

Reciprocal Influence Theory: A Reality in Most Organizations

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ABSTRACT

It is realistic to view organizations as places where leaders and subordinates interact in a complex way, each exerting reciprocal influence on the other. Research efforts examining the reciprocal influence process will continue to be of interest to managers and researchers and will be used to emphasize the dynamics of leadership in organizations.

Most theories of leadership share one underlying assumption: Leader behavior affects subordinate behavior. Particularly in correlational studies, any association between leader behavior and group effectiveness has been interpreted as measuring the impact of the leader's action on subordinate satisfaction, motivation, or performance (Bass, 2010; Bennis, 2011; Drucker, 2010; Yukl, 2010). More recently, however, it has been recognized that in any complex organization the flow of influence or authority is not unilateral and downward-from leader to subordinate-but also upward from subordinate to leader. According to *reciprocal influence theory* certain leader behaviors cause subordinate behaviors, and certain acts of subordinates (for example, low performance) can cause the leader to modify behavior (Luthans, 2011; Starke, 2001).

The reciprocal influence theory is a reality in most organizations. For example, consider the manager of a firm who is dedicated to the mission of improving the quality of a product. How is this manager's behavior influenced by subordinates? One obvious response is that the leader will closely supervise team members who are not performing well and will loosely supervise others who are fulfilling their mission of product improvement. Thus, by their performance, subordinates are influencing the leader. As another example, consider a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a major company who has a top quality manager who is very hot tempered. Although the CEO has authority over this organization member and can order the individual to perform many job-related activities, the CEO may be fearful of the subordinate's temper and will modify his or her leadership style to accommodate this individual. In this case, the manager is probably exerting more influence on the CEO than the leader is influencing the subordinate.

Managerial Implications

Several studies support the notion of reciprocal influence between leaders and subordinates. The results to date suggest the following:

1. Leader consideration or employee-centered behavior and leader positive reinforcement both can lead to employee job satisfaction (Likert, 1987).
2. High initiating structure or production-centered leadership sometimes leads to lower employee job satisfaction (Likert, 1987).
3. Low-performing subordinates tend to cause leaders to use more initiating structure/production-centered leadership and punitive reward behavior (that is, punishment) (Luthans, 2011).
4. High leader positive reward behavior tends to lead to improved subordinate performance. However, few studies have shown any direct evidence that leader initiating structure or leader consideration causes increases or decreases in subordinate performance (Yukl, 2010). These findings emphasize the importance of rewards as an influence factor in determining subordinate behavior (Luthans, 2011; Szilagi, 2010).

Conclusion

It is realistic to view organizations as places where leaders and subordinates interact in a complex way, each exerting reciprocal influence on the other. Research efforts examining the reciprocal influence process will continue to be of interest to managers and researchers and will be used to emphasize the dynamics of leadership in organizations.

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