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Leader authenticity as a mediator between leader emotional labor and wellbeing

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Abstract

Theory and evidence suggest leader emotional labor has an important influence on leader and follower wellbeing. However, we lack empirical research to understand how leader's use of emotional labor strategy may or may not explain significant variance in wellbeing. To advance knowledge in this emerging line of research, we examine how leader emotional labor impact leader authenticity from both leaders' and followers' perspectives, which, in turn, impact the extent of leader and follower wellbeing. We look at emotional exhaustion, recovery and leader-member relationship as key wellbeing outcomes.

Introduction

Emotional Labor (EL), the idea of regulating emotions as part of the work role, was conceptualized in the early 1980s by sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983). Three decades after its introduction as a concept, emotional labor became a focal area of study in the organizational behavior (OB) and organizational psychology (OP) in recent years (Grandey & Melloy, 2017). Although key researchers across a variety of theoretical approaches have reasoned that leaders use emotional labor, almost all empirical research on emotional labor have focused on service workers. Humphrey et al. (2016) listed the benefits of merging leadership research and emotions research, and they stated that emotional labor in leaders as one of the areas that needs additional study. Thus, this study contributes to current literature by examining leader emotional labor relate to leader authenticity and consequently, to leader and follower wellbeing. We introduce leader emotional labor has three basic categories – surface acting, deep acting and genuine emotions. Each type of leader emotional labor is proposed to have different effects on leader authenticity. In turn, leader authenticity is expected to associate to emotional exhaustion, recovery and leader-member exchange relationship.

Literature review

Leader emotional labor

Leaders perform emotional labor whenever they display emotions in an attempt to influence self- and other- perceptions (Humphrey et al., 2016, Humphrey, 2012). In this research, three basic categories of leader EL are examined. First, leaders may engage in surface acting (SA) which involves changing their outward emotional expressions but do not attempt to feel the emotions that they are displaying (Grandey & Melloy, 2017; Hochschild, 1983). Second, deep acting (DA) involves leaders' efforts to modify inner feelings to match emotional display rules (Grandey & Melloy, 2017; Humphrey et al., 2015; Hochschild, 1983). Genuine emotional display is the third category of leader emotional display (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Diefendorff, Croyle, & Gosserand, 2005; Humphrey et al., 2015). Ashforth and Humphrey argued that people's spontaneous and natural emotional reactions to workplace events are often appropriate and thus can be considered a form of EL.

Leader authenticity

Authenticity implies that “*one acts in accord with the true self, expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings*” (Harter, 2002, p. 382). Authenticity in leadership describes leaders with great capacity to effectively process information about themselves (their thoughts, emotions, goals, and beliefs), an ability to adjust their behavior in leadership in accordance with their own self (Černe, Jaklič & Škerlavaj, 2013).

Černe et al. (2013) states that researchers should employ different perceptions concerning leader authenticity in their research. Many researchers assume that leader authenticity does not involve others' perception of a leader, but only an individual's own actions in accordance with an individual's true nature (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Thus, leader authenticity must be self-reported. Sparrowe (2005) opposes this and reasons the need to assess leader authenticity from multiple sources. Leaders cannot measure themselves to be authentic but can be assessed by people in contact with them (Goffee & Jones, 2005; Ilies et al., 2005). Therefore, two perspectives exist about perception of leader authenticity. In this study, we measure leader authenticity from both leaders' and followers' perspectives.

Leader emotional labor and leader authenticity

The fact that leaders may use emotional labor strategies to display emotions that they are not actually feeling raises issues about leader authenticity (Gardner et al., 2009; Grandey et al., 2012; Humphrey, 2012; Hunt et al., 2008). In this study, we examine the consequences of the three forms of EL noted above to leader felt authenticity and follower perceived leader authenticity. Hypotheses state that each type of EL is posited to have different effects on leader authenticity.

Leaders feel more authentic when they use genuine emotions, with the next best results for deep acting. Avolio and Gardner (2005), and Ashforth and Tomiuk (2000) have shown the use of deep acting may affirm and reinforce the sense of authenticity. In contrast, surface acting is negatively related to leader felt authenticity because the leader is portraying an emotion rather than exhibiting true feelings (Gabrel et al., 2015). Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) were among the first management scholars to argue that surface acting can cause a loss of one's sense of authentic self. Brotheridge and Lee (2002) reported that engaging in deep as opposed to surface acting was significantly and positively related to actor feelings of authenticity. Nonetheless, deep acting requires the manipulation of inner feelings in violation of naturally emerging emotions, leader felt authenticity is posited to be below the level of experienced authenticity following genuine emotional displays (Gardner et al., 2009).

Furthermore, researchers have argued followers have similar reactions. Leaders who engage in genuine emotional displays are more likely to garner favourable impressions from followers and high levels of perceived leader authenticity and that deep acting produces the next best perceptions (Gardner et al., 2009; Humphrey et al., 2015). Leaders who engage in surface acting receive the lowest perceived leader authenticity (Gardner et al., 2009; Humphrey et al., 2008). When leaders experience and display spontaneous emotions, such natural emotions are likely to be viewed by their followers as genuine and appropriate, resulting in high perceived leader authenticity. Previous studies confirm surface acting is generally ineffective in generating desired audience impressions (Beal et al., 2006; Bono & Vey, 2007; Shulei & Miner, 2006). When leaders engage in surface acting, followers are more likely to view them as "acting," resulting in unwanted impressions that the leader is inauthentic and manipulative (Thomas et al., 2017).

Leader authenticity and wellbeing

Evidence from different studies has showed the fundamental role of leader authenticity in wellbeing not only for leaders' own wellbeing, but also their followers' wellbeing (Rahimnia & Sharifirad, 2015; Hülshager & Schewe 2011; Ilies et al., 2005). We posit that leaders and followers experience feelings of authenticity arising from leader emotional labor, which, in turn, relate to their overall sense of wellbeing. The literatures on emotional labor, leader authenticity and wellbeing suggest three components of wellbeing that merit attention: emotional exhaustion, recovery and leader-member exchange relationship (LMX) (Fisk & Friesen, 2012; Hülshager et al., 2012; Sonnentag et al., 2017).

Leader authenticity and emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is the basic individual stress dimension of the broader construct of job burnout. Emotional exhaustion '*refers to feelings of being overextended and depleted of one's emotional and physical resources*' (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001, p. 399).

In a test of a conservation of resources model of emotional labor, Brotheridge and Lee (2002) found that the relationships between emotional labor and emotional exhaustion were mediated by feelings of authenticity. Genuine emotional display and deep acting showed a significant positive relationship with authenticity, and surface acting demonstrated significant negative relationship. Authenticity, in turn, was strongly and negatively related to emotional exhaustion (Grandey et al., 2012; Gardner et al., 2009). The implication for this study is that when leaders feel inauthentic due to extensive reliance on emotional labor, they are likely to feel fatigue, frustration, and tension because they simply do not want to give, and potentially misrepresent their emotions, as they have in the past.

Leader authenticity also affects their followers' emotional exhaustion. Laschinger et al. (2012, 2013) found the authentic behaviour of nursing leaders was important to nurses' perceptions of conditions in their work environments, and ultimately contributed to lower levels of emotional exhaustion. Similarly, Laschinger and Fida (2014) stated that the more nurses perceive their supervisor as authentic the less likely they are to experience emotional exhaustion. Thus, we expect leader emotional labor is posited to have different effects on perceived authenticity of leader, and in turn, affect follower emotional exhaustion. Those followers perceiving their leaders are authentic are less likely to show emotional exhaustion.

Leader authenticity and recovery

Recovery has been considered as a process through which depleted resources are replenished, as opposing to the process of the building up of stress (Sonnentag et al., 2017; Sonnentag & Zijlstra, 2015). Sonnentag and Fritz (2007) recognized four specific recovery experiences that have the potential to restore affective and regulatory resources: psychological detachment, relaxation, mastery experiences, and control. According to their study, any activities that provide recovery experiences to individuals facilitate recovery. In this research, we focus on divisionary recovery strategy: psychological detachment and relaxation. Psychological detachment refers to being physically and mentally away from work or switching off from work-related demands (Sonnentag & Zijlstra, 2015). Relaxation is a state of low activation and enhanced positive affect that facilitates recovery because it limits the prolonged activation of the functional system and counteracts the effects of negative emotional states (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007).

Sonnentag and Fritz (2007) demonstrated stress recovery on a day-to-day basis particularly refers to internal resources such as energy or positive mood, and recovery implies that resources are replenished, and resource-loss cycles are halted. Therefore, we expect leader emotional labor produce the level of leader authenticity, and in turn, leader authenticity as an internal resource positively relates to psychological detachment and relaxation. This implies that leader authenticity may have two effects on recovery. One is individuals experience authenticity could disengage oneself mentally from work. The other is leader authenticity could result in positive affective states which should replenish an individual's affective resources and achieve relaxation recovery experience.

Grandey et al. (2012) argued low authenticity exacerbates the resource depletion from emotional regulation at work, but high authenticity replenishes the self, buffering against depletion. In their study, they found that within units that had authenticity, employees felt safe being authentic, they could take a break from monitoring and regulating themselves (Grandey et al., 2012; Vohs et al., 2005). Given this reasoning and evidence that such recovery opportunities reduce self-regulatory depletion, authenticity in workplace is expected to replenish resources from surface acting during leader-follower interactions (Grandey, Papp & Brice, 2015; McCance et al., 2013; Grandey et al., 2012). Furthermore, studies identified leader authenticity fosters positive affective states among employees (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Ilies et al., 2005; Gardner et al., 2005; Avolio et al., 2004). Thus, we expect that leader authenticity will build relaxation states throughout the workforce and consequently, followers obtain relaxation recovery experience.

Leader authenticity and leader-member exchange

Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory describes leadership as a process, focusing on the relationship between a leader and a follower (Gooty et al., 2012). LMX research categorized the relationship leaders could have with their followers into two groups: high-quality and low-quality exchanges. Whether or not a relationship may be classified as high- or low-quality depends upon the level of confidence each party has in the other, their level of shared respect, and their perceptions of mutual obligation (Fisk & Friesen, 2012). Avolio et al. (2004) demonstrated that an intimate, trusting and cooperative leader-member relationship is not possible without authenticity. Leader authenticity illustrates high moral standards, integrity, and honesty, their favorable reputation fosters positive expectations among followers, enhancing their levels of trust and perception of relationship quality (Lopez & Rice, 2006).

One of outcome arising from leader emotional labor is the level of leader felt authenticity and follower perceived leader authenticity (Gardner et al., 2009; Humphrey et al., 2015). The ability to display true emotions and to be oneself is characteristic of high-quality interpersonal relationships, whereas inauthenticity is more commonly found in low-quality relationships (Clark & Brissette, 2000). Leaders have been encouraged to use deep acting strategy and display genuine emotions to appear authentic to followers (Gardner et al., 2009); yet, this be important to individuals with high-quality leader relationships who expect more “real” interactions (Fisk & Friesen, 2012). Leader authenticity produces high levels of trust as followers come to see the leader as a genuine and reliable person (Avolio et al., 2004). Surface acting and its associated inauthenticity and suppression may result in low quality relational connections between leaders and followers (Semmer, Messerli & Tschann, 2016). Indeed, inauthentic display of positive emotions has been found to reduce receiver satisfaction (Grandey et al., 2005), perceived interaction quality (Diefendorff et al., 2006). Furthermore, theory and research describe leaders and followers in high quality exchange relationships as being psychologically close, suggesting that a leader will be less likely to fake or suppress emotions when interacting with individuals he or she shares a positive connection with (Fisk & Friesen, 2012; Glasø & Einarsen, 2008; Clark & Finkel, 2004). Together, high level of Leader felt authenticity and high-level of follower perceived leader authenticity could be anticipated to high-quality LMX relationship.

Method

The snowballing technique was used, that is, individuals known to the research team were asked to forward the study invitation via email to people they know. Two hundred and two matched leader-follower dyads (44% response rate) who met the eligibility criterion participated in a questionnaire survey. The final research ages of 20 and 68 years. Ninety-six percent of the sample was British. Eighty-two percent of respondents worked full-time, with 41.6% of the sample having a senior manager position and 22.5% of the sample having a line manager position. On average, they worked 41.56 hours per week (SD=9.15). The length of the average leader-follower relationship was 53 months (range: 1 months to 600 months).

Preliminary Findings

The reliability of all scales was satisfactory, with α scores ranging from .74 to .93. A measurement model of all multi-item measures was subjected to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in order to assess the convergent and discriminant validity of all constructs. We compared the fit of different models, and our hypothesized model produced a good fit to the data: $\chi^2(1516,202) = 2179.888$, RMSEA = 0.047, CFI = 0.912.

Further analysis will be conducted to test the hypothesized mediating effects of leader authenticity in couple months. We will use bootstrap analyses, generating 10,000 samples and bias-corrected confidence intervals to assess the significance of the indirect effects. Hayes (2013) recommended that researchers report the 95% CI for the significance of mean indirect effect from the bootstrap results. If the CI does not include zero, then the indirect effect is considered statistically significant. Therefore, after the structural model is examined through the Mplus program, the bootstrap procedure will be used to test whether or not the indirect effects are statistically significant. We hypothesized that leader emotional labor will be related to leader and follower wellbeing through leader authenticity.

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