarely supervise directly, so that group members make many on-the-job decisions themselves, such as what jobs they want to do. With such an approach, subordinates set their own goals with no managerial input and work toward them with no direction (Tosi & Pilati, 2011).

These categories of leadership behaviours have differential validities in predicting not only specific follower behaviours such as performance, but also job satisfaction (DeRue et al., 2011; Piccolo et al., 2012). The relationship between leadership behaviours and processes impacts psychological and physical well-being in the employee at the individual level. Psychological well-being is broadly defined in terms of subjective experience and functioning, while physical well-being encompasses bodily health and functioning (Grant et al., 2007). Physical well-being is receiving increasing attention in management research and is an important well-being outcome in the experience of work-related stress (Ganster & Rosen, 2013).

Mechanisms by which Leadership Behaviour Affects Employee Well-Being

Based on the resource-based perspective (Hobfoll, 1989), Inceoglu et al. (2018) examine processes (mediator pathways) by which leadership behaviour impacts employee well-being: (a) *Social-*

cognitive (b) Motivational (c) Affective (d) Relational (e) Identification.

Social-cognitive pathway is based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1982), and social information processing (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), encompassing mediators such as self-efficacy, confidence related constructs and justice perceptions. Leaders play an important role in framing the experience, being part of and shaping the social environment of their employees. Salancik and Pfeffer (1978) emphasize the social context as an important source of information for constructing meaning through guides to socially acceptable beliefs, attitudes and needs, and acceptable reasons for action, and makes specific information more salient and shapes expectations concerning behaviour. Embedded in a social context, a person's self-efficacy increases through enactive attainment, challenging tasks, and vicarious experiences which involve observing the performance of others (Bandura, 1982), and verbal persuasion, all processes that leaders can influence.

Motivational process through job design (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) includes job autonomy and task variety. Work provides the opportunity for individuals to meet needs for competence, affiliation, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and job characteristics are linked to employee well-being. The leader shapes the followers' work environment and access to resources (e.g. autonomy, allocation of interesting tasks) and thus their motivation.

Affective pathway comprises direct measures of a leader's affect, mood and emotions. Leadership behaviour influences follower affect through the direct display of their own emotions as well as through events triggering follower emotions (e.g. a positive or negative appraisal). Affective mediators also include follower affect and well-being, containing thriving and work engagement. This pathway emphasizes the followers' affect that is triggered by leadership behaviours such as communicating an inspiring vision, a key component of transformational leadership energizing followers.

Relational pathway, rooted in social exchange theories (Blau, 1964), leader-member exchange (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) refers to perceptions of interpersonal justice. The followers' perceptions of the interaction and relationship with the leader can be a form of support, a resource for followers, affecting their well-being (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Trust in the leader reflects the followers' perceptions of openly communicating with the supervisor on job-related problems without fear of negative repercussions and has been linked to well-being (Braun, Peus, Weisweiler, & Frey, 2013).

Identification-related mediators are linked to well-being. Leaders shape their followers' self-concept through enabling the creation of a collective identity that followers integrate as part of their own identity. Leadership behaviour can also impact the followers' identification with the organisation, team and their job (Ashforth et al., 2016), which in turn is likely to enhance employee well-being (Inceoglu et al. 2018).

Mediational pathways can also work differently depending on whether mediators are group or individual level constructs. Nielsen and Daniels (2012) examined the relationship of transformational leadership (measured at group level and as individual differentiated perceptions from the group level) and job satisfaction (hedonic), vitality (eudaimonic), burnout (negative) and sleep quality (physical). In this pathway the leaders' behaviour changes the context of work (e.g., social support, etc.) which affects employees' capabilities to deal with stress. Transformational leaders appear to change the working conditions for employees, and through this process have an influence on employee well-being. Over the last decades, there has been an increase in studies on the JD-R model in order to interpret relation leader behaviour and employee well-being (e.g. burnout, health, motivation, work engagement). The JD-R theory focuses on the interaction of job demands and resources to predict employee well-being. Demands and resources may have a combined effect on well-being, and indirectly influence performance in two possible ways. In the first interaction, job resources (e.g. social support, autonomy, performance feedback and opportunities for development) can moderate the influence of job demands like workload and emotional demands on strain, including burnout (Bakker, Demerouti, 2014). Workers having many job resources can address better demands at work. In the second interaction, job demands increase the influence of job resources on motivation (Xanthopoulou et al. 2012).

Employee psychological well-being can be operationalized in terms of affective (feeling) and

cognitive processes (thinking). Both form part of well-being composites or cognitive-affective syndromes which embody interlinked ideas, recollections, perspectives and mental networks as well as merely affect. These include job engagement, job satisfaction and burnout. There are positive and negative forms of psychological well-being, as leadership behaviours can have differential relationships with these constructs. Positive forms of well-being include hedonic well-being, which emphasizes the subjective experience of pleasure, and eudaimonic forms of well-being, which stress subjective vitality (De Simone & Franco, 2023). Examples of hedonic well-being are contentment, comfort, satisfaction, and serenity (Warr, 2013), while eudaimonic well-being involves the positive feeling of aliveness and energy and includes personal growth, learning and vitality as captured in the concept of thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005).

Conclusion

The study on the effects of leadership on employee well-being tends to occupy a very prominent niche in mainstream organisational research. The old classification of leader behaviour, based on the sharing of decision making between leader and follower in three ways (autocratic, laissez-faire and participative), continues to be considered in several current studies. However, recent research has analysed leadership behaviours particularly in consideration of the individual and organisational consequences of having a healthy workforce. The growing interest in the affective component of the workplace has created a shift in organisational behaviour studies. Researchers have recognized that people's emotions influence performance and employee decisions and actions are linked to emotions at the personal, interpersonal and organisational levels (Vacharkulksemsuk et al., 2011).

Three analysed categories of leadership behaviour are Task-oriented, Relational-oriented, Change-oriented and Passive Leadership or Laissez-faire (Yukl et al. 2002; Yukl, 2013). These categories have differential validities in predicting well-being and job satisfaction (Derue et al., 2011; Piccolo et al., 2012). The relational-oriented category includes leadership behaviours such as participative leadership that is associated with higher levels of subordinate satisfaction. Those who work for participative leaders are less resistant to change and show organisation identification (Tosi & Pilati, 2011).

Change-oriented leadership behaviours include transformational leadership that is inherently positive because of its focus on ethical behaviour, elevating employees' motivation, encouraging intellectual stimulation (and allowing employees to think for themselves) and demonstrating real concern for individuals' needs. It is through these positive behaviours that transformational leaders positively affect employee well-being. It provides role clarity, meaningful work, and enables employee to develop self-efficacy and trust in their leaders, all of which positively impact employee well-being (Kara, 2017). Although it seems logical to assume that a lack of leadership would be neither positively or negatively related to employee well-being, research findings suggest laissez-faire leadership negatively impacts employees' psychological well-being because it increases workplace stressors (e.g. role conflict, role ambiguity, and conflict with coworkers) and decreases trust in leaders (Kelloway et al., 2012).

The most frequently measured mediators were social-cognitive (follower self-efficacy and empowerment), relational (trust) in nature and affective pathways (follower and leader affect) and identification processes (follower identification with the leader). Studies of how change-oriented or transformational leadership might be associated with employee psychological well-being evoke the explanatory notion of resources provided by this form of leadership (Kara, 2017). Variables that have been examined and found to mediate (or partially mediate) this relationship include: meaningful work, self-efficacy, trust in the leader, sense of community, quality of working life, occupational self-efficacy, employee motivation (autonomous and controlled), team efficacy, work-life conflict, role clarity and opportunities for development, influence and involvement, social support, need satisfaction, climate for innovation, procedural justice and psychological empowerment, and psychosocial resources. Thus, transformational leadership might be associated with employee well-being by providing job resources (e.g. role clarity and career development, decision making participation and involvement, social support, job satisfaction).

There is a consistent and positive link between transformational leadership and employee affective well-being. Healthcare workers whose leaders rated high on transformational leadership experienced more positive emotions (e.g. optimism, happiness and enthusiasm) throughout the day compared to other healthcare workers whose leaders didn't rate high on transformational leadership (Bono, Folds, Vinson & Muros, 2007). A survey focusing on perceptions of patient care workers of the management style in three government-funded hospitals in Italy confirms transformational leadership as a source of high well-being for employees. In the perceptions of patient care workers (doctors, nurses and healthcare technicians), the relation with the superior is mostly based on personal esteem, engaging, effective, friendly, collaborative, and source of well-being (De Simone, 2015; 2016). Transformational leadership, positively associated with organisational climate, contributes to promoting human flourishing and organisational growth. The term climate originates from social climate, referring to the nature of the relationship between leaders and followers as a function of a leader's behaviour (Lewin et al. 1939). The term managerial climate, later introduced, refers to the fairness with which managers treated subordinates (McGregor, 1960). When the leader cultivates a positive emotional climate, it will benefit from an increase in the strength of interpersonal relationships (De Simone, 2013). Positive emotions, such as gratitude and appreciation, contribute to increasing organisational identification. Employees' efforts to work together, using positive experiences as a lever for organisational development and change, stimulate the creativity necessary for innovation. Gratitude motivates and reinforces social actions in both the giver and receiver of help, by inspiring positive actions. When the leader encourages followers to seek a positive meaning in their work, bringing forward what they value most, gratitude and enthusiasm tend to emerge (De Simone, 2016).

Other research has shown that the relationship between transformational leadership and employees' affective well-being is partially mediated by meaningful work and perceived work characteristics (e.g. role clarity, meaningfulness and opportunity for development), and fully mediated by personal resources (Nielsen, 2009). Personal resources are positive self-evaluations referring to individuals' ability to successfully influence and control their environment. Three personal resources, like self-efficacy, organisational-based self-esteem and optimism, can predict work engagement and exhaustion (Xanthopoulou et al., 2012).

Future research should investigate leaders' own well-being, particularly whether engaging in leader positive behaviours may be beneficial for the leader themselves, and consequently, influence the behaviour they enact.

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