How Followers and Leaders can Make a Difference: Evidence from U.S. Federal Agencies*

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Recent leadership studies point to the importance of taking followership into account when assessing leadership effectiveness. Accordingly, we develop and test a theoretical framework in which to examine the moderating role of participative versus directive leadership in the relationship between followership behaviors and job satisfaction. Focusing on data drawn from the 2012 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), the study finds strong evidence that the effects of followership behaviors on job satisfaction were contingent on leadership styles. More importantly, the results showed that followers who actively engage in their work and demonstrate a high level of independent critical thinking derived greater job satisfaction where participative leadership was higher. By contrast, the role of participative leadership may be perceived as less effective when knowledge sharing and cooperation among employees already exists. This study offers insights into how leaders should interact with followers, and identifies the situations in which a particular leadership style can have positive consequences for employee job satisfaction.

[Key Words] Leadership style, followership behavior, job satisfaction

Introduction

Since the turn of the 21st century, during a period in which both public and private sector organizations have gone through many transformations in order to flatten their hierarchies while placing greater expectations on followers, the ability of leaders to lead has come into question (Blanchard et al., 2009: Howell and

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Costley, 2006; Kelley, 1992). Accordingly, an increasing number of scholars and practitioners have suggested that followership must be taken into account in order to offer a more substantial explanation of leader–follower relations as well as to provide an accurate assessment of leadership impact (Baker, 2007; Chaleff, 1995; Howell and Shamir, 2005; Kelley, 1992).

Despite the increasing conceptual support for the potential utility of followership in, for example, satisfying psychological needs for comradeship, service to others, and self determination (Flower, 1991), research on followership as an important element in the leadership process is lacking. To address the gap in the literature, this study proposes and tests a theoretical framework in which different leadership styles moderate the relationships between followership behaviors, as conceptualized by Kelley (1992) and Gilbert and Hyde (1988), and job satisfaction, to enable a better understanding of leader–follower dynamics. Path-goal theory suggests that different types of leader behavior have a different kind of impact on followers' motivation. Although many different leadership styles could have been tested whether it moderate the relationship between followership and job satisfaction, we examine the role of participative, and directive leadership behaviors.

Through the testing of the theoretical framework, we hope to make two important contributions to the literature. Firstly, this theoretical framework helps paint a more accurate picture of the followership–satisfaction linkage by exploring the moderating role of directive and participative leadership styles. In the literature prior to this study, leadership has mainly been treated as a direct antecedent to employee outcomes, and rarely as an integral part of coaching and developing followership behaviors. Secondly, our model allows us to examine and compare the relative influence of directive and participative leadership on follower job satisfaction. Despite the popular belief that participative leadership is more effective than directive leadership, empirical studies have shown mixed findings (Somech and Wenderow, 2006). By integrating followership behaviors into leadership research as recommended in the literature (Kelley, 1992; Küpers, 2007), we hope to offer more detailed explanations of follower–leader relations in organizations.