

Unconscious Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

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Introduction

Transformational leadership emphasizes passionate, dynamic, and inspiring communication by a leader with followers (Bass 1990). Further, transformational leadership is associated with leaders broadening and elevating the interests of their followers. In doing so, transformational leaders generate awareness and acceptance of group goals and activities causing followers to look beyond their own self-interest and apply focus on the good/performance of the group or organization.

Charismatic leadership is one of three espoused originally by Weber (1947). Charismatic leadership is based upon the individual displaying exceptional heroism, holiness, or representative character to influence followers. Transformational leadership places more focus on a compelling message that a leader communicates to followers. Charismatic and transformational leadership theories both focus on the leader's ability to inspire followers, often in the same way (McCoy 2020). Accordingly, charismatic and transformational leadership behaviors are often considered to be virtuous, and it is broadly theorized that transformational and charismatic leadership behaviors help avoid organizational ethical failures because of the actions and practices of the leaders (Bass & Steidlmeier 1999; Flanigan 2013).

Burns (1978) stated that authentic transformational leadership can only be undertaken on a moral foundation. Accordingly, any activity not based on this moral foundation should be considered pseudo-transformational leadership (Sartre 1992 as cited in Bass & Steidlmeier 1999). The charismatic/transformational leader, because of the characteristics associated with these types of leadership, may inspire followers to act towards the benefit of the organization. However, the actions undertaken by followers in this context may ultimately be ethical or unethical.

The overarching belief among organizational researchers and leaders is that this unethical behavior is driven by self-interest. This has led to numer-

ous leadership failures within organizations such as Enron, Global Crossings, Lehman Brothers, WorldCom, and Volkswagen. Unethical behavior has been a contributor in each of these cases and, as a result, organizational leadership ethics has been a topic of continued interest to both the general public and researchers alike for many years (Bryant & Merritt 2019).

Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) can be described as acts that are unethical but motivated by a desire to provide a benefit to one's organization and its members (Bryant & Merritt 2019). Whether follower behavior manifests in organizations as UPB may be more related to the follower than the leader. Accordingly, follower-centered research may yield more insight into UPB than a leader-centered research approach.

Focus has been placed on the role that followers play in the occurrence of UPB associated with transformational and charismatic leadership. One observation that has been studied is that, in organizations that have transformational and charismatic leaders, follower UPB is increasing and being encouraged (McCoy 2020). Accordingly, focusing solely on leadership styles and leader actions may not be sufficient for assuring that an organization and its leaders are encouraging and developing an ethical workplace environment. Accordingly, developing an understanding of why followers engage in UPB is important because unethical behavior of followers and the overall negative effects of UPB on individuals and organizations should be reduced.

Follower UPB has negative effects on organizational performance (Effelsberg & Solga 2015; Effelsberg, Solga & Jochen 2014; McCoy 2020). Further, followers will support leaders and engage in UPB even when it is known that the leader has committed unethical actions (Fehr et al., 2020). Specific attributes that may influence follower propensity towards engaging in UPB have been identified (McCoy 2020). Additionally, whether the behavior is intentional or unintentional has been explored (Wang et al., 2021). However, what has not yet been examined is if this behavior is consciously or unconsciously occurring in followers. If follower UPB is being performed unconsciously, new methods of behavior identification and response, perhaps in the form of training, may have to be developed by organizations if UPB is to be reduced.

Literature Review

Unethical behavior has been observed in organizations at the same time that transformational and charismatic leadership practices were found in organizations (McCoy 2020). However, transformational and charismatic

leaders are not necessarily knowingly inspiring UPB (Xue et al. 2020). Regardless, the negative effects of such behavior have been documented extensively and include mental effects on individual follower well-being and future careers as well as organizational survival.

Effelsberg et al. (2014) identified a positive correlation between transformational leadership and UPB. Accordingly, new lines of research have been identified that demonstrate that there are potentially negative, unethical contributions to organizations knowingly and unknowingly by leaders who practice transformational and/or charismatic leadership (Zhang et al. 2020).

Charismatic/transformational leaders, because of the characteristics associated with these types of leadership, may inspire followers to act towards the benefit of the organization. However, actions taken by the leader are simply actions. Consideration as to whether the leader or the follower has a greater impact on unethical behavior should be made, as there is still the question of the reasoning behind why some employees perform acts of UPB in response to their leaders, while others do not. Fehr et al. (2020) suggested that employees with high moral disengagement (MD) retain their trust in leaders who act unethically. As a result of this trust in their leaders who act unethically, they derive a sense of having similar values to the leader, which may influence why they choose to follow this leader.

Song et al. (2021) expanded the Fehr et al. (2020) work regarding moral disengagement related to the propensity of followers' UPB. Followers in the presence of leader-follower congruence in MD propensity were more likely to engage in UPB. Also, followers engaged in UPB more when their MD propensity exceeded their leaders' MD propensity, as opposed to when their leaders' MD propensity exceeded their own. Newman et al. (2020) also investigated MD in the workplace. Results showed that MD exerts a significant influence on the work attitudes and behavior of employees at the individual level of analysis.

McCoy (2020) investigated demographic factors associated with follower UPB resulting from their commitment and allegiance to the leader. These specific follower demographics included gender, job tenure, income level, and age. The study found a relationship between transformational leadership and UPB based upon the variables studied which included follower gender, follower job tenure,; follower income level; and follower age. This demonstrated that transformational leadership methods do influence UPB in followers.

Mishra et al. (2021), classified previous studies regarding UPB based on their underlying theoretical perspectives to better understand how UPB

unfolds in the workplace. This included the investigation of a possible relationship between UPB and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). OCB refers to “individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization” (Organ 1988, p. 4 as cited in Mishra et. al). OCB and UPB are both voluntary and discretionary behaviors performed by followers. Further, while both OCB and UPB perpetuated by followers sought to increase organizational performance, there may be a simultaneous element of self-interest included with these behaviors in followers.

Voluntary behaviors motivated by follower self-interest are not the only factors that should be considered when identifying the propensity of followers to engage in UPB (Wang et al., 2021). Much research has been based on the premise that UPB is performed by followers in an intentional, active, and voluntary manner in response to particular leadership styles. However, there are seemingly required or forced instances of UPB as well. Organizational situations including ethical climate, performance pressure, the threat of job loss, etc. may impact the occurrence of UPB in followers. UPB focusing on extreme voluntary cases are not reflective of the most common form of UPB. Wang et al. (2021) encouraged researchers to consider both voluntary and involuntary UPB to better understand the phenomenon. Voluntary UPB actions are consciously aimed at benefiting the organization. Involuntary UPB actions may go against the follower’s beliefs; however, they feel compelled to act.

There is another factor that should be considered when attempting to better understand follower UPB whether the behavior is consciously or unconsciously occurring. Regardless of the motivation for or influence of the occurrence of such behavior, or whether it is voluntary or involuntary, if the follower is unaware that they are engaging in such behaviors, response actions may be difficult to identify. This begs the question of whether UPB is unethical if its actions are being performed unconsciously in response to organizational stimuli.

Analysis

Followers are influenced by those for whom they work. This influence has been shown to lead to unethical behavior performed by the follower to benefit the organization, its members, or their leaders (Effelsberg et al. 2014). Various leadership styles have been shown to influence this behavior.

Graham et al. (2015) found a positive relationship between transactional leadership and UPB, and Effelsberg et al. (2014) observed that transformational leaders may unintentionally encourage subordinates to commit higher levels of UPB through heightening their organizational identification.

UPB has been studied from various perspectives, including individual, organizational, psychological, and leadership (Zhang & Xiao 2020). Initially, more focus was placed on the organizational level and the leader role. More recently, research focus has been placed on the follower's role in the performance of UPB. This includes individual factors such as moral disengagement (Fehr et al. 2020) and demographic factors (McCoy 2020). There seems to be an assumption that the behavior is actively and voluntarily being performed by the follower, indicating that the follower is consciously performing acts of UPB. Further, focus is placed on leader influence and follower outcome behaviors. One area that may be missing from consideration is that of unconscious priming. Unconscious priming effects "involve passive activation of internal mental representations that influence judgments and behavior without the person's intention or awareness" (Bargh 2016, 49). This is an important distinction. Priming involves behavior that the individual did not intend to occur, is not aware of, and cannot accurately describe verbally. Based on the work of Effelsberg et al. (2014), it seems that transformational leadership influences followers to engage in UPB. If the follower unknowingly performs the UPB, then the unethical behavior by followers may be considered as a result of the prime (leadership style).

In the financial services industry, researchers evaluated workplace identity as a prime for investment bankers while they were at home on a weekend (Bargh 2016). Some respondents were asked to describe their work environment. Those employees with their work identity primed were more likely to cheat for monetary gain in a self-reported coin-toss task. A random sample from the same set of investment bankers at home, who were not first primed with their workplace identity, did not cheat. This exercise demonstrated unconscious priming of workplace identities on unethical behavior in the financial services industry. Subconscious ethical and unethical priming had similar effects: they activated moral standards and increased categorization more than neutral priming.

Followers often are assigned goals or objectives from leaders. If the follower is aligned with these goals, priming effects on UPB may be stronger (Bargh 2020). However, priming effects require the follower to be unaware of the influence of the primes. Wang et al. (2021) examined both intentional

and unintentional UPB and determined that unintentional UPB is both more pervasive and has a greater impact on organizational performance. In this case, the success or performance of the organization may be the prime with the commission of UPB by the follower as the follower perceives that they are working towards the best interests or needs of the organization.

In the financial services industry example, if the employee was not primed, they did not cheat. Welsh and Ordóñez (2014) found subconscious ethical and unethical priming activated moral standards and increased categorization more than neutral priming. Activating moral standards either subconsciously or consciously reduced respondent propensity to behave unethically.

Emphasis has been placed on determining the relationship between leadership styles, leader-follower relationships, follower demographic characteristics and attitudes, and others. It seems that these efforts have been undertaken to better understand the nature of UPB and its influences. There is now evidence that subconscious ethical and unethical priming influences ethical decision-making via the activation of moral standards (Welsh & Ordóñez 2014). This is true even when participants were unmonitored and given high-performance goals.

Recommendations for Future Research

Focus on particular leadership styles and their influence on follower acts of UPB is important; however, the fact that this behavior may be occurring without direct knowledge by the leader or the follower indicates that identifying influencing factors should be accompanied by practical efforts to mitigate such behavior regardless of which leadership style the leader exhibits.

First, there seems to be little consideration of primes relative to the occurrence of UPB in organizations. By applying the study of primes such as leadership style, leader-follower relationship, follower demographic characteristics and attitudes, or others, perhaps a better understanding of whether UPB is being performed by followers consciously or unconsciously could be made. This, in turn, could aid in the development of organizational training programs and materials to discourage the practice.

Second, Qing et al. (2020) recommend that organizations implement ethical leadership development training programs highlighting ethical organizational behavior and the practice of ethical leadership by managers. We agree with the recommendations made by Qing et al. (2020), as

doing so could improve awareness in the management group. Such training actions may include developing programs that encourage all members of the organization to focus and reflect on the ethical and moral issues that they face at work and how to best deal with ethical issues without specific emphasis on manager behavior or leadership style.

Third, research identifying specific primes associated with the unconscious commission of UPB by followers may identify reasons for follower acts of UPB. Once this information is presented to followers, research could be undertaken to determine the effect of leadership style on UPB among a controlled group of followers that have been specifically trained to determine if different leadership styles still encourage the commission of acts of UPB among followers if the prime is removed.

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