The effects of leadership behaviors on the employee well-being in the workplace: a worthy investment from managers or leaders

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Leadership and well-being in the workplace have become common topics in the mainstream media, in practitioner-oriented magazines and journals and, increasingly, in scholarly research journals. In this article we first review the literature that serves to define leadership and well-being. We then discuss the effects of leadership behaviors on employee well-being and finally the consequences and the implications in the workplace.

1. Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to summarize and integrate the extant literatures in leadership and well-being dealing with the effects of leadership behaviors on the employee well-being in the workplace. To begin we examine commonly used definitions and conceptualizations of leadership and well-being. We then discuss the effects of leadership behaviors on employee well-being, the consequences and the implications in the workplace.
2. General conceptualizations of leadership

As Stogdill (1974, p.7) point out a review of leadership research, there are almost as many as different definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it. It is much like the words love, democracy and peace. Although each of us intuitively knows what others mean by such words, the words can have different meaning for different people. As soon as we try to define leadership discover that leadership as many different meanings.

In the past 60 years, as many as 65 different classification systems have been developed to define the dimensions of leadership (Fleishman et al, 1991). One such classification system is the one proposed by Bass (1990, pp.11-20). He suggested that some definitions view leadership as the focus of group processes. From this viewpoint, the leader is at the center of group change and activity and embodies the will of the group. Another group of definitions conceptualizes leadership from a personality perspective, which suggests that leadership is a combination of special traits or characteristics that individuals possesses and that enable them to induce others to accomplish tasks. Other approaches to leadership have defined it as an act or behavior – the things leaders do to bring about change in a group. As well, leadership has been defined in terms of the power relationship that exists between leaders and followers. From this perspective, leaders have power and use it to effect change in others. Others view leadership as a transformational process that moves followers to accomplish more than what is usually expected of them. Finally, others address leadership from a skills perspective. This view stresses the capabilities (knowledge and skills) that make leadership possible.

Independent of the multitude of ways in which leadership has been conceptualized, some components can be identified as central: a) leadership is a process; b) leadership involves influence, c) leadership occurs in a group context, and d) leadership involves goal attainment. Based on these components, the following definition of leadership is used in this article: leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. Defining leadership as a process means that it is not a trait or characteristic that resides in the leader but a transactional (and transformational) event that occurs between the leader and his or her followers. Process implies that a leader affects and is affected by followers. It emphasizes that leadership is not a linear, one-way event but rather an interactive event. When leadership is defined in this manner, it becomes available to everyone. It is not restricted to only the formally designated leader in a group.
Leadership involves influence: it is concerned with how the leader affects followers. Influence is the *sine qua non* condition of leadership. Leadership occurs in groups. Groups are the context in which leadership takes place. Leadership involves influencing a group of individuals who have a common purpose. This can be a small task group, a community group, or a larger group encompassing an entire organization.

Leadership includes attention to goals. This means that leadership has to do with directing a group of individuals toward accomplishing some task or end. Leaders direct their energies toward individuals who are trying to achieve something together.

Leadership occurs and has its effects in context where individuals are moving toward a goal. Leaders need followers and followers need leaders (Burns, 1978; Hollander, 1992; Jago, 1982).

As Burns (1978) has pointed out, discussions of leadership sometimes are viewed as elitist because of the implied power and importance often ascribed to leaders in the leader-follower relationship. Leaders are not above followers or better than followers. Leaders and followers must be understood in relation to each other (Hollander, 1992) and collectively (Burns, 1978). They are in the leadership relationship together – two sides of the same coin (Rost, 1991).

### 3. General conceptualizations of well-being

Although the majority of research in psychology on well-being has been inductive, with a focus on assessments of happiness and life satisfaction in the population and on the determining antecedents and consequences of well-being, two broad theoretical strands can be distinguished (Keyes & Waterman, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993). The first of these has alternatively been termed the “hedonic” view, or “emotional well-being” – in this tradition, well-being is conceptualized as an effectively pleasant state (“pleasure and pain” approaches according to Diener, 1984). Proponents of the second tradition, the “eudaimonic” view, also called “psychological well-being”, claim that well-being cannot – and should not be – reduced to pleasure, that well-being comprises living in accordance with one’s inner self, one’s “demon” (daimon); the focus here is on living a meaningful life and on achieving self-realization as a fully functioning person.
Some authors have proposed additional components of well-being, such as social as distinct from psychological well-being (Keyes & Waterman, 2003), health is sometimes included as a sub-dimension (Argyle & Martin, 1991), and other conceptualizations rest upon how well-being can be achieved, as opposed to what it comprises (Diener, 1984). The large majority of present approaches to well-being, however can be captured by the distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic traditions. The last twenty years has seen enormous changes in the workplace in the developed and developing world. Jobs are no longer for life, hours of work are longer, major restructuring in organizations are a regular occurrence, new technology is hastening the pace of change and demanding an immediacy of response and the two-earner family is now the average family, creating problems of balance between work and home. These changes have created key issues for organizations about developing and maintaining well-being in the workplace (Cooper & Robertson, 2001).

4. Leadership and Management

Leadership is a process that is similar to management in many ways. Leadership involves influence, as does management. Leadership entails working with people, which management entails as well. Leadership is concerned with effective goal accomplishment, and so is management. In general, many of the functions of management are activities that are consistent with the definition of leadership. But leadership is also different from management. Whereas the study of leadership can be traced as back to Aristotle, management emerged around the turn of the 20th century with the advent of the industrialized society. Management was created as a way to reduce chaos in organizations and to make them run more effectively and efficiently. These functions are still representative of the field of management nowadays. Bennis and Nanus (1985) maintained that there is a significant difference between management and leadership. To manage means to accomplish activities and master routines, whereas to lead means to influence others and create visions for change. The authors, Bennis and Nanus made the distinction very clear. They said, “(...) managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right thing” (p. 221). Rost (1991) has also been a proponent of distinguishing between leadership and management. He contended that leadership is a multidirectional influence relationship and management is a unidirectional authority relationship. Whereas leadership is concerned with the process of developing mutual
purposes, management is directed toward coordinating activities in order to get a job done. Leaders and followers work together to create real change, whereas managers and subordinates join forces to sell goods and services (Rost, 1991, pp. 149-152). Although there are clear differences between management and leadership, the two constructs overlap. When managers are involved in influencing a group to meet its goals, they are involved in leadership. When leaders are involved in planning, organizing, staffing and controlling they are involved in management. Both processes involve influencing a group of individuals toward goal attainment.

5. Leadership behaviors on employee well-being in the workplace
Leadership in organizations has been associated with every aspect of the workplace. This article develops many of the ways in which a particular leadership behavior can affect the employee well-being.

5.1 – Stress and leadership
Several studies have found that leaders behavior affects employee well-being. The available evidence supports the notion of two opposite effects of leadership on employee well-being. First, positive leadership behaviors have a positive impact on well-being. Conversely, negative leadership behaviors have adverse consequences for individual well-being. For example, Gilbreath and Benson (2004) found that positive supervisory behavior (e.g., increasing employee control, improved communication and organization, considering employees and their well-being, just treatment of employees) predicted employee well-being over and above the effects of age, lifestyle, social support from co-workers and at home, and stressful work and life events. Similarly, Van Dierendonck et al (2004) found that high quality leadership behavior was associated with increased employee well-being. Other studies have focused on the notion of transformational leadership – shown to be an effective leadership style. In two studies, Arnold et al (2009) provided evidence for the link between transformational leadership and well-being. Moreover, they began to consider the mechanisms trough which these linkages occur. Specifically, Arnold et al (2009) found that transformational leadership helped employees to experience more meaning in their
work environment, and that these perceptions of meaningfulness predicted individual well-being. Other potential mechanisms also seem promising. For example, a recent experimental study showed that “charismatic leaders enable their followers to experience positive emotions” (Bono & Llues, 2006: 331). Another study found that transformational leadership behavior was positively related to mentoring and negatively related to job-related stress (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000). The positive effects of effective leadership extend to the physical consequences associated with stress. For example, Karlin, Brondolo and Schwartz (2003) examined the stressful occupation of New York city traffic enforcement agents and found that social support from immediate supervisors tended to be negatively correlated with systolic blood pressure. In addition to directly enhancing well-being, these results suggest that effective supervision may also help individuals cope with the stressful aspects of their jobs. The stress of poor supervision also manifests in physical outcomes. Wager, Fieldman and Hussey (2003) reported that on days when a sample of nurses worked for a supervisor that was seen as being punitive and unfair, they experience a 15mm increase in systolic blood pressure and a 7 mm increase in diastolic blood pressure compared to days when they worked for a supervisor who was seen has being fair. These results provided direct evidence that working for an unfair supervisor results in a greater likelihood of a cardio-vascular incident. Similarly Kivimaki at al (2005) that how an individual was treated by their supervisor predicted incident coronary disease (CHD) over a nine – year span the risk of CHD attributable to supervisory treatment was independent of risks attributed to traditional job stress or lifestyle risk factors.

5.2 – Leaders play an important role in influencing workplace safety

Cree and Kelloway (1997) noted that perceptions of managers and supervisors commitment to health and safety were strongly related to perceived risk and willingness to participate in safety programs. Mullen (2005) found that perceptions of managerial receptiveness to health and safety predicted individuals willingness to raise safety issues in the workplace. Hofmann and Morgeson (1999) found that high quality leader-member exchange contributed to improved safety communication and safety commitment, which in turn contributed to reduced incident of accidents. Specifically pertaining to the importance of leadership as a predictor of occupational health and safety related outcomes, Barling,
Loughlin and Kelloway (2002) reported that perceptions of supervisors safety-specific transformational leadership were related to individual safety consciousness and perceptions of safety climate and, through these intervening variables, safety events and actual injuries. Overall, the data suggest that when leaders actively promote health and safety, organizations experience better safety records and greater positive safety outcomes (Hofmann, Jacobs & Landy, 1995; Shannon, Mayr & Haines, 1997; Zohar, 1980; 2002b). Of particular interest is the finding that training leaders in safety had an impact on employees number of accidents (Zohar, 2002b).

5.3 - Leaders can influence workplace health behaviors

While the suggestion that organizational leadership is linked to job stress or job safety is not all surprising, many would have more difficulty accepting the suggesting that leadership may be linked to healthy lifestyle practices. Nonetheless, the available data, albeit scarce, does in fact seem to support such a link. Substance use in the workplace is prevalent and the role of supervisors in managing substance use and its consequences are well documented. For example, based on his national (US) prevalence data, Frone (2006) reported that just over 14% of the workforce engaged in illicit drug use with 3.9% of respondents engaging in illicit drug use at work. As he notes, these are global estimates and in certain sectors of the workforce illicit drug use may be substantially higher. Supervisors are expected to intervene when they detect problems related to substance use (Ames, Grube & Moore, 2000) and to enforce policies (e.g. Bamberger & Donahue, 1999). More recently there is evidence that supervisory behavior may be a causal factor in substance use. Bamberger and Bacharach (2006) found that when supervisors engage in abusive supervision employees are more likely to engage in problem drinking. Similarly supervisors who treat employees unfairly may precipitate health-related behaviors such as lack of sleep. Greenberg (2006) reported that employees treated unjustly were more likely to display insomnia and that training supervisors in interactional justice substantially reduced these adverse consequences. While this suggests that poor leadership can predict unhealthy behaviors in subordinates, it may also be the case that positive leadership behaviors can encourage healthy style behaviors.
Related with the success on health promotion programs, Whiteman, Snyder and Ragland (2001) found that tobacco usage declined as a result of the program and that program success was attributable to leadership and command involvement. Leaders can influence health behaviors via several routes. Leaders can create the conditions that inhibit or encourage employees to engage in health behaviors (or not). The need for managerial support for programs such as employee assistance programs (Fielding, 1984) is well documented. Leaders are role models who perform a communicative role in organizations, just as managers may communicate the importance (or not) of working safely (Kelloway et al, 2005), they may, through their actions, communicate the importance of health-enhancing activities. There are data suggesting that leaders who engage in regular programs of exercise are rated higher on standardized measures of leadership style (McDowell-Larson, Kearney & Campbell, 2002).

6. How do leaders contribute to employee well-being in the workplace?

Leaders influence the health of their employees or the employee well-being because of their organizational position and power (leaders create the organizational conditions that lead to a host of well-being and health related outcomes) and because of the behavior of leaders toward individuals or leadership style exerts an influence on employee well-being related outcomes. Kelloway et al (2005) drew the parallel with traditional occupational health and safety analysis in suggesting that leaders are a root cause of employee health outcomes. Leaders are suggested to have a direct impact on the most common job stressors (i.e, workload and pace, roles stress, career concerns, work schedules, interpersonal relations, job content and control; Sauter, Murphy & Hurrell, 1990). This suggestion has received at least initial empirical support (Skogstad et al, 2007). In doing so, supervisors make a direct contribution to individual well-being, by creating the conditions that either promote, enhance or detract from employee positive health-related employee behavior in the workplace. In commenting on their experiences with leadership development programs, Kelloway and Barling (2000) note that all participants, regardless of group composition, unanimously identify exactly the same two distinct sets of behaviors, one constituting good leadership and the other poor leadership; suggesting that these behavioral sets are intuitive and generalisable.
The set of good leadership behaviors are those comprising the style called “transformational leadership” (Avolio, 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1990; 1994). In contrast, Kelloway et al (2005) suggested that the set of poor leadership behaviors may be classified as one of two types: passive and abusive. Passive leaders may lack appropriate and/or social skills and thus avoid engaging in any leadership behavior at all. Abusive leaders, may be abusive, aggressive, violent or punitive. Of particular importance is the fact that this tripartite characterization of leadership behaviors (i.e, transformational, passive and abusive) parallels styles of personal interaction in other contexts (e.g., positive, withdrawal and angry behaviors in marital interaction; MacEwen, barling & Kelloway, 1992).

7. The set of good leadership behaviors and the leadership style

Transformational leadership has been defined as superior leadership that occurs when leaders “broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group (Bass, 1985: 21). Empirical data largely support the effectiveness of such behaviors. For example, leaders use of transformational leadership behaviors is associated with subordinates satisfaction (Hater & Bass, 1988; Koh, Steers & Terborg, 1995), commitment to the organization (Barling, Weber & Kelloway, 1996; Bycio, Hacket & Allen, 1995; Kohn et al, 1995), trust in management (Barling et al, 1996), and organizational citizenship behaviors (Kohn et al, 1995). Laboratory-based experimental investigations show that transformational leadership styles result in higher task performance (e.g, Howell & Frost, 1989; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996). Field studies also support the performance impact of transformational leadership. In longitudinal studies, for example, Howell & Avolio (1993) linked transformational leadership to unit financial performance. Transformational leaders go beyond exchange relationships and motivate others to achieve more that they thought was possible (Bass, 1998). Shamir, House and Arthur (1993: 578) notes that “transformational leadership gives meaningfulness to work by infusing work…with moral propose and commitment”.

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Transformational leaders implicitly and explicitly tell followers what is important in the workplace, about their work and about themselves (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; White & Mitchell, 1979). In doing so, transformational leaders create a sense of meaning which in turn may translate into enhanced well-being among followers.

8. The set of poor leadership behaviors and the leadership style

Although the foregoing discussion focused on the notion of good leadership, we also recognize that failing to enact that, or refusing to engage in the most basic of leadership behaviors, may also be a source of stress for individuals. We term this lack of enacted good leadership, passive leadership (Kelloway, Mullen & Francis, 2006). We define passive leadership as comprising elements from both the laissez-faire and management-by-exception (passive) articulated in the theory of transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Leaders who use the laissez-faire style avoid decision making and the responsibilities associated with their position (Bass, 1985; Hater & Bass, 1988). Leaders engaging in the management by exception (passive) style do not intervene until problems are either brought to their attention or become serious enough to demand action (Bass, 1985). The leader who fails to provide feedback or who fails to stand up for employees (Neuman & Baron, 2005; Skogstad et al, 2007) is displaying passive leadership. Not surprisingly, effective leadership is generally considered to be ineffective. For instance, Howell and Avolio (1993) reported that passive management by exception is negatively related to business unit performance and laissez-faire leadership is generally accounted to be the least effective style (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Frischer and Laarson (2000) found that leaders “lack of initiative is negatively related to subordinates” satisfaction and efficiency. Kelloway et al (2006) that there were both conceptual and empirical grounds on which to suggest that passive leadership is (a) distinct from and (b) has negative effects beyond those attributable to a lack of transformational leadership skills. Bass (1985) distinguished “active” and “passive” leadership as separate higher-order factors underlying his leadership measure.
Researchers have since investigated this distinction, often combining Bass and Avolio`s (1990) management by exception-passive and laissez-faire dimensions into a single higher order “passive” leadership dimension (e.g. Bycio et al, 1995; Den Hartog, et al., 1997). Garman, Davis-Lenane and Corrigan (2003) found that management by exception (passive) is negatively correlated with transformational, but positively correlated with laissez-faire leadership. In the same study, active and passive management by exception emerged as independent constructs, thereby furthering the empirical support for the distinction between active and passive leadership. It is generally accepted that passive leadership correlates negatively, and transformational leadership positively, with numerous organizational outcomes (Den Hartog, et al., 1997; Howell and Avolio, 1993). However, until recently it was unclear whether the deleterious effects of passive leadership were attributable to a lack of more positive leadership behaviors or whether passive leadership in and of itself constituted a destructive form of leadership. Indeed, few studies specifically examined the impact of passive leadership on organizational outcomes. Rather, the existing research has focused on the positive organizational impact of more active forms of leadership. Recent research has begun to change this emphasis, documenting the destructive impact that passive leadership has on individual and organizational outcomes (Kelloway et al, 2006; Skogstad et al, 2007). Skogstad et al (2007) empirically tested the suggestion made by Kelloway et al (2005) that passive leadership may be a root cause of workplace stress. Consistent with this suggestion Skogstad et al (2007) found that laissez-faire leadership by one’s supervisor led to the experience of conflicts with co-workers and role stress (i.e, conflict and ambiguity). In turn, role stress and conflict predicted the experience of bullying and psychological distrust. As the authors note, their data are consistent with the view that laissez-faire or passive leadership is not a neutral form of leadership but, rather, is a destructive leadership style that impairs individual well-being. Furthermore, passive leadership can be identified by particular leadership behaviors, such as avoidance or withdrawal. That is, passive leadership is not merely the absence of leadership behavior (be it transformational or otherwise), rather the behaviors expressed by passive leadership are observable and quantifiable. A great deal of research attention has focused on issues related to aggressive and violent behaviors in the workplace (Kelloway, Barling & Hurrell, 2006).
Variously termed “workplace harassment” (Rospenda, 2002), “emotional abuse” (Keashly, 1998, 2001), “bullying” (Rayner & Cooper, 2006), or simply workplace aggression (Schat & Kelloway, 2005) such behaviors have deleterious consequences for both individuals and organizations (Schat & Kelloway, 2005). Abusive leadership occurs when individuals in a formal leadership role engage in aggressive or punitive behaviors toward their employees (Tepper, 2000). Ashforth (1997) has suggested that such behaviors constitute “petty tyranny” in organizations. While the incidence of physical violence from supervisors is extremely low (LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002) acts of non-physical aggression from supervisors accounted for 20% of aggressive behaviors reported by unionized respondents compared to members of the public who accounted for 38% of aggressive behavior. The available data suggest that those exposed to abusive supervision are more likely to be distressed, dissatisfied and to leave their jobs (Zellars, Tepper & Duffy, 2002). Abusive supervision is associated with a leader’s reliance of an authoritarian leadership style (Aryee et al, 2007) suggesting that such behaviors may be a frequent occurrence in the lives of employees. LeBlanc & Kelloway (2002) provided evidence that the effects of aggression varied with the source of the aggression. In particular, the effects of public aggression/violence on outcomes were indirect, being mediated by fear of future violence (Rogers & Kelloway, 2001).

9. Conclusion

While some constructs in the organizational sciences are relatively abstract and disconnected from reality, leadership and well-being are clearly linked to the everyday work and life experiences of all organizational members. Although there is little doubt that leaders have a pervasive influence on the well-being of employees, there is no doubt that the set of good leadership behaviors, like the transformational leadership style, create a sense of meaning which in turn may translate into enhanced well-being among followers. Leadership might be seen as an “attribution” or an “inferred state” and well-being might be seen as a “state of being”. Leadership and well-being are organizational events associated to the everyday work and life experiences and the effect of that events depends on perceptions. In terms of the definition of a workplace as comprising physical safety, the psychological environment and healthy lifestyle practices, the available data consistently suggest that organizational leaders affect employee experience of job stress, job safety and engagement in healthy styles behaviors.
Thus, this is an obvious area where the concerns and agendas for managers and leaders are closely aligned with those of scholars and researchers. That is, the basic questions associated with leadership and well-being that a manager or leader might raise should be of clear interest and relevance to researchers. And likewise, the questions and hypotheses that might be developed from a research program are likely to be of clear and immediate interest to those in organizations. Clearly, then the concept of well-being in the workplace should be elevated to the same degree of importance to organizational scientists as the more commonly concepts of leadership, motivation and attitudes. In fact, these actions demonstrate that employees well-being is worthy of investment and commitment from managers, and that the challenges of improving the employees work experience are important.

10. References


