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What kind of relationships do you have with those who report to you and with your own boss? In turn, what relationship does your boss have with his/her own boss? We study these relationships in conjunction with empowering leadership to suggest that the better these relationships are, the better position leaders are in to positively influence their employees and anyone else who depends on them for resources. We find that empowering leadership behaviors can indeed be effective in helping employees feel empowered, and subsequently exhibit lower levels of cynicism and deviance, especially if the leader has a good relationship with his/her own boss (i.e., upward exchange).

Employee Cynicism and Time Theft

Employee cynicism is “an evaluative judgment that stems from an individual’s employment experiences” (Cole, Bruch, & Vogel 2006: 463). It is characterized by frustration, disillusionment, and distrust of upper management (Abraham 2000). However, cynical employees are not necessarily “negative people” (Johnson & O’Leary-Kelly 2003: 640); instead, cynical attitudes are shaped by experiences at work. As cynicism entails frustration and other negative emotions, it is likely to result in “time theft,” a non-aggressive form of deviant behavior (Robinson & Bennett 1995). Employees who engage in time theft spend at least a portion of their work hours for nonproductive activities. This may include taking longer breaks than allowed, surfing the internet for personal reasons, or daydreaming. Estimates of time theft in U.S. organizations range from one hour per day (the industry standard, which is typically calculated into salaries) up to two hours per day (Henle et al. 2010; Martin et al. 2010).

Empowering Leadership

Empowering leadership is a promising strategy for leaders to positively shape employee attitudes and behaviors, including cynicism and time theft (Huy 2002; Oreg & Berson 2011). Empowering leaders share power with their subordinates, giving them decision-making authority. They also express confidence in employees’ abilities to perform their jobs autonomously (Spreitzer 1995). Empowerment includes four leader behaviors: highlighting the significance of employee work, allowing employee participation in decision-making, emphasizing employee strengths, and
removing bureaucratic constraints (Ahearne et al. 2005; Kirkman & Rosen 1999; Leach, Wall, & Jackson 2003). In turn, employees feel psychologically empowered if they perceive meaning, competence, autonomy, and impact in their work (Conger & Kanungo 1988; Kirkman & Rosen 1999; Spreitzer 1995).

Based on prior research, we predict empowering leadership is associated with cynicism directly and indirectly via individual psychological empowerment. That is, we expect empowering leader behaviors to motivate employees to want to “repay” those benefits, increasing employee motivation and trust in the leader, as well as employee perception of their own state of psychological empowerment. In turn, we expect cynicism is less likely to develop among psychologically empowered employees, because they adjust their attitudes and workplace behaviors to “pay for” the positive benefits received. The result of empowering leaders should be less employee cynicism leading to higher employee productivity.

**Leader-to-Leader Exchange (LLX)**

Leaders are also nested in relationships with their own bosses in a chain of convergent hierarchical structures, each level of which is likely to influence the next lower level (Graen, Dansereau, & Minami 1972). In that hierarchy, direct supervisors play the important role of “linking pin” in personally connecting with their subordinates, but also in connecting their subordinates to upper management (Graen, Cashman, Ginsburg, & Schieman 1977: 491). LLX (leader-to-leader exchange) is the quality of the relationship a leader holds with his/her own boss. Research suggests that leaders with high quality boss relationships have more emotional, attitudinal, and physical resources, bestowed as benefits to them by upper management. These resources enable leaders to fully, supportively empower their employees (Cashman et al. 1976); in other words, their empowering efforts are legitimized by the resources they have been given. Leaders with high quality upward relationships also have more positive experiences at work, which they may pass onto their own employees, thus increasing the success of their empowering behaviors (Herscovitch & Meyer 2002). When managers are freed from “watching their back” with their own boss, they are motivated to deliver on an empowering promise, compared to when they have a less secure relationship with upper management.

**Findings**

We sampled 161 employees reporting to 37 supervisors in a mid-sized R&D organization in the U.S. Mid-Atlantic region, who each completed 2 surveys approximately four months apart. The average age was 42.45 years for employees and 46.78 years for supervisors. The majority of the participants (82%) had a college degree. In addition, the supervisors had worked for the organization for an average of 14.52 years, and all had graduate degrees, which were necessitated by the scientific research nature of the work.
All of our predictions were supported, suggesting that empowering leadership is most effective in helping employees feel significantly more empowered if that leader has high-quality LLX (see Figure 1). Fortunately, we also found that empowering leaders can help reduce their employees’ cynicism and time theft through their empowering behaviors, even if they do not enjoy those high-quality relationships (LLX) with their bosses.

**What it Means**

These results are important to the real estate industry because they suggest that empowering leadership may be used by sales managers to increase salesperson psychological empowerment and to ease cynicism. However, sales managers and their bosses are also encouraged to strive to develop quality dyadic relationships, because the effects of these dyadic relationships may impact salespeople. Furthermore, we alert managers to the likelihood that salespeople may use time theft as a way to cope with their own cynical attitudes. Hence, it is important for managers to pay special attention to clues that salespeople are experiencing cynicism and find opportunities to reduce it.

In addition to empowering subordinates and fostering good LLX with their own bosses, managers might directly address cynicism (and therefore reduce likelihood of time theft) by meeting with salespeople to discuss their attitudes and experiences. If salespeople must perform new behaviors during a stressful or highly uncertain period of time (e.g., organizational change; Armenakis & Bedeian 1999), managers might be wise to initially encourage the new behaviors from less cynical employees, allowing them to serve as exemplars and encouragers to more cynical employees (Barsade 2002). By reducing employee cynicism through empowering leadership behaviors exhibited by a leader who also enjoys high-quality relationships with upper management, managers may ensure a happier and more productive workplace.

**Recommended Reading**

References


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Dr. Natalia M. Lorinkova’s (PhD – University of Maryland) research focuses on leadership and social capital issues (with an emphasis on dynamic and multi-level leadership processes and relational issues in organizations). She also examines non-traditional work arrangements such as virtual teams, teleworking and working from home. From a methodological perspective, Dr. Lorinkova is interested in growth modeling, multi-level modeling and meta-analytical techniques. Her research has appeared in leading academic journals such as *Academy of Management Journal, Personnel Psychology* and *Journal of Management*. Dr. Lorinkova is a member of the Academy of Management, Southern Management Association and SHRM (Society for Human Resource Management), and her work has received best paper awards and included in the best conference papers proceedings in a number of divisions. She serves as a

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