

Employees' Reactions to Imperfect Managerial Behaviors

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Abstract

The results from a followership theory and attribution theory based study about employees' reactions to imperfect managerial behaviors are reported. Employees were found to react in pro-organizational ways and more so in a short-time perspective than in a longer time perspective. The predictions of attribution theory were by and large confirmed. Theoretical and practical implications of the results are discussed.

Keywords: Managerial behaviors, managerial shortcomings, employee reactions

1. Introduction

In this article we question the (often implicit) assumption that employees react positively to good managerial behaviors and negatively when managers have shortcomings. We take a followership perspective (Bligh, 2011; Chaleff, 2003; Kellerman, 2008; Kelly, 1988, 1992; Riggio, Chaleff & Lipman-Blumen, 2008; Shamir, Pillai, Bligh, & Uhl-Bien, 2007) and assume employees in such situations to have a wider repertoire of responses. Their reactions, thus, matter; employees may reinforce as well as reduce the effects of the managerial shortcomings.

We furthermore assume that attribution processes are triggered (LePine & van Dyne, 2001:69) when employees find their managers exert imperfect behaviors, that is, the employees ask themselves *why* the managers behaved in that particular way. We build on and extend LePine and van Dyne's model about peer responses to coworkers' low performance to our context of reactions to managerial behaviors and assume that employees' reactions are explained by their attributions of the managerial behaviors.

2. Research questions

Our research questions, thus, are:

1. How do employees react to their managers' imperfect behaviors?
2. How are employees' reactions to managers' imperfect behaviors explained by the employees' attributions of these behaviors?

We focus on managers' behaviors rather than on managers as persons and thus assume individual managers to exert a variety of behaviors ranging from excellent to inferior. Our focus, furthermore, is day-to-day quite trivial managerial imperfect behaviors. While big failures may have disastrous organizational consequences, the imperfections focused on here have more emerging consequences. These effects may in aggregate, however, harm the organizations substantially. The study of such reactions is therefore important.

Our research questions are interesting in the emerging followership literature. (Bligh, 2011; Chaleff, 2003; Kellerman, 2008; Kelly, 1988, 1992; Riggio, Chaleff & Lipman-Blumen, 2008; Shamir, Pillai, Bligh, & Uhl-Bien, 2007). Rather than considering followers' reactions as more or less automatic responses to what their managers do, subordinates in these approaches are considered to be important subjects with a repertoire of behaviors. With our study we also extend attribution theory into the context of the relationships between managers and employees.

Our research questions are interesting, from a practical standpoint, by providing knowledge on how organization members—other than managers—can contribute to improved organizational functioning.

We conducted a qualitative explorative study among 5 employees from various organizations. We identified 12 cases of less-than-perfect managerial behaviors and examined the respondents' reactions to these behaviors.

3. Theory



There is an emerging literature on followership (Bligh, 2011; Chaleff, 2003; Kellerman, 2008; Kelly, 1988, 1992; Riggio, Chaleff & Lipman-Blumen, 2008; Shamir, Pillai, Bligh, & Uhl-Bien, 2007). Shamir (2007) gives an excellent overview of followers' role in leadership processes from passive recipients to active co-producers. In the traditional view, Shamir argues, followers are recipients of leader influence. The next steps are followers as moderators of leader impact (situational leadership), followers as substitutes for leadership, leadership as a follower-driven phenomenon, shared leadership, and Shamir's reversal of the lenses perspective in which he examines followers' impact on leadership.

While proactive behaviors in organizations (Crant, 2000) is an integrated dimension in followership, less is known about reactive behaviors among employees. Typically, Shamir (2007) considers followers as recipients, moderators (such as in situational leadership theories), substitutes, and constructors of leadership, he discusses shared leadership and followers as co-producers of leadership. He does not, however, address the question of repertoire of employee responses examined in this article. Kellerman (2008) analyses 7 types and 19 persons exerting bad leadership. She thus take a person rather than behavior focus. Similarly, Erickson et al. (2007) examined the prevalence of bad leaders, behaviors that caused a leader to be perceived as bad, the impact of bad leaders on the employee and the organization, whether these bad leaders had always been bad, and what happened to the bad leader. In contrast to these studies, we took a behavior rather than person focus, assuming that managers exert a range of various behaviors.

Attribution theory is about individuals' explanations of behaviors and events. The main variables in attribution theory are locus of causality, stability, and controllability (Kelly 1976; Weiner et al., 1971; Weiner, 1995) that is whether the behaviors or events are explained by the actor or situation, whether the behaviors are permanent or vary over time, and whether the actors can influence the outcome of the behaviors.

For relationships in organizations, attribution theory has been used for analyzing how superordinates support their employees (Drach-Zahavy & Somech, 2006). LePine and van Dyne (2001) developed an attribution theory based model of peer responses to coworkers' low performance, see table 1. Employees' reactions to managerial behaviors do not seem to have been examined, however. For this purpose, we extend LePine and van Dyne's model and substitute coworkers' low performance with imperfect managerial behaviors.

Table 1 - LePine and van Dyne’s attributional model for coworkers’ low performance and helping behaviors

		Internal locus of control		External locus of control
Stability	Low	Motivate Affect: Anger toward low performer Cognition: High expectancy for change Behavior: Pep talks/threats	Train Affect: Empathy toward low performer Cognition: High expectancy for change Behavior: Teach/train	 Compensate
	High	Reject Affect: Anger toward low performer Cognition: Low expectancy for change Behavior: Complain/criticize		
		High	Low	
		Controllability		

Note: The behaviors listed in the motivate and reject cells are not exhaustive but are, rather, illustrative examples.

Motivating is based on anger and implies a demand for better efforts (LePine & van Dyne, 2001:74).

Training is based on empathy and typically uses instruction and directs the low-performing peer to make better efforts (LePine & van Dyne, 2001:73-74).

Rejecting is based on anger and, since the potential for change is considered to be low, the colleagues are predicted to try to eliminate the low performer from the group. They may complain to the supervisor and engage in “psychological games” to make the low performer feel uncomfortable (LePine & van Dyne (2001:73). Compensating is based on empathy. Colleagues are predicted to perform some of the low performer’s task elements by expanding their own roles in order to include the peer in the group (LePine & van Dyne (2001:73).

Building on this model, employees’ reactions to imperfect managerial behaviors will be explained using the main variables in attribution theory, locus of control, stability and controllability (Kelly 1967; Weiner et al., 1971; Weiner, 1995). For example, when an employee explains a managerial behavior by the characteristics of the manager in a situation where the manager can influence the outcome, the employee is predicted to react with anger and to complain and criticize. In this situation the locus of control is internal to the manager, and stability and controllability are high. On the other hand, when the managerial behavior is attributed to external causes, the employee is predicted to react with empathy and to make compensational efforts for the managerial behavior.

4. Method

Personal interviews with 12 persons, 7 women and 5 men were conducted. The participants were operating core employees in manufacturing and the service industry; none of them had any managerial responsibility. Based on an interview guide, the interviewees’ were asked to give examples of imperfect managerial behaviors and to tell how they reacted to these behaviors. Our study was limited to the employees’ perceptions and behaviors. We thus, and according to attribution theory on which this study was founded, based our analysis on the interviewees’ considerations of the imperfect managerial behavior and their perceptions of the managers’ cognitions and behaviors. We, thus, did not examine other actors’ perceptions of the events. Neither did we study the outcomes of the various reactions.

We acknowledge that this self-report approach might have given some biases regarding the employees' behaviors; high legitimate behaviors are likely to have been over-reported while behaviors with low legitimacy correspondingly might have been under-represented. These self-reports enabled us, on the other hand, to examine our second question thoroughly; it is exactly employees' perceptions that are interesting here, irrespective of whether or not they correspond with how the managers conceive the actual situations.

5. Results

Case 1: Alex: A managers' social engagement

Alex found his manager's social engagement to be a challenge. Rather than based on competence and motivation, many of Alex' coworkers were recruited as a consequence of the manager's social engagement. Alex found them to be shirking rather than making good efforts at the workplace. In spite of the resulting inferior organization's efficiency and complaints from customers and other groups in the organization, the manager did not take any action such as setting standards for these employees.

Alex' first reaction to this situation was to talk with his manager to request the manager modify his social engagement and to be more challenging towards the employees. This did not work. Alex observed no changes and he then reacted with passivity, and after some time, he quit.

In the first phase, Alex perceived the behavior to be internally explained, to have low stability and high controllability. As predicted in the model, Alex then requested the manager do something about the situation. Alex subsequently perceived the stability to now be high, and the controllability to still be high. The model then predicts rejection, and Alex rejected by giving in and quitting.

Case 2: Alex: Incorrect working instructions

Alex' manager several times gave him incorrect work instructions in writing. In one case, the manager discovered his mistake, but complained that Alex had not discovered it. In another case, Alex ignored the manager and did the job according to his best judgment. Even if Alex was annoyed by the managers' incorrect work instructions, he was empathetic that such imperfections might occur in the manager's hectic and stressful working conditions. The manager, in at least one situation, seemed to realize that he was the one to be blamed while not unequivocally admitting it.

In this case, the locus of control is partly internal and partly external; Alex to some degree attributed the manager's behaviors to his busy days. The stability was high and the controllability was low. Both in the internal and the external locus of control cases, compensation is predicted. Alex' way of compensating was to do his job according to his best judgment, he thus ignored and deviated from the manager's instructions.

Case 3: Alex: Condescending attitudes and behaviors

Alex found it challenging that his manager talked to him in a condescending way. He was also annoyed by the manager's general lack of praise to his subordinates.

During a time period when Alex was a representative for the employees, he tried to make the manager give more appreciation to his subordinates and refrain from his condescending attitudes. Subsequent to such talks, the manager actually did modify his behaviors for a while. A short time later, however, the condescending attitudes and behaviors reappeared. Alex then gave in and complained about the managerial behaviors.

The locus of control is internal, the stability is first low and then high, and the controllability is high. According to the model's predictions, Alex first motivated and then rejected by complaining.

Case 4: Laila: Inappropriate employment

A colleague of Laila was given a regular employment contract in spite of inappropriate behaviors in the preceding probationary period. The colleague had obviously misused drugs and was often absent from work.

Laila was given the responsibility to document the colleague's absences during the probationary period, and she was frustrated that these reports were not followed up by managerial action. According to Laila, the permanent employment relationship should not have been established. Laila found it gave a bad impression of the organization as well as of the manager. The manager, however, ignored Laila's warnings.

The locus of control was internal, the stability was low, and the controllability was high. As predicted by the model, Laila tried to motivate the manager.

Case 5: Laila: Equivocal leadership

A recently employed colleague of Laila had parked three motor vehicles in the parking lots without permission. Laila was provoked, and first spoke both with the offending colleague and with the manager. When not noticing any change, she approached the manager, arguing very directly that the manager would lose respect if he did not take any action. The manager hesitated, but after approximately two weeks, the cars were removed from the parking lots. Laila generalized this event and argued that a manager must be able to make unpopular decisions.

In the attribution model, the locus of control was internal, the stability was low, and the controllability was high. Laila's reaction was according to the model by motivating her manager.

Case 6: Laila: Comments about future employment possibilities

At a company social event, Laila's manager made some comments about future employment possibilities for some specifically-named persons in a merger process. The manager gave the impression that he was able to influence who was safe and unsafe to be permanently employed respectively. Two persons, one of them Laila, were especially embarrassed by these comments and approached the manager with their concerns. The manager agreed and regretted what had been said.

The locus of control was internal, the stability was low, and the controllability was low. According to LePine and van Dyne's model, the model used here, Laila's reaction was to teach and train which, in this case, succeeded.

Case 7: Jonas: Dishonest information

Jonas discovered that his manager had not told him the truth about an abroad position that Jonas would like to have. The manager had apparently made some investigations and Jonas was told that he had no chance to have the position. Jonas, however, did some investigation for himself and found that the manager had withheld information; Jonas actually might have had the job. Some months later, information about another position that Jonas aspired to have was manipulated, too. After some time, it was revealed to Jonas that the manager's motivation was his desire to keep Jonas in the manager's department. To some extent the manager admitted his deceiving behaviors. Jonas, however, requested a transfer from that department to another one in the same company.

The locus of control is internal, the stability is high, and the controllability is high. According to the attribution model, the reaction is rejection, and Jonas' quitting was in accordance with the prediction.

Case 8: Jonas: Lacking empathy about employees' individual limits

Jonas found his manager to challenge some of his subordinates beyond reasonable limits, for example, by forcing them to stand in front of others on a scene even if they found this to be very uncomfortable. Jonas made a straightforward statement about this to his manager, requesting he be more sensitive to the individual limits among the employees.

The locus of control was internal, the stability was low, and the controllability was low. The LePine and van Dyne model in this case predicts training, and that is what Jonas actually did.

Case 9: Jonas: Inappropriate impression management

In a telephone conference, Jonas' manager presented himself as more knowledgeable than he really was. Jonas, on the other hand, was not consulted on an issue even when he was the one who really knew how to answer the customer's questions. When Jonas subsequently talked with his manager about this event, they both found the situation to be ridiculous and they agreed that the others depend on Jonas' knowledge in the field. Jonas felt quite comfortable the outcome of the conversation.

The locus of control was internal, the stability was low and the controllability was high. According to LePine and van Dyne's model, Jonas motivated the manager.

Case 10: John: Rejected initiatives

John's manager rejected initiatives such as bringing order to an office where old and useless materials had been stored for many years. John reacted by suggesting fewer initiatives to the manager. John admitted that this was somewhat selfish of him. Employees before him, however, had experienced difficulties because they were not able to adjust themselves to the manager's rejections of their initiatives.

The locus of control was internal, the stability was high and the controllability was high. According to the model, John reacted with rejection, however in a passive way rather than actively with complaints and critics.

Case 11: Anette: Sexual harassment

Anette's manager had for a long time made sexually-oriented comments towards her. Up until a special event, Anette had tried to ignore these remarks. After an incident in which some external representatives were present and her manager had made comments about Anette's way of walking and her body, Anette gave the manager a very clear message to stop the harassment.

The locus of control was internal, the stability was high, and the controllability was high. The predicted reaction in the attribution model is to reject. Anette's first method of rejection was to ignore and then to speak out in a very clear way.

Case 12: Anette: Cowardice

Some of Anette's colleagues exploited a situation in which there is a low degree of expectation of obedience of rules and instructions. One colleague especially has a very relaxed attitude towards internal rules. Anette had for a long time been frustrated, but after an incident when this colleague did not deliver a company-owned car back in time, Anette was very clear in her message to the manager.

The locus of control is internal, the stability is high and the controllability is high. Anette reacted first by ignoring and then by active complaints and critics.

Summary of the cases

The 12 cases represent a wide range of day-to-day imperfect managerial behaviors. In a majority of the cases (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 10), the interviewees considered the managerial behaviors to be questionable for the *organizations'* interests rather than for their own interests. In the remaining three cases (7, 9, and 12), the reported managerial behaviors were manager-subordinate related. In case 7, the manager pursued the interests of his department, rather than those of the entire organization. In cases 9 and 12 the managers used power at the expense of the employees, but did not gain any organizational interest. None of the reported cases, thus, were about managerial behaviors that promoted the organizations' interests at the expense of the reporting employee.

We are aware that this outcome may be due to how the questions in our interview guide were worded; they may have made the respondents focus more on behaviors that are organizationally questionable than on dubious behaviors in a manager-employee perspective. The above reported composition of imperfect managerial behaviors, however, does differ from most theoretical and common sense approaches in which the alignment of employees' interests with those of the organization is considered to be a managerial responsibility. Our results, on the other hand, suggest that, similar to managerial perceptions of employees that do not behave in accordance with the interests of the organizations, employees may consider some of their managers' behaviors to differ from these interests.

Not only did the employees hold perceptions that seemed to be in accordance with the organizations' interests. In cases 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, and 12 they reported that their behaviors were pro-organizational. In cases 1 and 3 there is a difference between short-term and long-term reactions. While the employees' initially reacted in pro-organizational ways by motivating their managers, they subsequently adopted rejecting behaviors such as by quitting the organization in case 1 and by complaining in case 3. We thus observe that an optimistic judgment of managers' ability and willingness to modify their behaviors seems to be replaced by a more cynical why-care attitude. In the remaining cases, the employees' reactions were either potentially harmful for the organization or organization department (case 7) or for the organization (case 10). Importantly, the above conclusions are based on employees' self-reports and on a small sample. Furthermore, whether the employees' behaviors actually *did* bring about the intended organizationally functional outcomes was not examined.

Employee behaviors may have outcomes that are in accordance with—as well as discrepant to—the interests of the organization. What can be said from this limited material, however, is that the employee *claimed* to further the interests of their organization, but less so in the long-term perspective than in a short-term perspective.

Employees reactions and their relationships to LePine and van Dyne’s attribution model are presented in table 2.

Table 2 – Employees reactions in the LePine and van Dyne model

		Internal locus of control		External locus of control	
		Controllability			
		High	Low		
Stability	Low	Motivate: 1a – Alex: A manager’s social engagement 3a – Alex: Condescending attitudes and behaviors 4 - Laila: Inappropriate employment 5 - Laila: Equivocal leadership 6 - Laila: Comments about future employment possibilities 9 - Jonas: Inappropriate impression management	Train: 6 - Laila: Comments about future employment possibilities 8 - Jonas: Lacking empathy about employees’ individual limits	Compensate: (2) Alex: Incorrect working instructions	
	High	Reject: 1b - Alex: A manager’s social engagement 3b - Alex: Condescending attitudes and behaviors 7 - Jonas: Dishonest information 10 - John: Rejected initiatives 11 - Anette: Sexual harassment 12 - Anette: Cowardice	Compensate: (2) - Alex: Incorrect working instructions		

The letters a and b indicate short-term and long-term perspectives, respectively. Parentheses indicate that a case is partly in one cell and partly in another cell.

Only for case 2, and in this case only partly, the locus of control was reported to be external. This may be due to how the questions in our interview guide were formulated. The questions may have made the informants focus on cases with internal locus of control. The results for case 2 demonstrate that Alex compensated for the imperfect managerial behavior by doing his job according to his best judgment rather than complying with his manager.

The table furthermore demonstrates that employee reactions to managerial imperfections are in accordance with the predictions of LePine’s and van Dyne’s model. Depending on stability and controllability, employees motivated, trained, rejected and compensated, respectively. The above described difference between short- and long-term perspective in cases 1 and 3 is explained by the stability dimension; when in the first case stability was considered to be low, that is, when there is potential for change, employees motivate. When finding that such a potential did not exist, they rejected. While rejecting in the LePine and van Dyne model typically is to make attempts to eliminate the offending colleague (LePine & van Dyne, 2001:73), the rejecting behaviors in our study were to quit/withdraw (case 1), to complain (case 3) and to take fewer initiatives (case 10). While understandable from an individual perspective, these reactions represent substantial organizational challenges; the negative effects of managers’ flawed behaviors are reinforced rather than reduced by such employee reactions.

We furthermore notice that no attempts to eliminate the manager were reported.

6. Discussion

With our study, we have combined followership and attribution theory in examining employee reactions to imperfect managerial behaviors. We found that employees in a majority of cases reported managerial behaviors that were perceived to not pursue the interests of the organization. The employee reactions, furthermore, are reported to be mainly pro-organizational. There are some differences between short-term and long-term reactions and these differences are crucial; the employees changed their reactions from motivating their managers to rejecting which in one case meant quitting.

The predictions of attribution theory are mainly confirmed in this study; even if the distribution of cases is somewhat skewed, employees motivated, trained, rejected, and compensated according to LePine and van Dyne's (2001) model on which this study was based. Compared with their context of peers' reactions to low performers, new categories of behaviors emerged: In two cases rejecting meant quitting. And in the case of compensation, the employee *ignored* and *deviated from* the managerial directive by replacing his manager's judgment with his own. This is an example of positive or constructive deviance (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003, 2004; Warren, 2003).

The limitations of this study is the small sample and the reliance on self-reports. It should therefore be conducted again with a larger sample and with more unobtrusive measures in order to confirm or modify our results. Our study, furthermore, did not address the question of relative frequency of managerial imperfections; what are the proportions of constructive and imperfect managerial behaviors respectively?

Our finding that employees do consider their managers to deviate from organizational interests, and that they, to a substantial degree, behave in pro-organizationally ways makes us assume that they represent a potential for improving such behaviors. In the above framework, this means to make employees refrain from rejecting and instead motivate, train, and compensate. Such pro-organizational employee behaviors may be perceived as incurring costs (in a broad meaning of the word) or to represent a risk or threat for the employee, such as when an employee has an alternative job possibility and therefore may quit or when John in case 10 fears difficulties if he takes more initiatives.

In other cases pro-organizational behaviors may be with or without minor costs or risks for the employee. We suggest that in such cases there is a substantial potential for better functioning organizations by teaching and training employees to motivate, train and compensate instead of rejecting.

When costs or risks are involved in employees' pro-organizational behaviors, accordingly, the implications of our study is that managers should adjust their behaviors to the interest of the organization. In John's case, for example, the manager should encourage rather than discourage employees' initiatives. When no or minor costs or risks for the employees are involved, on the other hand, the implications of our study is that employees should be taught and trained to behave in more pro-organizational ways.

The efforts to teach and train employees to react in pro-organizational ways, accordingly, should be made towards behaviors in the first category. In such cases, the employees share the interests with the organization, but they do not necessarily have the knowledge and abilities to exert pro-organizational behaviors. They are therefore appropriate targets for teaching and training how to act in such ways.

Another question is who should teach and train these employees. In contrast to other organizational knowledge and abilities, managers are not the persons to teach and train these issues. This is true for support, but even more so for the even more crucial behaviors of compensational efforts, such as Alex' ignoring and deviance from managerial directives in case 2.

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