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On regulatory focus and performance in organizational environments

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How self-regulation by managers relates to employee initiatives and employee performance

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Abstract

This study examined how two different self-regulation orientations that managers can use (i.e., a promotion orientation or a prevention orientation) relate to the initiatives that employees take in their work and to the overall task performance of employees. Data from 42 employees working in four reemployment services in the Netherlands demonstrates that managers' use of a promotion orientation (as perceived by employees) is significantly associated with initiative taking in employees (Hypothesis 1), while managers' use of a prevention orientation (as perceived by employees) is significantly associated with their task performance (Hypothesis 2). These results suggest that managers should balance the use of both regulatory orientations in their work in order for employees to function optimally.

A manager's behavior, and in particular the self-regulation orientation he or she uses in dealings with employees, has been found to be an important predictor of the work initiatives and performance of these employees (Wu, McMullen, Neubert & Yi, 2008; Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko & Roberts, 2008; Wallace, Little & Hill, 2010). Self-regulation refers to one's ability to adapt cognition, emotions and behavior, both consciously and unconsciously, to achieve set goals (Karoly, 1993).

A highly influential theory on self-regulation (i.e., Regulatory Focus Theory, Higgins, 1997) assumes the existence of two motivational systems (i.e., orientations) that regulate people's purposive goal directed behavior; a promotion orientation and a prevention orientation. The two regulation orientations therefore also tend to influence the ways in which people attempt to achieve work goals. Those who adopt a promotion orientation aim to realize their own ideals at work, or the ideals of their organization, and tend to emphasize the importance of reaching success in achieving these ideals. Those who adopt a prevention orientation are primarily concerned with meeting their direct task obligations and responsibilities (Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Kark & Van Dijk, 2007; Neubert et al., 2008). These people often find it important to avoid errors while achieving their work goals.

Prior research suggests that one's hierarchical position within an organization can evoke, or induce a certain self-regulation orientation in people. The presence of resources and opportunities, as well as the experience of freedom, make it easy for managers to adopt a promotion orientation that is driven by gains and successes (Sassenberg, Jonas, Shah & Brazy, 2007; Keltner, Gruenfeld & Anderson, 2003; Higgins, 1997). Although research has demonstrated that a regulatory promotion orientation used by managers positively relate to the creativity levels observed in their employees (Wu, McMullen, Neubert & Yi, 2008), some recent studies provide suggestive evidence that the ability of managers to transcend this role-congruent orientation may relate positively to other relevant work behaviors of employees. The current study aims to further examine this possibility. The central prediction is that the tendency of managers to adopt their role-defined promotion orientation will relate positively to the extent to which employees are willing to take initiatives (a prerequisite of creative work behavior). Additionally, we argue that the ability of managers to adopt a prevention orientation will be positively related to other important outcomes which should be visible in objective indicators of employees' in-role performance.

Managers' Self-Regulation Orientations

It was initially thought that the orientation people use to regulate their behavior is a stable personal characteristic (Higgins, 1997). More recent research in organizational settings has shown, however, that the orientation used may be context dependent - for example - on the task or work role assumed by the person in question (Brockner & Higgins, 1997;

Levine Higgins & Choi, 2000; Faddegon, Ellemers & Scheepers, 2009). In this respect, it has been found that the role of being a manager tends to evoke a promotion orientation in people (Sassenberg, Jonas, Shah & Brazy, 2007; Keltner, Gruenfeld & Anderson, 2003; Higgins, 1997). A managerial role encompasses certain features that offer people the scope to exercise a promotion orientation. Managers operate in a relatively powerful position where they often do not have to account for their actions; they thus possess a great deal of autonomy. Once in power, managers also operate in a reward-rich environment where they not only receive more financial rewards for their contributions than regular employees do, they also receive more social rewards for these contributions than do regular employees (i.e., in terms of praise and flattery; Keltner et al. 2003). Research demonstrates that having autonomy and the opportunity to receive rewards generally makes people more approach oriented (Fiske, 1993).

There are two other reasons why a managerial role easily induces a promotion orientation in people. First, a managerial role requires the ability to process a great deal of information on employee and organizational-level activities (Fiske, 1993). This global, explorative and visionary work approach matches the work strategy that follows from the use of a promotion orientation (Förster & Dannenberg, 2010). Second, prior research has shown that people who tend to adopt a promotion orientation in accomplishing their goals, are generally also more attracted to occupying a managerial role (Sassenberg et al., 2007). In other words, a managerial role makes it more likely that people adopt a promotion orientation towards their work, but this role also attracts individuals with a promotion orientation. It remains to be seen, however, whether managers who solely rely on this role congruent orientation are in the best position to stimulate their employees to demonstrate the wide range of work behaviors needed to perform well in their job.

Managers' Perceived Use of a Promotion Orientation and Employee Initiatives

Wu, McMullen, Neubert & Yi (2008) showed that managers who adopt a role-induced promotion orientation can stimulate creativity and initiative taking in employees. Given their relatively powerful position, the expectations and behavioral norms that managers convey tend to be closely monitored and copied by their employees (Bandura, 1986; Brockner & Higgins, 2001). The self-regulation orientation used by managers can thus serve as an example to employees and can encourage them to take more work initiatives and act more creatively.

New initiatives tend to make a major contribution to the performance of employees by enhancing their personal abilities, knowledge and skills (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2005; Anderson, De Dreu & Nijstad, 2004). Nevertheless, employees who undertake such initiatives do not automatically perform well in their job. For example, West (2002)

has demonstrated that employees who regularly develop new ideas only perform above standard when they are capable of putting these ideas into practice, and are allowed to do so. These boundary conditions are sometimes difficult to overcome. For example, experimental studies on the execution of creative tasks have found that individuals who are able to think of new, creative ideas often have trouble in subsequently selecting and implementing the most feasible option (Herman & Reiter-Palmon, 2011). Moreover, in a work context, employees who take new initiatives can meet considerable opposition from colleagues who wish to avoid the uncertainty and stress that comes along with the implementation of these initiatives (Janssen, Van de Vliert & West, 2004). This can lead to conflicts and impair the task performance of all individuals involved (Janssen et al., 2004).

To conclude, although there is literature that suggest that managers who use a promotion orientation should be positively related to intentions of their employees to take initiatives and develop new ideas at work, these intentions do not always translate into concrete task outcomes of employees. A manager's reliance on a role-congruent promotion orientation may thus not have the desired relationship with their objective task performance.

Managers' Perceived Use of a Prevention Orientation and Employee Performance

Leadership research suggests that managers who are able to transcend their role-defined regulation orientation (i.e., by adopting a prevention orientation) may ensure that employees perform well on their formal task responsibilities. For example, Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko en Roberts (2008) found that when managers who aimed at "initiating structure" were positively related to the in-role performance of employees. The authors explain this relationship as the result of a "spill-over" effect, such that leaders that initiate structure seem to evoke a prevention orientation in employees, which in turn is related to better in-role performance. However, there may also be a direct positive relationship between managers who "initiate structure" and the in-role performance of employees because these managers in fact had been able to adopt a role-transcending prevention orientation, which helps employees to structure their work and to implement activities that contribute to their in-role performance.

Research suggests that managers who adopt a prevention orientation can indeed stimulate task behaviors in employees that are usually positively associated with overall performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Salgado, 1997; Stewart, 1999). For instance, managers who use this orientation set out concrete task objectives and aim to minimize task failure (Förster & Higgins, 2005). Because of this meticulous way of working, it has been argued that managers who adopt a prevention orientation should have detailed knowledge of the characteristics of the employees working for them and of the tasks employees need to perform. will stimulate employees to work accurately (Förster, Higgins & Bianco, 2003)

and will use a well thought-out guidance approach (Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Kark and Van Dijk, 2007). Moreover, with their detailed task knowledge, managers with a prevention orientation can foresee whether corrective action is needed during the execution of a task.

Managers' use of a prevention orientation may also relate positively to the overall performance of employees because some of the tasks that employees have to execute simply require this orientation. These are so-called prevention oriented tasks; failure on these tasks has serious consequences for the organization while a good performance on these tasks does not really stand out (Van Dijk & Kluger, 2011). An example of such a prevention oriented task is detecting errors in company reports (Van Dijk & Kluger, 2011). When working on this task, employees need to keep focused on what is wrong and what they should avoid in order to perform well. Because of their subordinate role, it is highly likely that employees may in fact need to perform more prevention oriented tasks than promotion focused tasks. So employees do not enhance their in-role performance on this task when they develop additional new plans and initiatives. A manager who helps them perform well in this role should be aware of and sensitive to these task features and be able to guide employees in performing well on such tasks.

Hypotheses

To conclude, we propose that both the tendency of managers to rely on a role-congruent promotion orientation and the ability of managers to transcend their role by displaying a prevention orientation can be positively related to employee intentions and employee behaviors. We therefore designed a field study to examine how the regulatory orientations used by managers related to the extent to which employees are willing to take new initiatives as well as to their objective task performance. We hypothesize the following;

Hypothesis 1. A manager's perceived use of a promotion orientation will be positively related to employees' intentions to take initiatives at work.

Hypothesis 2. A manager's perceived use of a prevention orientation will be positively related to employees' objective task performance.

Method

Participants and Study Procedure

In the course of 2010, questionnaires were sent to employees who worked as job coaches at four different reemployment services in the Netherlands. During this same period, objective data on the task performance of these employees were collected from their managers. The reemployment services were responsible for implementing the provisions of the Dutch social security legislation and for providing a range of services aimed at helping

unemployed and disabled people to re-enter the work process. So, the employees that we approached had the task to help unemployed people with finding a new job, and to persuade new employers to hire them.

The reemployment services were approached via contacts with the Dutch organization for Applied Scientific Research TNO. The researchers gave a brief presentation on the objectives of the study to the management of each reemployment service and sent an email to the employees asking them whether they would be willing to take part in the study. All employees who agreed to participate were sent an online questionnaire.

For 42 employees we were able to collect data on 1) their self-reported initiative taking at work, 2) their perceptions of their managers' regulatory orientation and 3) their objective work performance. The average age of the employees of whom we collected all information necessary for our research, was 42.4 years ($SD = 10.59$) and the proportion of male employees was 29%, (71% was female).

Independent Variables: Managers' Self-Regulation Orientations

Managers' use of the two self-regulation orientations was determined by asking the employees which orientation they predominantly observed in their manager when directing their activities at work. In this way we assessed managers' self-regulation orientations as perceived by the employees. Drawing on the regulatory focus scale developed by Lockwood, Jordan and Kunda (2002), eight statements assessing the extent to which their manager used the role-congruent promotion orientation, and seven regulation statements capturing the extent to which their managers were able to transcend to a prevention orientation, were developed. A principal components analysis (PCA) revealed considerable overlap in the constructs of the managers' regulation orientations. Based on the PCA we therefore created two scales that did capture the two distinct regulatory orientations in managers. The promotion orientation scale consisted of four regulation statements assessing the extent to which their manager used the role-congruent promotion orientation (e.g., "My manager encourages me to achieve my ideals and ambitions at work," $\alpha = .93$). The prevention orientation scale consisted of 7 regulation statements capturing the extent to which their managers were able to transcend to a prevention orientation (e.g.; "My manager regularly reminds me about my responsibilities and obligations at work", $\alpha = .79$). The full list of items is displayed in appendix 1.

Dependent Variables

Employee initiative taking. After characterizing the behavior of their managers in this way, the employees were asked to report the extent to which they take initiatives in their own work. This variable was assessed with three statements ($\alpha = .73$) from the personal

initiative scale proposed by Frese, Fay, Hilburger, Leng and Tag (1997). An example of such a statement is: “I am particularly good at realizing ideas in my work”. The full list of items is displayed in appendix 1.

Employee performance. Employee performance data were based on their annual client targets over 2010 and were retrieved from each participating reemployment service. The annual client target represents a certain number of clients that employees have to place in a new job. This target is corrected for the hours employees work per annum. The performance measure we used was the extent to which employees were able to meet this target (in %). Within the reemployment services, this target is an important performance indicator, used to monitor employees’ progress. We received these performance data in the final half of 2010. The reemployment services provided this information in different months. As a result they sometimes did not yet have a complete overview of results obtained in 2010. If this was the case, we established the extent to which employees were ‘on track’ in meeting their performance targets for the whole year, by correcting results achieved so far for the number of months that had passed. A Shapiro-Wilk test confirmed that the performance data were normally distributed ($p = .89$).

Control Variables

The four reemployment services where the study was carried out were comparable in size and the region where they were located. Nevertheless, we included the location, as well as info about two demographic background variables from the employees (i.e., their gender and age), as control variables in the analyses. None of these control variables significantly influenced the effects we observed and report below.

Results

Descriptives

A correlation analysis (see Table 1) revealed that the gender and age of participants were significantly correlated to each other ($r = -.36, p = .02$), meaning that the women in our sample were younger than the men. The demographic control variables did not relate to other variables of interest to hypothesis testing. The extent to which employees perceived their managers to use a promotion orientation was positively and significantly correlated to employee’s self-reported initiative taking ($r = .34, p = .03$), as proposed in Hypothesis 1. Additionally, there was a significant positive association between the extent to which employees indicated their managers used a prevention orientation and employee’s objective task performance ($r = .44, p = .004$), as proposed in Hypothesis 2. As the perceived promotion

orientation and prevention orientation scores for the managers were marginally significantly correlated ($r = .27, p = .09$), we could not regard them as completely independent predictors of employee initiative taking and employee performance. We corrected for this association when further testing our hypothesized relationships by including both regulation orientations in subsequent regression analyses (i.e., both orientations are included in all analyses, either as a key predictor or as a control variable).

Table 1: Correlation of all independent, dependent and control variables

	Gender	Age	Reemployment service	Promotion orientation of manager	Prevention orientation of manager	Initiative taking of employee	Percentage of unemployed reintegrated
Gender	1	-.36*	.14	.11	-.12	-.08	-.14
Age		1	-.01	-.26	-.26	.20	.008
Reemployment service			1	-.05	-.03	-.01	-.25
Promotion orientation of manager				1	.27	.34*	.14
Prevention orientation of manager					1	-.09	.44**
Initiative taking of employee						1	-.13
Percentage of unemployed reintegrated							1

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Regression Analyses

In order to test Hypothesis 1 for employee initiative taking, the reemployment service office, gender and age of the employees and the managers' perceived use of the prevention orientation were first included in the model as control variables (step 1). The managers' promotion orientation was then included as a predictor in the model in step 2. There was no significant relation between any of the control variables and employees' initiative taking, but the extent to which the employees perceived their managers to use a promotion orientation was significantly related to employees' initiative, as predicted in Hypothesis 1 ($\beta = .38, p = .03$). Adding the managers' promotion orientation to the model explained 12.3% of the variance in employee initiative taking ($p = .03$), resulting in a ΔR^2 of .17 for the total model. The results thus support Hypothesis 1 (see Table 2).

Table 2: Multiple regression results for hypothesis 1

	B	SE B	beta
Step 1			
Gender	-.13	.38	-.06
Age	.03	.02	.26
Reemployment service	.06	.15	.07
Prevention orientation of manager	-.11	.24	-.08
Step 2			
Promotion orientation of manager	.47	.21	.38*

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

$R^2 = .041$ for step 1, $\Delta R^2 = .125$ for step 2 ($p = .03$)

A similar procedure was followed to test the second hypothesis concerning the employees' objective performance. We again included the reemployment service office and employees' gender and age as control variables in the model and this time added the managers' use of a promotion orientation as a control variable to this first step. The managers' perceived prevention orientation was then included as a predictor in the model in step 2. None of the control variables were significantly related to employees' objective performance, as anticipated. The extent to which employees perceived their manager to use a prevention orientation was a significant predictor of objective task performance ($\beta = .48, p = .004$). Managers' perceived prevention orientation explains 20% of the unique variance in employees' objective performance. This change in R^2 is significant ($p = .004$) bringing the ΔR^2 of the total model to .28. The results of the multiple regression analysis, summarized in Table 3, thus support Hypothesis 2.

Table 3: Multiple regression results for hypothesis 2

	B	SE B	beta
Step 1			
Gender	-.03	.35	-.01
Age	.02	.02	.01
Reemployment service	-.17	.14	-.18
Promotion orientation of manager	.09	.19	.07
Step 2			
Prevention orientation of manager	.68	.22	.48**

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

$R^2 = .075$ for step 1, $\Delta R^2 = .200$ for step 2 ($p = .004$)

Significance Testing of Correlational Differences

In view of the restricted sample size in this study, we examined whether one of the two orientations is a stronger predictor of the dependent variables than the other. A Steiger's Z test for Hypothesis 1 demonstrates that managers' perceived use of a promotion orientation was significantly more strongly correlated with employees' initiative taking than managers' perceived use of a prevention orientation ($p = .024$). By contrast, managers' perceived use of a prevention orientation was more strongly correlated with the objective performance of employees than managers' perceived use of a promotion orientation, as expected, even though the difference between these correlations was only marginally significant ($p = .098$).

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

This study demonstrates that managers' use of a promotion orientation, as perceived by employees, is positively related to the extent to which employees report to undertake new initiatives at work. Managers' use of a prevention orientation on the other hand, does not relate to employee initiative taking. Hence, whilst a promotion orientation in managers seems to inspire initiatives in employees, a prevention orientation does not necessarily deject this behavior. This finding extends prior studies (Baas, De Dreu & Nijstad, 2011; Beudeker, Rink, Ellemers & Blonk, 2014) demonstrating that a prevention orientation does not automatically undermine creativity or initiative taking. In addition, as predicted, when employees perceived their managers to use a prevention orientation, this was positively related to their objective performance. Managers' perceived use of a promotion orientation was less clearly related to objective employee performance. This finding contributes to current insights on the implications of managers' ability to go beyond what is expected in their role by demonstrating that has positive consequences for the performance of employees. An important implication of this conclusion is that managers may do well to deploy both regulatory orientations to encourage initiative taking in employees as well as ensuring that their task performance remains optimal.

Strengths, Limitations and Future Research Directions

An important strength of our study was the use of an objective employee performance measure. The number of clients that find new work within one year arguably depends to a considerable extent on the motivational and intervention techniques used by the social service employees. Yet, we acknowledge that the unemployed clients have an important role in this process as well. Of course some clients more easily find a job themselves without

much help from social service employees. But these clients will be randomly distributed amongst social services employees' caseloads as well as reemployment offices.

There are a few other limitations to this study that imply some caution in drawing conclusions from these data. First, the data in this study are cross-sectional in nature, and therefore do not necessarily offer support for a causal relationship between the regulatory orientation of a manager and employee behavior. Since the employees examined here assessed the regulatory orientation of their managers as well as their own degree of initiative taking, it may be that employees who often take initiatives are also more inclined to perceive their manager to use a promotion orientation and value this behavior. Arguing against this explanation, we refer to prior research in which researchers control for the regulatory orientation of the employees and still find a similar relationship between a promotion orientation in managers and initiative taking in employees (Wu, McMullen, Neubert & Yi, 2008).

As an additional argument against this explanation of our results we note that there is good reason to assume that subordinates tend to perceive their superiors accurately rather than being biased or projecting their own preferences on them. Since employees are dependent on their managers, it is important for them to make an accurate estimate of what the latter wants from them – independent from their own behavior or wishes (Fiske, 1993). Employees thus often develop an accurate, detailed picture of their managers. We therefore feel confident about the robustness and direction of the obtained relationship. Future research might establish further evidence for the patterns we observed, ideally with a longitudinal setup. Such longitudinal data collection requires a big investment in time, effort and money and is therefore only worthwhile when there are clear indicators of new and interesting relationships. Our study is therefore an important first step in revealing new knowledge on managers' use of a promotion and/or a prevention orientation in relation to important employee behaviors.

Second, the present study only considers a specific and small sample of employees in the social security sector. These employees carry out prevention tasks on a daily basis. Serious consequences are likely to ensue if they do not receive proper guidance from their managers. For instance in the administration of the cases dealt with, data from various government departments have to be linked via the national insurance number of the client in question. If employees were to fill in the wrong national insurance number, information about this client could be lost and the client could lose benefits; such errors can take a long time to correct. In a work context such as this where costs of making errors are very high, a manager whom displays awareness of prevention concerns is relevant for task performance. The results obtained are at thus certainly applicable to managers and employees in this sector, but we realize that further research might reveal whether our findings also apply

to other sectors. Prior work by Neubert et al. (2008) suggests this might be the case as they obtained corresponding results in a longitudinal study concerning the performance of employees in private sector organizations.

The relations we observed imply that managers may need to learn to adjust their self-regulation orientation to the kind of work output they want from their employees. While the results of this study suggest that it is theoretically possible to do both (the two orientations were reasonably correlated in the perceptions employees held of their managers), meta-analytical evidence demonstrates that such a positive relationship is generally uncommon (Lanaj, Chang & Graen, 2012). The promotion orientation and the prevention orientation thus usually represent two clearly different strategies for goal achievement that people use. So, we believe that combining both orientations may be difficult. Future research can address this issue and examine how managers can learn to transcend their role-congruent promotion orientation to adopt a prevention orientation in work situations where employees need to work meticulously and meet certain requirements. Experimental studies have demonstrated that switching between these two orientations is possible (Higgins, Shah & Friedman, 1997; Friedman & Förster, 2001), confirming the idea people's regulatory orientations are not carved in stone, and can be adapted to suit their circumstances. Moreover, research by Van Dijk and Kluger (2011) showed that managers are able to adjust their feedback to whether employees need to perform a promotion-oriented or prevention-oriented task. Yet given that both orientations are orthogonal constructs (Higgins, 1997; Lanaj, Chang & Graen, 2012), managers who would have to master very different behaviors when switching to a prevention orientation.

Another question raised by our results is whether the influence of managers on employee initiative taking and employee performance can be modulated by employees themselves. For example, we did not consider employees' own regulatory orientation in our study, but it would be interesting to investigate whether a promotion oriented manager also stimulates employees with a dominant prevention orientation to take more initiative on the work floor, or to test whether – in line with the ideas of Shah, Higgins and Friedman (1998) and Stam, van Knippenberg and Wisse (2010) – some kind of match is needed between the manager's regulatory orientation and that of the employee in order to achieve a clear-cut effect on either initiative taking or objective performance (see also Hamstra, van Yperen, Wisse & Sassenberg, 2011; Van Dijk & Kluger, 2004).

Conclusion and Practical Implications

The key conclusion of the present study is that managers' perceived role-congruent promotion orientation is positively related to initiatives that employees take at work. Additionally, managers' perceived prevention orientation relates positively to employees

overall task performance. An important practical implication of these findings is that managers may wish to consider whether their dominant management style is promotion oriented or prevention oriented. Moreover, it might be good for managers to make a conscious effort to use their non-dominant regulatory orientation occasionally, particularly when this orientation matches employee task requirements. They could try using promotion oriented management when their employees have to perform tasks where initiative taking is important, and prevention oriented management when employees need to work meticulously and take responsibilities. In this way, managers can match their leadership to the tasks that employees need to execute, and raise employees' overall task performance to a new level.

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Appendix 1: full description of the items used in the research

Managers' promotion orientation

1. My manager urges me to realize my ideals and ambitions at work
2. My manager urges me to think about the person I would ideally like to be in the future
3. My managers urges me to achieve my ambitions in my work
4. My manager urges me to strive to reach my "ideal self" – to fulfill my hopes, wishes and aspirations.

Managers' prevention orientation

1. My manager teaches me to avoid negative occurrences at work
2. My manager shows me on a regular basis that he/she worries that I will fail to accomplish my work goals
3. My manager talks about examples of bad things that might happen to me at work
4. My manager reminds me of my responsibilities and obligations on a regular basis
5. My manager teaches me to be more oriented towards preventing losses than towards achieving gains in my work
6. My manager urges me to avoid failure at all cost
7. My manager urges me to strive to be the person I "ought" to be – to fulfill my duties, responsibilities and obligations

Employee initiative taking

1. I actively attack problems that occur at work
2. I am particularly good at realizing ideas at work
3. Whenever something goes wrong, I search for a solution immediately

