The role of goal-focused leadership in enabling the expression of conscientiousness
The Role of Goal-Focused Leadership in Enabling the Expression of Conscientiousness

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The authors tested the hypothesis that goal-focused leadership enables conscientious workers to perform effectively by helping them to accurately understand organizational goal priorities. Data collected from 162 workers in a private sector document processing organization supported the hypotheses that goal-focused leadership moderates the relationship between conscientiousness and job performance and that person–organization goal congruence mediates this moderated relationship. Specifically, conscientiousness was more strongly positively related to performance among workers who perceived that their supervisors effectively set goals and defined roles, responsibilities, and priorities than among workers who did not perceive this type of goal-focused leadership.

Keywords: personality, leadership, goal congruence, conscientiousness, performance

What role does leadership play in influencing effective employee performance? Do good workers need effective leadership to perform well, or do they achieve in spite of poor leadership? Conscientiousness, a trait that reflects motivation (Schmidt & Hunter, 1992), is the best personality predictor of overall job performance (Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001) and may be one of the defining characteristics of good workers. However, research is needed to more fully understand the situational moderators of the conscientiousness–performance relationship. Consistent with trait activation theory (Tett & Guterman, 2000), we propose that certain leadership behaviors may serve as cues that activate the expression of conscientiousness at work and thus enable conscientious workers to perform effectively.

As Stogdill (1950) noted over 5 decades ago, an important behavioral indicator of leadership effectiveness is the creation of a clear understanding of the organization’s goals and the employee’s role in achieving these goals (Messick, 2005; Zaccaro & Klimesh, 2001). Adopting this view of leadership effectiveness, we define goal-focused leadership as leadership that uses policies and practices to communicate organizational goals and align employees’ efforts with these goals. We propose that goal-focused leadership may serve as a cue that triggers the detail, achievement, and dependability orientations of highly conscientious workers, leading to effective performance. Thus, one purpose of the present study was to increase understanding of how to maximize employee performance by examining goal-focused leadership as a situational moderator of the conscientiousness–performance relationship.

A second purpose of our research was to more fully understand the mediating mechanisms that explain how conscientiousness and leadership impact performance. Because we believe that one way in which goal-focused leaders enable conscientious workers to perform effectively is by helping them understand organizational goal priorities, we focus on person–organization goal congruence as a potential mediator. When leaders clearly articulate organizational goals, employees are likely to develop high levels of person–organization goal congruence. This relationship between goal-focused leadership and goal congruence is likely to be strongest among conscientious employees whose detail and achievement orientations increase the likelihood that they will attend to goal-focused communications. High levels of goal congruence, in turn, enable employees to achieve performance outcomes that are valued by the organization. Thus, our second purpose was to examine person–organization goal congruence as a potential mediating mechanism by which conscientiousness and leadership impact performance. By exploring when and how conscientiousness positively impacts performance, we hope to advance understanding of this relationship and contribute to knowledge about how to maximize performance.

Personality and Performance

During the 1960s–1980s, research suggested that personality explained little variance in work-related outcomes. However, the link between personality characteristics and work-related outcomes has since been widely acknowledged (e.g., George, 1992; Mount & Barrick, 1995a; Perrewé & Spector, 2002). Much of the progress linking personality with performance can be traced to a consensus among personality researchers that a five-factor structure best represents personality (Goldberg, 1992; John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & Costa, 1999; Wiggins & Trapnell, 1997). The five-factor model of personality includes the traits of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience. By organizing the traits studied in previous research into the five factors of personality and aggregating study results using meta-analytic methods, a clear picture of the...
relationship between personality and work-related outcomes emerged.

Barrick et al. (2001) observed that 15 meta-analytic studies of personality–performance relationships revealed that conscientiousness is the most consistent Big Five predictor of work outcomes across jobs. The relationship between conscientiousness and job performance is often attributed to several behavioral tendencies that are characteristic of conscientious individuals. For example, conscientious individuals tend to be dutiful and thorough as opposed to careless and negligent (Goldberg, 1993). They also exert effort and persist in an attempt to meet challenges and achieve goals. These types of behaviors enhance the job performance of conscientious workers.

Although conscientiousness is the most consistent Big Five predictor of job performance, meta-analyses of personality–performance relationships have reported small average observed validity coefficients of conscientiousness (e.g., \( r = .12 \) in Tett, Jackson, & Rothstein, 1991; \( r = .11 \) in Vinchur, Schippmann, Switzer, & Roth, 1998; \( r = .12 \) in Hurtz & Donovan, 2000). On the basis of their second-order meta-analysis, Barrick et al. (2001) reported variability in the validities of conscientiousness across studies (\( p = .23; 90\% \) credibility values range from .10 to .35). They concluded that the conscientiousness–performance relationship has shown sufficient variability across studies to warrant a search for moderators. Specifically, it is likely that aspects of the situation may enhance or suppress the effects of conscientiousness on performance. With this study, we propose that workers’ direct supervisors influence the environment in ways that impact the expression of conscientious behaviors. In the next section, we describe how supervisor goal-focused leadership serves to encourage the expression of conscientiousness.

Leadership and the Expression of Conscientiousness

Driven by calls for research on situational moderators of personality–performance relationships (e.g., Mount, Barrick, & Ryan, 2003), Tett and Burnett (2003) developed a personality trait-based interactionist model of job performance to provide a theoretical basis for the search for moderators. This model draws from trait activation theory (Tett & Guterman, 2000) to suggest that personality is more strongly related to job performance when situational cues for trait expression are present in the work environment and when these cues cause trait-expressive behaviors to be positively valued by those evaluating performance. Tett and Burnett proposed that trait-relevant cues may come from the task itself, from the social environment, or from the organizational climate and culture. With this study, we focused on one cue for trait expression in the social environment: the employee’s direct supervisor (Tett & Burnett, 2003).

Throughout an organization, supervisors translate the organization’s strategy into goals for their work units and align the efforts of workers with these goals. The importance of clarifying goals and aligning individual roles with these goals is a component of many leadership theories. For example, path–goal leadership theory emphasizes the importance of clarifying workers’ performance goals (House, 1996). Leaders who exhibit the behavior of initiating structure also set goals and define role responsibilities (Stogdill, 1950). However, both path-goal leadership and initiating structure include additional behaviors, such as clarifying the means by which the goals can be achieved and providing structure to the tasks. Because we believe that clarifying goals and setting direction constitute the key leadership behaviors that enable the performance of conscientious workers (i.e., those workers who often know best how to effectively execute their work tasks), we propose that these behaviors, which we refer to as goal-focused leadership, moderate the relationship between conscientiousness and performance.

For two reasons, we suggest that the relationship between employee conscientiousness and performance is likely to be stronger among workers who perceive that their supervisors exhibit high levels of goal-focused leadership. First, goal-focused leadership is a trait-relevant situational cue that triggers the expression of conscientiousness (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000). According to the principle of trait activation, personality traits are latent potentials that are triggered by trait-relevant situational cues. For example, an unorganized office may trigger the expression of orderliness, resulting in behavior that is consistent with that trait (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Similarly, by consistently discussing organizational goals and linking employees’ work to those goals, goal-focused leaders provide an environment in which conscientious workers’ tendencies toward achievement and dependability are triggered. Highly conscientious workers tend to be effective because they (a) are motivated to put forth the level of effort needed to accomplish goals (Mount & Barrick, 1995a); (b) are thorough, responsible, efficient, organized, and reliable (McCrae & John, 1992); and (c) persevere and are disciplined (Colquitt & Simmering, 1998). We propose that these trait-relevant behaviors are more likely to be expressed in situations in which supervisors emphasize the importance of goal achievement and provide information relevant to achieving organizationally valued goals. Thus, the relationship between conscientiousness and performance is likely to be stronger among employees whose supervisors exhibit high levels of goal-focused leadership. When supervisors do not clarify goals and set direction, conscientious employees are likely to have difficulty directing their efforts toward goals valued by the organization, and, as a result, the relationship between conscientiousness and performance is likely to be weak among those employees.

Second, goal-focused leaders are likely to value the expression of conscientiousness. Supervisors who place a high priority on clarifying goals and setting direction likely value behaviors reflecting responsibility and achievement orientation, as they enable workers to achieve the communicated goals. Thus, conscientiousness is likely to be more strongly related to job performance among workers whose supervisors are effective rather than ineffective at goal-focused leadership because goal-focused leaders positively evaluate expressions of conscientiousness.

Hypothesis 1: Goal-focused leadership moderates the relationship between conscientiousness and job performance. Conscientiousness is more strongly positively related to job performance among workers whose supervisors exhibit high rather than low levels of goal-focused leadership.

Further, we propose that one way by which goal-focused leadership and employee conscientiousness combine to positively impact employee performance is through increased person–organization goal congruence. Person–organization goal
congruence exists when an employee’s perceptions of goal priorities are aligned with the perceptions of members of key constituencies within the organization (e.g., management, coworkers). Leadership theories suggest that creating an alignment between employee and organizational goal priorities is a key role of leaders in organizations (Messick, 2005; Stogdill, 1950). When leaders effectively communicate organizational goals, translate those goals to work unit goal priorities, and link the work of each employee to the organization’s goals, employees are likely to develop high levels of person–organization goal congruence. This may be especially true of conscientious employees. Goal-focused leadership provides cues that signal both expected behavior and consequences for behaving consistently and inconsistently with those expectations. Trait activation theory (Tett & Guterman, 2000) suggests that these cues may activate the detail and achievement orientations of highly conscientious employees, who attend more carefully to subsequent communications regarding organizational goals than do employees low in conscientiousness. Consequently, conscientious employees develop higher person–organization goal congruence in response to goal-focused leadership than do their low-conscientiousness colleagues.

We further suggest that person–organization goal congruence positively impacts employee performance. Although the majority of empirical research has focused on the relationship between a shared understanding of organizational goals and employees’ job attitudes (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; Vancouver, Millsap, & Peters, 1994; Vancouver & Schmitt, 1991; Witt, 1998), a long history of goal-setting research shows that goals help direct employee effort (Locke & Latham, 2002). When employees’ perceptions of goal priorities are aligned with those of top management, employees are more likely to “direct their efforts toward those goals most highly prized by top management” (Jauch, Osborn, & Terpening, 1980, p. 544) and, as a result, receive higher performance ratings.

**Hypothesis 2:** Person–organization goal congruence mediates the interactive effects of conscientiousness and goal-focused leadership on job performance.

**Method**

**Participants and Procedure**

We surveyed line managers in a private sector document processing organization and the employees who reported to them. We requested that line managers ask their 487 employees to attend one of several scheduled meetings. Of these, 390 (80%) volunteered to participate. Employees rated their own personality, their supervisor’s leadership behaviors, and their perceptions of the organization’s goals. We asked supervisors to complete performance ratings on their employees during the same month. We matched the supervisor and employee data forms using identification numbers derived for the study. We collected matched data from 162 employees (42% of employees surveyed: 87% women; 27% minorities; M age = 32.86 years) and their 41 immediate supervisors (81% women; 18% minorities; M age = 38.70 years). The sample of employees resembled the organization’s population in terms of demographic characteristics (83% women; 34% minorities; M age = 33.06 years).

**Measures**

**Conscientiousness.** We assessed conscientiousness using the Big Five–based Personal Characteristics Inventory (PCI; Mount & Barrick, 1995b). Employees rated 30 items on a 3-point, Likert-type scale (from 1 = disagree to 3 = agree). Evidence has demonstrated the convergent and divergent validity of the PCI with other Big Five measures (Mount, Barrick, Lafliff, & Callans, 1999). As compared with normative data (Mount et al., 1999; N = 4,556), our sample had a higher mean conscientiousness level (2.75 vs. 2.51) and a lower standard deviation (0.16 vs. 0.30), which may be due to the fact that our sample was made up of volunteers.

**Goal-focused leadership.** In consultation with line and human resources managers, we designed an upward feedback survey for the organization. As a part of this survey, employees rated their supervisors on five items assessing the degree to which they set goals and defined roles, responsibilities, and priorities. This scale is included in the Appendix. In an exploratory factor analysis of the five goal-focused leadership items, only one factor had an eigenvalue greater than 1. This factor explained 75.8% of the variance. Thus, we concluded that the scale represented a single leadership factor. Because supervisors may treat employees differently (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) and employees are likely most influenced by their perceptions of the supervisor’s leadership behaviors, we used individual follower perceptions of leadership in our analyses.

**Goal congruence.** At our request, the management operating team provided eight nonoperational goals (March & Simon, 1958), and we then asked the senior executive and the study participants to rank those eight goals from 1 (most important) to 8 (least important) in terms of the organization’s priorities. We calculated a person–organization goal congruence score for each employee by comparing the goal rankings of the employee with the rankings of the senior executive. To assess goal congruence, we used the D statistic profile score (Cronbach & Gleser, 1953), or the square root of the sum of the squared differences between each goal ranking of the individual and the senior executive. As higher scores reflect greater differences (i.e., greater goal incongruence), we multiplied the D statistic by –1 so that higher scores would reflect greater goal congruence and then standardized the scores.

**Job performance.** On the basis of results of job analyses and in consultation with line managers and human resources officials, we developed job performance items that were relevant to the organization. Supervisors rated their employees on seven items, which are included in the Appendix. The supervisors used the following scale: (a) 1 = weak or bottom 10%, (b) 2 = fair or next 20%, (c) 3 = good or next 40%, (d) 4 = very good or next 20%, or (e) 5 = best or top 10%.

**Control variable.** Barrick et al.’s (2001) second-order meta-analysis results revealed two generalizable personality predictors of performance, namely emotional stability and conscientiousness. Thus, we included emotional stability as a control variable in our analysis. We assessed it with the PCI’s 20-item Emotional Stability scale (Mount & Barrick, 1995b).

**Results**

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics, reliability estimates, and intercorrelations of study variables. To test Hypothesis 1, we
first regressed employee performance on the control variable, emotional stability. In the next step of the analysis, we examined the relationships of employee conscientiousness and supervisor goal-focused leadership with performance. Both conscientiousness ($\beta = .26, p < .01$) and goal-focused leadership ($\beta = .18, p < .05$) were significantly related to employee performance. Finally, we entered the Conscientiousness $\times$ Goal-Focused Leadership cross-product term at Step 3. The results of this final step of the analysis are presented in Table 2 as Model 1. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the Conscientiousness $\times$ Leadership cross-product term explained significant variance in employee performance ($\beta = .21, \Delta R^2 = .04, p < .01$). Figure 1 shows a plot of the equations at low and high levels ($-1$ and $1$ standard deviations from the mean) of goal-focused leadership. Conscientiousness was unrelated to job performance among workers whose supervisor exhibited low levels of goal-focused leadership, $\beta = .05, t(157) = 0.43, ns$ (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). However, the simple slope was significantly different from zero among workers who rated their respective supervisors as effective at goal-focused leadership, $\beta = .57, t(157) = 4.17, p < .01$.

To test Hypothesis 2, we followed the procedures suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). Support for mediated moderation requires that three conditions must be met. As reported previously, we first established that the interaction of conscientiousness and goal-focused leadership was significantly related to performance (Model 1). In Model 2, we regressed goal congruence on emotional stability, conscientiousness, leadership, and the Conscientiousness $\times$ Leadership cross-product term to determine if the interaction was significantly related to goal congruence. Finally, in Model 3, we added goal congruence as a predictor of employee performance and controlled for the Leadership $\times$ Goal Congruence interaction. Support for the hypothesis required that goal congruence was significantly related to employee performance while controlling for the Mediator $\times$ Moderator interaction and that the relationship of the Conscientiousness $\times$ Leadership cross-product term and performance was reduced in magnitude.

As reported above, the interaction between conscientiousness and goal-focused leadership predicted employee performance, satisfying the first condition for mediated moderation. As shown in Model 2, the Conscientiousness $\times$ Leadership cross-product term also significantly predicted goal congruence ($\beta = .22, \Delta R^2 = .05, p < .01$). Figure 2 shows that conscientiousness was unrelated to goal congruence among the workers rating their respective supervisors as ineffective at goal-focused leadership, $\beta = -.15, t(157) = -1.27, ns$. However, the simple slope was significantly different from zero among workers who rated their respective supervisors as effective at goal-focused leadership, $\beta = .57, t(157) = 4.17, p < .01$.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, Reliability Estimates, and Intercorrelations Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Employee emotional stability</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Employee conscientiousness</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Goal-focused leadership</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Person–organization goal congruence</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Employee performance</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Goal congruence scores are standardized. The reliability estimates ($\alpha$) are presented in the diagonal. $^p < .05$. $^{**} p < .01$.

Table 2

Summary of Regression Analysis Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variable</th>
<th>Model 1: Performance</th>
<th>Model 2: Goal congruence</th>
<th>Model 3: Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1: Control variable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional stability</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2: Main effects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.29**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal-focused leadership</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>.10**</td>
<td>.04*</td>
<td>.10**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3: Interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness $\times$ Leadership</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.17*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership $\times$ Goal Congruence</td>
<td>.04**</td>
<td>.05**</td>
<td>.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.03*</td>
<td>.18**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4: Mediator</td>
<td>Person–organization goal congruence</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.03*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>.14**</td>
<td>.09**</td>
<td>.18**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $\Delta R^2$ reflects the change in $R^2$ following each step in the hierarchical regression models. Standardized coefficients are reported for the final step in each model.

* This term was included to test the mediated moderation hypothesis. $^p < .05$. $^{**} p < .01$.

Figure 1. Goal-focused leadership as a moderator of the relationship between employee conscientiousness and employee performance.
different from zero among workers reporting a supervisor effective at goal-focused leadership, $\beta = .38, t(157) = 2.74, p < .01$. Finally, as shown in Model 3, goal congruence was significantly related to employee performance ($\beta = .19, \Delta R^2 = .03, p < .05$). When we entered goal congruence as a predictor of performance, the relationship of the interaction between conscientiousness and goal-focused leadership with performance was reduced in magnitude. Thus, goal congruence partially mediated the interactive effects of conscientiousness and goal-focused leadership on job performance.

**Discussion**

To increase the understanding of the relationship between conscientiousness and job performance and its usefulness to practicing managers, the conditions under which conscientiousness is related to job performance and the mediating processes that help explain this relationship must be more fully understood. We found that goal-focused leadership moderates the relationship between conscientiousness and job performance. When leaders provide strategic direction for employees by setting goals that are related to the organization’s vision and by defining roles, responsibilities, and priorities, conscientious employees respond with higher levels of performance. We also found that person–organization goal congruence mediated the interactive effects of conscientiousness and goal-focused leadership on job performance. Person–organization goal congruence was at its highest level among highly conscientious employees whose supervisors clearly established goals and priorities for the work unit. Goal congruence, in turn, was positively related to employee performance. Thus, one reason why highly conscientious employees who are supervised by goal-focused leaders have higher levels of job performance compared with other employees may be because their conceptualization of organizational goal priorities is consistent with that of organizational executives.

These results are consistent with trait activation theory (Tett & Guterman, 2000), which suggests that traits are more likely to be expressed in the presence of certain task, social, and organizational cues. Our results suggest that goal-focused leadership may have triggered the expression of conscientiousness, resulting in higher levels of goal congruence and job performance. When supervisors did not exhibit goal-focused leadership behaviors, even highly motivated high-conscientiousness workers may have been unaware of either existing or changing priorities and organizational objectives. Without a clear understanding of organizational objectives, their tendencies toward achievement and dependability may not have been triggered.

**Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research**

The present study has several strengths that help to identify the mechanisms by which conscientiousness and performance are related. First, we tested trait activation theory (Tett & Guterman, 2000) by examining goal-focused leadership as a moderator that enables the expression of conscientiousness. In addition, we examined one mediating mechanism through which conscientiousness and leadership interact to impact job performance. Thus, our study contributes to the personality–performance literature by addressing both when and how conscientiousness is related to performance. Finally, we found support for the hypothesized moderator and mediator even after controlling for conscientiousness, goal-focused leadership, and emotional stability.

Despite these strengths, the present study does have limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, we examined only one type of leadership as a moderator of the relationship between conscientiousness and performance. It should be noted that goal-focused leadership is conceptually similar to other leadership behaviors, such as initiating structure. However, other leadership behaviors may differentially impact the relationship between conscientiousness and performance. For example, transactional leaders may be able to motivate employees low in conscientiousness by using extrinsic rewards. Additionally, conscientiousness may serve as a substitute for some leadership behaviors (Kerr & Jermier, 1978), such that conscientious employees may perform well even in the absence of the close management provided by a directive leader. Thus, future researchers might examine how other leadership behaviors impact the relationship between conscientiousness and performance.

Second, whereas we examined goal-focused leadership as a moderator of the relationship between conscientiousness and performance, it is likely that other aspects of the situation may also facilitate the expression of conscientiousness or compensate for low levels of conscientiousness. Examining the impact of situational characteristics on personality–performance relationships is made more difficult by the lack of an organizing taxonomy of situational characteristics (Barrick, Mitchell, & Stewart, 2003). However, future research on situational moderators of personality–performance relationships may be aided by Tett and Burnett’s (2003) theory that suggests that personality traits may be activated by cues from the task, social, and organizational environments in which employees work.

Third, we operationalized goal congruence using a $D$ score to compare the goal rankings of each employee with goal rankings of a senior executive in the organization. Because of concerns with the $D$ score, including a disregard for the direction of the difference, Edwards (1993, 1995) suggested alternative methods for examining goal congruence as a dependent variable and an independent variable. However, these methods require that goal importance be assessed normatively rather than ipsatively, precluding comparison among goals to establish individuals’ perceptions of...
goal priorities. Thus, we operationalized goal congruence using a $D$ score. Future research is needed to replicate our results using normative assessments of goal importance and polynomial regression.

Additionally, consistent with research on goal congruence (e.g., Vancouver & Schmitt, 1991; Witt, 1998), we conceptualized goal congruence on the basis of a comparison of each employee’s perception of organizational goal priorities with that of an organizational representative. We did not assess consistency between the employee’s personal work goals and organizational priorities. Aligning employee’s personal work goals with organizational priorities may be another way in which goal-focused leaders enable conscientious workers to perform effectively.

Finally, we used cross-sectional data to test the hypotheses in this study. On the basis of trait activation theory, we hypothesized that goal-focused leadership activates the expression of conscientious behaviors and that the interaction of conscientiousness and goal-focused leadership positively impacts employee performance partly because of higher levels of person–organization goal congruence. However, it is also possible that conscientious employees and employees with high person–organization goal congruence show an interest in organizational goals and thus encourage their supervisors to exhibit more goal-focused leadership behaviors. Longitudinal research is needed to explore these possible reciprocal relationships.

**Implications for Management Practice**

Gellatly (1996) put forth that it is “shortsighted to make a selection on the basis of conscientiousness and then place new hires in work environments that potentially inhibit the natural expression” (p. 480) of conscientious behavior. Although research has shown that conscientious workers have tendencies toward being dependable and achievement oriented, trait activation theory suggests that characteristics of the task, the social environment, and the organization’s climate and culture influence the extent to which these tendencies are expressed. Specifically, the results of the current study suggest that supervisors should clearly communicate organizational goals and align employees’ efforts with these goals to enable the expression of conscientious behaviors. When conscientious employees are supervised by goal-focused leaders, the employees are more likely to perform at a higher level compared with other employees.

Our results also suggest that organizations and managers should work to align employees’ perceptions of organizational goal priorities with the goal priorities of senior executives. When employees are aware of organizational goal priorities, they are more likely to direct their efforts toward organizationally valued activities, resulting in higher job performance ratings. Our results suggest that supervisors can positively influence the person–organization goal congruence of their employees by communicating organizational goals and aligning employees’ efforts with these goals.

**References**


Appendix

Goal-Focused Leadership and Performance Scales

Goal-Focused Leadership Items

1. To what extent does [name of supervisor] provide direction and define priorities?

2. To what extent does [name of supervisor] clarify specific roles and responsibilities?

3. To what extent does [name of supervisor] translate strategies into understandable objectives and plans?

4. To what extent does [name of supervisor] link the unit’s mission to the mission of the company overall?

5. To what extent does [name of supervisor] follow up to make sure the job gets done?

Performance Items

1. [Employee name] consistently produces a high quantity or volume of work.

2. [Employee name] consistently produces a high quality of work.

3. [Employee name] finds creative and effective solutions to problems.

4. [Employee name] works through problems independently whenever possible.

5. [Employee name] does not knowingly repeat mistakes.

6. [Employee name] uses critical thinking skills to analyze problems.

7. [Employee name] is eager to learn new systems or procedures.

Received July 16, 2007
Revision received July 9, 2008
Accepted September 4, 2008