



LEADING FROM THE FRONTLINE

DEVELOPING LEADER IDENTITY AND LEADERSHIP SELF-EFFICACY AMONG FRONTLINE MANAGERS

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INTRODUCTION

Frontline managers are responsible for the supervision of non-managerial employees and overseeing day-to-day operations in general. They are often directly involved in employee recruitment, training, and performance management and are critical to implementing practices and innovations that enhance productivity (Ahmed, Shields, White, & Wilbert, 2010; Brewer, 2005; Kraut, Pedigo, McKenna, & Dunnette, 1989; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Risher, 2010). Frontline managers in the service industry are no exception, and should receive more attention as the service industry expands.

We therefore designed a research study based in a large organisation in the food service industry. Through this study, we sought to understand what factors relate to the important concepts of leader identity and leadership self-efficacy at the frontline. We first provide some background on these concepts, as well as a number of potential determinants. We then describe the methodology of our study, followed by the findings and their implications.

BACKGROUND

LEADER IDENTITY AND LEADERSHIP SELF-EFFICACY

Leader identity and leadership self-efficacy are still relatively underexplored concepts in management scholarship. However, the limited research that exists suggests that they are important for successful leadership. First, leader identity simply refers to the degree to which a person identifies himself or herself as a leader (Hiller, 2005). This is important because how one identifies oneself determines their actions and how they relate to others. Indeed, recent research supports the idea that a stronger leader identity promotes the behaviours needed to lead effectively (Day & Sin, 2011), justifying further exploration of this important concept among managers at the frontline.

We also propose that leadership self-efficacy is important for frontline managers. Paglis and Green (2002, p. 217) define this concept as:

a person's judgment that he or she can successfully exert leadership by setting a direction for the work group, building relationships with followers in order to gain their commitment to change goals, and working with them to overcome obstacles to change.

In short, leadership self-efficacy is a person's belief that he or she can lead. In general, self-efficacy regarding a particular behaviour is an important determinant of a person's effort and persistence in exhibiting that behaviour (Bandura, 1977). Of course, successful demonstration of any behaviour is only possible through effort and persistence, making self-efficacy a key concept in various domains, with leadership being no exception. In fact, research has shown leadership self-efficacy to be a significant determinant of leader effectiveness (Chemers, Watson, & May, 2000; Ng, Ang, & Chan, 2008). In this study, we were therefore interested in understanding potential determinants of leadership self-efficacy among frontline managers.

POTENTIAL DETERMINANTS OF LEADER IDENTITY AND LEADERSHIP SELF-EFFICACY

We explored a number of potential determinants of leader identity and leadership self-efficacy. First, we considered two individual traits: learning goal orientation and neuroticism. VandeWalle (1997, p. 1000) defines learning goal orientation as "a desire to develop the self by acquiring new skills, mastering new situations, and improving one's competence." We reasoned that managers with a high learning goal orientation would be dedicated to developing themselves as leaders (leader identity) and would likely exhibit high leadership self-efficacy as they developed their skills. In addition, we expected that neurotic managers would lack the stability necessary to develop leadership self-efficacy and would be less likely to identify themselves as leaders.

In addition, we expected that several work attitudes and perceptions would also impact leader identity and leadership self-efficacy. Specifically, the manager's perceptions around leader-member exchange, or the quality of the relationship that the person has with his or her own manager (Graen, 1995), is expected to impact self-efficacy and identity in the leadership domain. We similarly expected that the degree to which the person feels empowered by his or her manager would be particularly impactful, as would job engagement in general.

Finally, we were interested to see how gender, age, and length of experience in the current management position would relate to leader identity and leadership self-efficacy. Leadership scholars have observed differences in leadership styles between men and women (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Engen, 2003). Additionally, self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977) suggests that successes in leadership would help to drive leadership self-efficacy upward, making age and experience in management potentially interesting factors to examine.

METHODOLOGY

We gained access to 61 stores in a large organisation in the food service industry. Starting in November 2014, we opened our online survey to frontline (shift) managers. During three waves of data collection spanning approximately six months, we obtained completed surveys from 214 managers, of a possible 402 managers in the 61 stores, for a response rate of 53.2%. In return for filling out the approximately 10-20-minute online survey, managers were offered the opportunity to participate in a training program conducted by the Centre, which consisted of five short online modules and a half-day of face-to-face training. Participating managers were also entered into a draw to win one of two \$100 gift vouchers.

The survey asked managers about their self-perceptions, their perceptions of the workplace and their attitudes, and their personal characteristics such as personality and demographics. We used established scales to measure all variables except demographics. Specifically, leader identity was measured with a 4-item scale by Hiller (2005); leadership self-efficacy was measured with a 12-item scale by Paglis and Green (2002); learning goal orientation was measured with a 5-item scale by VandeWalle (1997); neuroticism was measured with a 3-item scale by Donnellan, Oswald, Baird, and Lucas (2006); LMX was measured with a 7-item scale by Scandura and Graen (1984); empowerment was measured with a 12-item scale by Ahearne, Matheiu, and Rapp (2005); and job engagement was measured with an 18-item scale by Rich, LePine, and Crawford (2010). We present our findings and their implications in the next section.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The study's findings are summarised in the table below. As expected, learning goal-oriented managers tended to exhibit a stronger leader identity and higher leadership self-efficacy. Further, and also as expected, neuroticism seemed to negatively impact these two outcomes. These findings suggest that organisations may maximise leader identity and leadership self-efficacy at the frontline in part through human resource management practices that identify and promote emotionally stable employees who exhibit a learning goal orientation. Another practical implication is to consider personality in job recruitment and selection. Emotionally stable individuals with high learning orientation, for example, could be identified through a mix of recruitment methods (e.g., interviews and behavioural observation).

Additionally, leader identity and leadership self-efficacy seemed to be higher when frontline managers perceived a better relationship (higher quality leader-member exchange) with their own managers, when they felt empowered by their managers, and when they were more engaged in their jobs in general. These findings have a number of implications. First, leaders at the middle and upper levels of the organisational hierarchy must foster high-quality relationships with managers at the frontline. Second, these relationships must also aim to empower frontline managers through activities such as delegation and the solicitation of ideas and opinions. Such managers may also promote and establish an environment where employees are highly empowered. Third, while organisational leaders must view and develop frontline managers as emerging leaders in the organisation, they must also simultaneously understand that frontline managers must be nurtured through job engagement as any other member of the organisation does. Finally, as organisations often rely on leadership development programs to increase performance, they may want consider developing a curriculum built around leader identity and leadership self-efficacy, given its importance.

Interestingly, while gender did not seem to relate to leader identity in this study, it did relate to leadership self-efficacy. On average, the 131 women who participated in the study (61% of the 214 participants) exhibited lower leader self-efficacy than the 83 men. While perhaps disappointing, this is not surprising, in light of the findings of prior research. This lower self-evaluation among women is not likely due to any difference in actual capability, but rather to societal perceptions about women in leadership roles and to women's tendency to evaluate themselves lower than men in general (Heilman, 2012). It is important to communicate such findings to both men and women, in order to draw attention to the biases that exist in people's perceptions. It is also important for organisational leaders to proactively develop, promote, and encourage emerging leaders based on objective criteria and to ensure that staffing and promotion, even on seemingly objective criteria, do not present bias in favour of one gender. The evidence suggests that women can be as effective—or indeed sometimes even more effective—than men in leadership roles (Eagly et al., 2003), so it is in the organisation's best interest to ensure that women managers do not experience any unnecessarily detrimental self-efficacy perceptions.

Finally, while age did not seem to relate to either of the outcomes of interest, the length of experience in management did have a positive influence on leadership self-efficacy among frontline leaders. Managers in the study were, on average, 23.7 years old, with relatively low variation among the participants (a standard deviation of 6.5 years), so our results are far from conclusive with respect to age. However, the participants had spent an average of 2 years (standard deviation = 2.1 years) in their current managerial positions. Consistent with self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977), the frontline managers generally exhibited higher leadership self-efficacy the longer they had been in their positions. Of course, actual experience is not the only way to build self-efficacy. It is important for organisational leaders to realise that self-efficacy can be built vicariously (i.e., by allowing people to see others) and through encouragement and training by others in the organisation. All of these methods could be employed in developing efficacious leaders at the frontline.

Summary of Findings

	Leader Identity	Leadership Self-Efficacy
Personality		
<i>Learning Goal Orientation</i>	Stronger for learning goal-oriented managers (.27 ^{**})	Higher for learning goal-oriented managers (.48 ^{**})
<i>Neuroticism</i>	Weaker for neurotic managers (-.16 [*])	Lower for neurotic managers (-.19 [*])
Work Attitudes and Perceptions		
<i>Leader-Member Exchange</i>	Stronger when managers perceive good relationships with their own managers (.32 ^{**})	Higher when managers perceive good relationships with their own managers (.42 ^{**})
<i>Empowerment</i>	Stronger when managers feel empowered by their own managers (.34 ^{**})	Higher when managers feel empowered by their own managers (.46 ^{**})
<i>Job Engagement</i>	Stronger when managers feel engaged in their jobs (.44 ^{**})	Higher when managers feel engaged in their jobs (.58 ^{**})
Demographic Characteristics		
<i>Gender</i>	No significant relationship	Lower for women (-.14 [*])
<i>Age</i>	No significant relationship	No significant relationship
<i>Length of Experience in the Current Management Position</i>	No significant relationship	Higher with experience (.14 [†])

Note: Numbers in parentheses denote zero-order correlations. Double asterisks (**), single asterisks (*), and daggers (†) denote statistical significance at the $p < .01$, $.05$, and $.10$ levels, respectively.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that several factors are important to leader identity and leadership self-efficacy at the frontline. While the cross-sectional nature of this study cannot unambiguously assert causality, the statistical significance of the correlations suggests important relationships exist in practice that are consistent with theory and prior related research. Above, we have noted a number of practical implications of the results of this study, but we conclude by emphasising the importance of extending this research to further understand the factors that drive effective leadership at the frontline.

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