

Perceived Leadership, Core Job Characteristics, and Work Motivation

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Abstract. Previous studies found a direct influence of the five core job characteristics, i.e. variety, identity, significance, autonomy and feedback, on employees' involvement in their work. We present the results of an investigation in the Romanian work context that focused on a potential determinant of these core job characteristics, i.e. managers' leadership style, as perceived by the employees in their department. We test the hypothesis that perceived leadership style influences employee core job dimensions, which function as a mediator of the effect of the former on work motivation. The study investigated and compared the three leadership styles described by the Full Range Leadership Theory, namely transformational, transactional and laissez-faire, and examined their relationships with overall job perceptions and with work motivation on a sample of 210 Romanian employees from companies located in the Iasi County. We used structural equation modeling to examine the statistical fit of the model including the hypothesized relationships. Results highlight several significant associations between these variables and support the mediation effect of core job characteristics in the relationship between leadership and motivation. Specifically, they suggest that positive job perceptions on their core characteristics exert a positive and significant effect on work motivation. Moreover, transformational leadership was found to have both a direct influence on work motivation and an effect mediated by enhancements in job perceptions. The laissez-faire style of leadership emerged as having a detrimental effect on job perceptions, while transactional was found to have only a direct positive effect on work motivation, with no influence on job perceptions. Overall, this pattern of findings complements the previous results on the benefits of transformational leadership, by highlighting its influence in shaping employees' perceptions of their jobs, while also highlighting the specificities in the influence of transactional and laissez-faire leadership styles on work motivation.

Keywords: work motivation; perceived job characteristics; transformational leadership; transactional leadership; laissez-faire leadership.

Introduction

Ensuring optimal levels of work motivation in personnel is of paramount importance for any company since motivated employees have higher job performance and tend to engage to a higher degree in positive organizational behaviors (Marsden & Richardson, 1994; Huddleston & Good, 1999). Consequently, identifying and addressing the factors that could enhance work motivation is a very important area of research in management literature. One of the most widely used models of work motivation in such studies is the Job Characteristics Theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), focused on employees' internal or intrinsic motivation. According to the model, employees are more motivated by jobs that possess five key characteristics, namely variety, identity, significance, autonomy and feedback. The purpose of the present research is to test the relationships between employees' perceptions of their jobs on these dimensions and their work motivation in a Romanian sample. Moreover, we aim to investigate the influence of managers' leadership style, as perceived by the employees in their department, on these perceptions of job characteristics, as well as on their work motivation.

Previous research indicated that jobs regarded as possessing the five characteristics delineated by the Job Characteristics theory are more intrinsically motivating. Specifically, employees are more motivated to perform to the best of their abilities in jobs that have high variety (i.e. that require the use of several skills and talents), identity (i.e. that allow employees to perform a task from beginning to a visible end, thus completing a whole, identifiable piece of work), significance (i.e. that has a high and meaningful impact on beneficiaries),

autonomy (i.e. that offers employee control and latitude of decision in performing their tasks), and feedback (i.e. that offers employees information about their performance and recognition in this regard) (Fried & Ferris, 1987; Tierney, 2002). Empirical studies suggest that there is a unidimensional structure of these characteristics (Loher, Noe, Moeller, & Fitzgerald, 1985), which allows for a single index combining them to be used in research on this topic (e.g. Judge, Bono, & Locke, 2000; Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006). Overall, job design interventions aiming to increase intrinsic work motivation should ensure that employees perceive their work as meaningful and generally valuable, that they feel responsible for their work results and that they receive proper information concerning the results of their work efforts (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Parker, Wall, & Cordery, 2001).

Since leaders play a crucial role in the activities of any organization, their leadership style is essential for organizational development and success (Deal & Kennedy, 2000). One of the areas of the influence of leadership style employees' attitudes and behaviors, which comprises, among others, their work involvement and perceptions of their job tasks. One of the dominant classifications of leadership styles is the one introduced by the Full Range Leadership Theory (Bass & Avolio, 1995, 1997), describing three types of leadership. The transformational leadership, previously conceptualized by Burns (1978), focuses on the leader behaviors that have the potential of influencing followers' ways of thinking about the situations they encounter in their jobs. Transformational leadership changes employees' beliefs and approaches by inspiring them to adhere to a motivating vision about the future success of the group and by instilling ideals and values that would motivate them to commit to this vision and consequently invest higher levels of effort in their job tasks. They have the necessary charisma to convince followers, are inspirational in their discourse about the future and intellectually stimulating by provoking employees to develop their own ideas and by challenging the current assumptions, and also assume the role of coaches for their employees, by attending to their needs and concerns (Bass & Avolio, 1997; Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006; Pieterse, Knippenberg, Schippers, & Stam, 2010).

Previous studies documented significant positive effects of transformational leadership on employee attitudes and performance. In what regards the latter, three meta-analyses of research on this topic indicated a strong and consistent influence of this leadership style on employee's performances on the job (Fuller et al., 1996; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). This result can be interpreted as an effect of the influences that the behaviors of transformational managers on their staff members' attitudes and perspectives concerning their job and the organization as a whole. For instance, transformational leadership was found to increase employees' perceptions of fairness within the company and their trust in managers (Pillai, Schreishem, & Williams, 1999), their job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behaviors (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990), as well as their self-efficacy (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). Group-level effects were also found, as employees with managers adopting transformational leadership are characterized by stronger group potency and effectiveness (Sosik, Avolio, & Kahai, 1997).

Other studies suggest that transformational leadership can also enhance employees' perceptions of core job characteristics, by changing the way employees think about their work. Their consideration of employees' needs may increase perceptions of autonomy; they give regular feedback to their followers, thus enhancing this job characteristic; they try to inspire employees by defining their work outcomes in a more ethically significant manner, thus increasing the perceived meaningfulness of their work; they also motivate employees to seek new perspectives and ways to perform their tasks, which may enhance their perceptions of skill variety (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006).

The second style of management described by the Full Range Leadership Theory, namely transactional, is limited to an exchange relationship between manager and his employees, in which the latter receive rewards or are administered sanctions depending on their performance on the job (Bass & Avolio, 1997; Avolio et al., 1999). Once the leader sets performance targets and communicates employees the system of rewards allocated on the basis of their future efforts, his management involvement restricts to the monitoring of group performance and the administration of incentives. More specifically, the manager characterized by this style of leadership distributes rewards contingent on performance, corrects employees when necessary (the active side of "management by exception"), and sanctions employees who fail to obtain the previously set level of performance (the passive side of "management by exception"). Due to its exclusive focus on the outcome of employees' efforts (i.e. job performance), while ignoring the internal processes that these efforts depend on

(i.e. work motivation), transactional leadership has a weaker positive influence on job behaviors, at least when compared to the transformational style (Lowe et al., 1996; Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Thirdly, the laissez-faire style of leadership refers to a passive manner of managing or even to “non-leadership” (Judge & Piccolo, 2004), in which leaders refrain from their responsibilities, including supervising employees and allocating rewards and sanctions and fail to address important organizational tasks and events by postponing indefinitely problems and decisions (Bass & Avolio, 1997). Moreover, laissez-faire leaders show low interest in the concerns and needs of their employees. Consequently, it is associated with lower levels of employee performance on the job (Yukl, 2002).

Methodology

Aims and hypothesis

The present study aims to investigate the relationships between the three leadership styles discussed above, employees' perceptions of their jobs on the five characteristics described by the Job Characteristics theory, and work motivation. On the basis of previous findings, we expect the transformational leadership style to have a positive effect on work motivation, but also that this influence would be mediated by job perceptions. In this line of argument, the increases in work performance and motivation brought by transformational leadership that has been documented by past investigations (e.g. Judge & Piccolo, 2004) would be largely due to improvements in the ways employees perceive the key characteristics of their jobs. The mediation role of job perceptions in the relationship between transformational leadership and motivation was first highlighted by Piccolo and Colquitt (2006) in a US sample. Besides testing this pattern of findings in the Romanian organizational culture, the present study further extends previous research by taking into account the other two leadership styles described by the Full Range Leadership Theory (Bass & Avolio, 1995, 1997). Specifically, we expect the transactional style to have a lower positive influence on employees' job perceptions, due to its focus on the external motivators of work effort, i.e. rewards and sanctions, while ignoring the intrinsic motivational processes that the transactional leadership targets. This hypothesis is in line with previous results that suggest that transactional leadership has a more ambiguous relationship with work performance (Lowe et al., 1996). In what regards laissez-faire leadership, we expect the behaviors composing this style to negatively affect employees' job perceptions, due to leaders' avoidance of managing tasks needed in order to ensure employees' commitment to their work (i.e. goal setting, coaching, inspiring followers). This would also lead to lower job performance, consistent with previous findings concerning the effects of laissez-faire leadership (Yukl, 2002).

Participants and procedure

We distributed 235 surveys to employees in 11 companies located in Iasi County, Romania. The surveys were anonymous, and confidentiality was ensured. 210 surveys were returned. In the final sample, 106 employees (50.5%) were men; the mean age was 37 years. According to the criterion of the work sector, the distribution of participants was: 63 (30%) in the banking sector, 60 (28.6%) in the sales sector, 47 (22.4%) in the industrial sector, 23 (11%) in private consulting, 17 (8.1%) in the private school sector.

Instruments

Work motivation was measured using a six-item measure developed by Baldwin (1990) on the basis of the work motivation scale first validated by Patchen (1970) and used in other research in this area (e.g. Crewson, 1997). Respondents are required to rate their agreement with items describing certain levels of work involvement and effort intensity (e.g. “I put forth my best effort to get my job done regardless of the difficulties”) on a 5-point response scale with 1 = “Strongly Disagree” and 5 = “Strongly Agree”. Higher overall scores indicate higher levels of work motivation.

Perceived job characteristics were measured with the revised form of the Job Diagnostic Survey (Idaszak & Drasgow, 1987), which addresses each of the five dimensions described by the Job Characteristics Theory

(Hackman & Oldham, 1976): variety (e.g. “The job requires me to use a number of complex high-level skills”), identity (e.g. “The job provides me the chance to completely finish the pieces of work I begin”), significance (e.g. “The job is very significant and important in the broader scheme of things”), autonomy (e.g. “The job gives me considerable opportunity for independence and freedom in how I do the work”) and feedback (e.g. “After I finish a job, I know whether I have performed well”). Respondents are required to rate their agreement with each item on a 5-point response scale with 1 = “Strongly Disagree” and 5 = “Strongly Agree”. In line with previous studies that used a single index of job perceptions, called a motivating potential score (Judge, Bono, & Locke, 2000; Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006), we combined the 10 items into an overall score. Higher overall scores indicate strong perceptions of one’s job as possessing these motivating characteristics.

Perceived leadership was measured by using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire Form-5X Short (MLQ-5X) developed by Bass and Avolio (1995, 1997). The scale includes 36 items requiring respondents to rate their agreement with each item on a 5-point response scale with 1 = “Strongly Disagree” and 5 = “Strongly Agree”. Sets of four items were used to measure each of the five key characteristics of transformational leadership: Idealized Influence – attributes (e.g. “My supervisor goes beyond self-interest for the good of the group”), Idealized Influence – behaviors (e.g. “My supervisor considers the moral and ethical consequences of decisions”), inspirational motivation (e.g. “My supervisor considers the moral and ethical consequences of decisions”), intellectual stimulation (e.g. “My supervisor reexamines critical assumptions to question whether they are appropriate”), and individual consideration (e.g. “My supervisor helps others to develop their strengths”). Similarly, sets of four items addressed the dimensions of transactional leadership: Contingent Reward (e.g. “My supervisor makes clear what one can expect to receive when performance goals are achieved”), management-by-exception (active) (e.g. “My supervisor keeps track of all mistakes”), and management-by-exception (passive) (e.g. “My supervisor waits for things to go wrong before taking action”). Four items measured laissez-faire leadership (e.g. “My supervisor avoids making decisions”).

Results

The mean inter-item correlations of the scales, used in order to examine their internal consistency, are presented in Table 1. They indicate that all the instruments have satisfactory internal consistency. Also, Table 1 presents the Pearson correlations between variables, which generally correspond to our general hypothesis: the transformational and the laissez-faire leadership styles are significantly related to job perceptions and to work motivation, the former in a positive manner and the latter negatively. We also found a significant negative relationship between these two leadership styles. Job perceptions emerged as positively related to work motivation, while the transactional leadership style correlated significantly only with work motivation.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, internal consistency and Pearson correlations between variables

	Mean inter-item correlation	2	3	4	5
1. Transformational leadership	.22	.02	-.41**	.50**	.36**
2. Transactional leadership	.30	1.0	-.12	.11	.20**
3. Laissez-faire leadership	.45		1.0	-.50**	-.27**
4. Job perceptions	.29			1.0	.42**
5. Work motivation	.37				1.0

** p < .01

In the second stage of analysis, we used structural equation modeling in order to examine whether the model that we hypothesized has an adequate fit to the data. The structural equation approach not only considers simultaneously all the relationships that we presumed between the variables investigated but also tests the directional influence between them. Thus, they provide a more comprehensive test of our hypothesis that states causal effects between leadership styles, job perceptions and work motivation. The model also included the significant correlation that we found between the transactional and the laissez-faire leadership styles.

Results revealed the following indexes of model fit: $\chi^2_5 = 18.67$ $p < .001$; CFI = .92, AGFI = .89, GFI = .96; RMSEA = .11 (with a 90% confidence interval .06 – .17). The values of the AGFI and RMSEA parameters indicate a poor fit of the model to the data, according to the guidelines concerning the accepted values and intervals of these fit indexes (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Byrne, 2001). Thus, we analyzed the set of results in order to identify the changes in the model that could increase its statistical fit. We found that the effect of transactional leadership on job perceptions is not statistically significant ($b = .06$; $p = .25$), and consequently we eliminated this relationship from the model. The modification indexes also indicated that there are two additions that would significantly increase model fit, namely the direct effects of the transformational and of the transactional leadership styles on work motivation, besides their effects mediated by job perceptions. We re-specified the model by making these three changes and re-analyzed its model fit. The indexes resulted in this second phase were: $\chi^2_4 = 4.91$, $p = .29 > .05$; CFI = .99, AGFI = .96, GFI = .99; RMSEA = .033 (with a 90% confidence interval .00 – .11). They indicate a very good level of fit of this model to the data, all indexes corresponding to the recommended standards and intervals. All estimated parameters in the causal model (i.e. regression weights) were significant at the .05 level, and there were no additional modifications that would increase model fit.

The final model with the standardized regression weights that describe the strength of the influences between variables is presented in Figure 1.

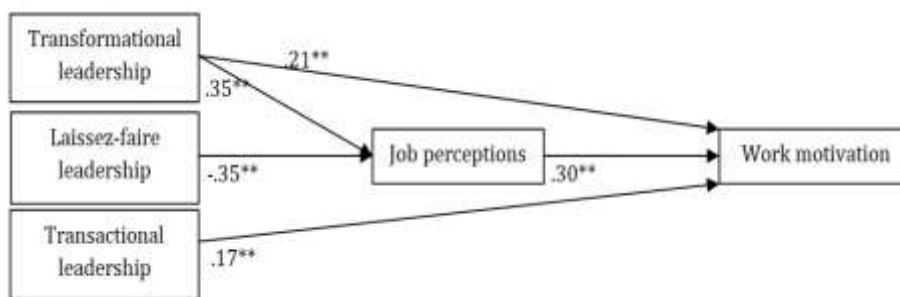


Figure 1. The standardized regression weights of the effects in the final model
 ** $p < 0.001$

Discussion

Past research showed that managers' leadership style has important effects on employee performance and work-related perceptions and attitudes (Deal & Kennedy, 2000), and that job perceptions on the five key characteristics delineated by the Job Characteristics theory also influence work motivation and results (Parker, Wall, & Cordery, 2001). While most of the previously documented motivational effects of leadership style pertained to the transformational leadership, our research extended this focus by analyzing the influences of the other two styles described by the Full Range Leadership Theory (Bass & Avolio, 1995, 1997), namely the transactional and the laissez-faire leadership. To this end, we tested a model of causal relationships in which these leadership styles, as perceived by the employees, were hypothesized to influence job perceptions on their key characteristics, and consequently work motivation.

The pattern of results that emerged in the study provides at least partial support for this general assumption. Specifically, we found that the transformational and the laissez-faire leadership styles significantly influence job perceptions, and the latter exerts a positive and significant effect on work motivation. This confirms our hypothesis that job perceptions mediate the effect of leadership styles on motivation, albeit only in the case of two out of the three leadership styles investigated. The positive effect of transformational leadership on job perceptions is in line with previous results on the benefits of this management style in what regards the changes that it generates in the ways employees approach and think about their work (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; Sosik, Avolio, & Kahai, 1997; Piccolo, & Colquitt, 2006; Pillai, Schreishem, & Williams, 1999). Their behaviors aim to inspire an empowering and positive vision in their employees concerning the job and their future, enhancing perceptions of meaningfulness and skill variety, while their attentive and constructive focus

on the concerns and work behaviors of their followers also foster employees' appraisals of autonomy and feedback.

Our results also indicate that the effect of transformational leadership on work motivation is not limited to the one mediated by job perceptions, which suggests that there are parallel routes of influence of this style of leadership. For instance, as transformational leaders regularly emphasize the mission and values of their organization to their employees, this may motivate the latter to invest higher degrees of effort in pursuing the collective objectives of the company (Bass, 1985). Moreover, this style of leadership is more successful in convincing followers to identify with the organizations and to pursue group-level goals instead of personal interests, which further enhances their motivation to perform in their jobs to the best of their abilities (Podsakoff et al., 1990).

The negative influence of the laissez-faire leadership style on job perceptions and, consequently, on work motivation confirms the inactive and inefficient nature of this pattern of leadership behaviors. Since these managers ignore the concerns and even work activities of their employees, the latter does not receive the expected input in guiding their efforts on the job and in defining the overall values and objectives of the organization (Bass & Avolio, 1997; Yukl, 2002). Moreover, this style of refraining from any coaching and motivational efforts from the manager send out a negative message about the significance of the work, which, coupled with the lack of feedback and encouragement, significantly affects employees' perceptions of their jobs and diminish their work motivation.

We also found a direct effect of the transactional leadership style on work motivation, but not one that is mediated by enhancements in job perceptions. This suggests that the dominant focus on employees' performance on the job, which characterizes this style, has the intended effect on their work motivation, at least in the Romanian organizational culture. The administration of rewards and sanctions contingent on performance, although it has no influence on the ways employees perceive their work, still has a significant incentivization effect on employees' involvement in their work tasks, albeit weaker than in the case of transformational leadership, in line with the results of previous studies in this area (Lowe et al., 1996; Bass & Riggio, 2006).

There are several practical implications of our results. Firstly, they reconfirm the benefits of transformational leadership and suggest that managers should adopt, to the best of their capabilities, the behaviors comprising this management style and that companies may benefit from training their managers in performing these behaviors. Secondly, managers mostly characterized by the transactional style should take into account the possibility that their employees would exhibit even higher levels of work effort if they would complement their management practices by including at least part of the behaviors characterizing transformational leaders. Finally, our results indicate that managers should avoid laissez-faire leadership, as it has a direct negative influence on employees' perceptions of their jobs and further on their work motivation. Managers' detachment from their leadership duties and lack of involvement in current tasks of the team sends a toxic message to employees about the significance of their own job and about them as members of the organization.

Regarding the limitations of this study, it should be noted that the effects of certain important variables, such as the work sector, were not controlled. Further studies could examine the relationships between leadership styles, job perceptions and work motivation in specific economic sectors, as it can be expected that they would vary according to the nature of the specific work tasks within the organization. Another limitation of the current study is that we did not directly assess leadership styles; instead, employees' perceptions of their managers were used as a proxy. Finally, the research was performed in a transversal and correlational fashion, which cannot fully attest to the causal relationships included in the model.

In conclusion, our findings suggest that transactional leadership positively influences work motivation, both directly and through its effect of enhancing employees' perceptions of their jobs on their core characteristics. Oppositely, the laissez-faire style has a detrimental influence on job perceptions and consequently on work motivation, while transactional leadership is positively related to the latter, with no significant effect on job perceptions. Further research should investigate in more detail the job characteristics that are more greatly

influenced by these leadership styles, as well as the specific leadership behaviors that are most important for the perceptions of these characteristics and for enhancing work motivation.

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