TRANSFERRING THE FULL RANGE OF LEADERSHIP MODEL INTO THE DIGITAL AGE

Impact of remote leadership on work engagement: A randomized field experiment

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Introduction

Digitally-mediated communication and remote leadership have become an indispensable component of today's working world (Kahai, Fjermestad, Zhang, & Avolio, 2007).

Knowledge gap. The question arises how leaders can lead effectively, despite remote conditions: to what extent are leaders able to influence their employees when relying on technology-mediated communication (Driskell, Radtke, & Salas, 2003) and to what extent they predict transformational and transactional leadership work efficacy (Neufeld, Wan, & Fang, 2010)?

News value. Differentiation between transactional contingent reward and management-by-exception leadership. Simultaneous investigation of all active leadership behavior defined in the full range of leadership model (Bass & Avolio, 1990) in a digital setting.

Method

In a randomized field experiment we investigated the differential effects of digitally mediated transformational, transactional contingent reward, and management-by-exception leadership on work engagement of employees ($N = 131$) using video vignettes to create realistic and standardized leadership scenarios (annual speeches).

Hypotheses for work engagement.

- (1) transformational leadership > contingent reward
- (2) transformational leadership > management-by-exception
- (3) contingent reward > management-by-exception active

Findings

ANCOVA with work experience as covariate ($F_{(2,124)} = 17.328, p < .001, \eta^2 = .218$).

- (1) Planned comparisons revealed that work engagement was significantly higher in transformational leadership compared to contingent reward ($p < .001, r = .462$), supporting hypothesis 1.
- (2) Contrary to hypothesis 2, there was no significant difference between transformational leadership and management-by-exception ($p = .163$).
- (3) Contrary to hypothesis 3, work engagement was significantly lower in contingent reward compared to management-by-exception ($p < .001, r = .336$).

Discussion. In line with previous field studies, transformational leadership relates positively to work engagement (Ghadi, Fernando, & Caputi, 2013; Zhu, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2009). Participants in the management-by-exception condition showed unexpectedly high values in work engagement. A possible explanation might be the role definition of leadership in digital context and motivation might arise under two conditions: first, the leader has confidence in the employees' abilities and second, provides support and acts as supporting contact person in critical situations. These considerations are in line with the concept of shared leadership (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014).

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