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The Downside of Goal-Focused Leadership: The Role of Personality in Subordinate Exhaustion

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Exhaustion has a significant impact on employees and organizations, and leader behavior may affect it. We applied conservation of resources theory to test propositions regarding the joint effects of goal-focused leadership (GFL) and personality on employee exhaustion. We proposed that the relationship between GFL and exhaustion depends on employees' standing on both conscientiousness and emotional stability. Specifically, we expected that high-conscientiousness subordinates experience greater compatibility with a goal-focused leader because of their predisposition to direct resources toward achievement and goal setting, resulting in lower exhaustion under such a leader than among low-conscientiousness employees. Furthermore, high emotional stability may compensate for GFL incompatibility among low-conscientiousness employees by providing additional resources to manage GFL. In contrast, employees low on both traits likely experience greater exhaustion under a goal-focused leader compared with other employees. Results revealed a 3-way interaction in 2 independent samples and were generally supportive of our predictions. GFL was associated with heightened exhaustion among individuals in the low-emotional-stability, low-conscientiousness group but not among workers having any other trait combination.

Keywords: exhaustion, goal-focused leadership, conscientiousness, emotional stability, personality

An employee's immediate supervisor is perhaps one of the most influential people in his or her work life, affecting performance, attitudes, and well-being (Arnold, Turner, Barling, Kelloway, & McKee, 2007; Chemers, 2000; Den Hartog & Koopman, 2002; Denstein, 2005; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969; Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004). One area in which leaders may play a particularly important role is subordinate exhaustion. Exhaustion is one indicator of well-being, characterized by a lack of energy at work. It is contagious among employees (Bakker, van Emmerik, & Euwema, 2006) and can be quite costly to organizations and individuals, leading to turnover, poor health, dissatisfaction, and lower performance (Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003; Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007; R. B. Harris, Harris, & Harvey, 2008).

Although scholars have explored leadership as it relates to employee well-being (e.g., Arnold et al., 2007; Kuoppala, Laminpää, Liira, & Vainio, 2008; Sparr & Sonnentag, 2008), they have rarely discussed this relationship within a resource-based theoretical framework of stress. One exception is in the area of social support, which is a well-known buffer of stress, particularly when it originates from one's supervisor (R. B. Harris et al., 2008). In the present study, we framed goal-focused leadership (GFL; Colbert & Witt, 2009) within a conservation of resources (COR) framework (Hobfoll, 1989), theorizing that GFL behaviors influence subordinate exhaustion by providing supportive resources or imposing demands that consume resources.

GFL includes task-oriented leadership behaviors that emphasize goal achievement (Colbert & Witt, 2009). GFL is particularly interesting to discuss within a COR framework because it may be experienced as helpful by some workers and harmful by others. Building on recent work emphasizing the interaction between personality and situational factors in determining one's susceptibility to strain (Barrick & Mount, 2005; Johnson & Ostendorf, 1993), we suggest that personality determines how GFL is experienced and, therefore, whether it relates to subordinate exhaustion (Hetland, Sandal, & Johnsen, 2007). We studied the joint effects of GFL and two personality traits—emotional stability and conscientiousness—on employee exhaustion. Testing our hypotheses in two samples, we expected this study to contribute to the stress and leadership literatures in at least two ways: (a) by building our knowledge of the nomological network of GFL and (b) by considering the compensatory effects of two personality traits and a situational factor on exhaustion.

Resources, Demands, and Leadership

Exhaustion is the central dimension of burnout, a state of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy that results from chronic stress. Exhaustion is the energy component of burnout and has received the most consistent empirical support in its association with predictors and outcomes compared with the cynicism and inefficacy dimensions (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Maslach, Shaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). COR theory emphasizes the importance of resources in avoiding burnout in general and exhaustion in particular (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001; Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Resources are "those objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individual or that serve as a means for attainment" of other resources (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 516). Resources minimize the impact of work-related stressors, protecting individuals from neg-

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ative consequences of stress. COR theory predicts that when resources are unavailable, threatened, or invested with insufficient gain, individuals are likely to experience a general state of burnout and, more specifically, exhaustion (Hobfoll, 2001). Job demands are stressors that consume or threaten resources. They are “physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort” (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001, p. 501). The availability of resources that can be used to address demands largely determines the impact of those demands on employees, rather than their objective presence.

A primary responsibility of leaders is to provide resources (e.g., emotional support, functioning equipment, clear communication, and flexible work hours) so that employees can successfully complete work; this is one way leaders help subordinates avoid exhaustion (Chemers, 2000; K. J. Harris & Kacmar, 2006; Hobfoll, 2001; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). A supervisor who exhibits GFL behaviors emphasizes goal achievement by clarifying goals, suggesting means by which goals might be achieved, providing task structure, and following up to ensure goal achievement (Colbert & Witt, 2009). These behaviors minimize the need to spend cognitive resources in the preparation and execution of task activities because they identify the how, what, and why of work requirements and provide resources (e.g., tools) to accomplish those requirements. GFL behaviors also minimize the need to spend emotional resources because they reduce uncertainty and ambiguity, which are well-known stressors (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Jackson & Schuler, 1985). In other words, for many subordinates, GFL behavior contributes to their reservoir of resources, reducing the likelihood of exhaustion. But this may not be true for all subordinates, particularly those who do not react favorably to GFL behaviors (Hetland et al., 2007).

The Role of Personality

Contingency theories assert that leadership behaviors are not universally effective, but instead their effectiveness depends on a number of factors, including characteristics of subordinates (e.g., De Hoogh, Den Hartog, & Koopman, 2005; Fiedler, 1964; Gerstner & Day, 1997; House, 1996; Kellerman, 2007; Kerr & Jermier, 1978). Goal-focused leaders explicitly encourage subordinates to direct resources in specific ways, including to self-regulatory and goal-related on-task activities. They also implicitly discourage off-task activities (e.g., emotion-focused coping), on which some subordinates may rely to avoid exhaustion. Individuals who are not predisposed to devote significant resources to self-regulatory and on-task activities, as well as those having few resources to spare, are likely to experience GFL as a demand. Hence, they are likely to experience exhaustion.

Individual differences in subordinate personality likely determine the type and quantity of resources available, as well as how they are expended (Hetland et al., 2007). Emotional stability and conscientiousness, two traits of the Big Five model of personality that predict many work-related outcomes (e.g., job performance, deviance; Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001; Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007), likely influence resource availability and utilization. We expected that conscientiousness predisposes subordinates to expend resources in ways that are compatible with GFL (Colbert & Witt, 2009) and that emotional stability compensates for any

incompatibility by providing additional resources to manage GFL, even when it is experienced as a demand.

Conscientiousness

High-conscientiousness workers are detail, achievement, and planning oriented; dependable; hardworking; efficient; and organized (McCrae & John, 1992; Zellars, Perrewé, Hochwarter, & Anderson, 2006). They tend to be action oriented in addressing challenges, using proactive, rational, problem-focused coping strategies (Connor-Smith & Flaschbart, 2007; Humphreys & Revelle, 1984; Kuhl & Koch, 1984). In contrast, low-conscientiousness workers are easily distracted, disorganized, careless, and apathetic (Johnson & Ostendorf, 1993).

We posit that individuals with high levels of conscientiousness may experience positive well-being when assigned to a goal-focused leader (Colbert & Witt, 2009; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). From a COR perspective, conscientiousness acts as a resource that enables employees to set high performance goals and efficiently deploy their resources toward on-task activities that help them meet those goals, thereby conserving energy and reducing exhaustion (Halbesleben, Harvey, & Bolino, 2009; Judge & Ilies, 2002; Zellars et al., 2006). Therefore, high-conscientiousness employees are more likely to successfully leverage the resources offered by a goal-focused leader than those low in conscientiousness. Additional expectations to engage in self-regulatory activities are also likely to be compatible with their predisposition, because high-conscientiousness employees are inherently concerned with achievement, goal setting, and planning (Colbert & Witt, 2009; Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989; Zellars et al., 2006).

In contrast, low-conscientiousness individuals may not successfully apply resources provided by a goal-focused leader because they are not generally goal or task oriented, resulting in little return on resource investment. Further, when they are confronted with a goal-focused leader who requires them to invest their time, attention, and other resources toward activities that they are naturally inclined to neglect, they may experience GFL as demand on their valued resources. Therefore, we posit that GFL generally acts as a resource for high-conscientiousness employees but generally acts as a demand for low-conscientiousness employees (Atwater & Dionne, 2007).

COR theory also asserts that when individuals have other resources available to address demands, they are unlikely to manifest strain outcomes (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001). Thus, whereas GFL may act as a demand for low-conscientiousness employees, whether those employees manifest strain outcomes likely depends as well on the availability of other resources, including characteristics associated with emotional stability.

Emotional Stability

Emotional stability is the most consistent Big Five predictor of exhaustion (Hobfoll, 2001; Kim, Shin, & Umbreit, 2007; Lange-laan, Bakker, van Doomen, & Schaufeli, 2006; Maslach & Leiter, 2008). High emotional stability is associated with high self-esteem, stress resilience, optimism, and low negative affectivity (Johnson & Ostendorf, 1993; Tellegen, 1985). From a COR perspective, these characteristics serve as personal resources that

protect against exhaustion and other forms of strain, partly because they equip individuals to face challenges with a calm, optimistic temperament that minimizes resource loss (Giardini & Frese, 2006; Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll, Johnson, Ennis, & Jackson, 2003; Hobfoll & Lerman, 1989; Schwarzer, Boehmer, Luszczynska, Mohamed, & Knoll, 2005; Zellars et al., 2006).

Emotional stability frees attentional, cognitive, and other resources to address demands in the work environment, rather than dwell on internal states (Connor-Smith & Flaschbart, 2007). In contrast, emotional instability consumes resources through anxiety, anger, and/or sensitivity to negative conditions. Low-emotional-stability workers tend to experience high levels of dissatisfaction, stress, and self-doubt (Hogan & Briggs, 1984; Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998) and view the world with a pessimistic and defensive lens, interpreting many stimuli as threatening (McCrae & John, 1992). State oriented, they use emotion-focused coping strategies; in doing so, they are easily distracted off-task by worry and angst (Connor-Smith & Flaschbart, 2007; Humphreys & Revelle, 1984; Kuhl & Koch, 1984; Walsh, Balint, Smolira, Fredericksen, & Madsen, 2009).

Joint Effects of Conscientiousness and Emotional Stability

Because personality traits together compose an overall personality profile, distinct traits can act in a compensatory fashion (Barrick & Mount, 2005). For example, we have separately described individuals high in conscientiousness as achievement driven, organized, and dependable and individuals low in emotional stability as anxious and self-doubting. But considering the traits together, high-conscientiousness, low-emotional-stability individuals have been described as particular and perfectionistic (De Raad, Hendriks, & Hofstee, 1992; De Raad & Hofstee, 1993; Johnson & Ostendorf, 1993). Therefore, the level of one trait influences the overall personality profile of an individual with high (or low) levels of another trait.

We suggest that GFL is associated with reduced exhaustion when individuals possess a GFL-compatible combination of emotional stability and conscientiousness. That is, GFL may be beneficial for employees who efficiently use the resources provided by a goal-focused leader (i.e., those high in conscientiousness) as well as employees who possess sufficient resources to effectively manage the demands of a goal-focused leader (i.e., those high in emotional stability). Therefore, we expected that emotional stability affects the relationship between GFL and exhaustion among low- rather than high-conscientiousness individuals. Because conscientiousness is a highly salient trait to GFL, individuals with high levels of it likely experience low levels of exhaustion, even if emotional stability is low (Colbert & Witt, 2009). However, high emotional stability may protect less-GFL-compatible subordinates (i.e., those low in conscientiousness) from exhaustion. Below, we describe our specific predictions.

High emotional stability and high conscientiousness. Persons high in both emotional stability and conscientiousness are likely to thrive under a goal-focused leader. Individuals with this trait combination have been described as logical, decisive, systematic, and self-reliant (De Raad et al., 1992; De Raad & Hofstee, 1993; Johnson & Ostendorf, 1993). They likely take a calm and confident (high emotional stability), organized and focused (high

conscientiousness) approach to setting and achieving goals while efficiently and effectively leveraging and deploying resources. Hence, we expected that GFL is negatively associated with exhaustion among these employees.

Low emotional stability and high conscientiousness. When persons low in emotional stability and high in conscientiousness have a goal-focused leader, their high conscientiousness may compensate for their preoccupation with negative emotions, allowing them to direct their personal resources, as well as the additional resources provided by their goal-focused leader, on-task to successfully respond to challenging goals. We therefore expected that GFL is negatively associated with exhaustion among these employees.

High emotional stability and low conscientiousness. High emotional stability provides confidence and outward focus, equipping even low-conscientiousness individuals with a “greater capacity to allocate resources to accomplish tasks” (Barrick & Mount, 2005, p. 360). These tendencies help high-emotional-stability, low-conscientiousness individuals effectively leverage the resources offered by their goal-focused leader. Thus, we expected a negative GFL–exhaustion relationship among low-conscientiousness, high-emotional-stability workers.

Low emotional stability and low conscientiousness. Persons low in both emotional stability and conscientiousness are scatter-brained, compulsive, self-indulgent, discontented, and irrational (De Raad et al., 1992; De Raad & Hofstee, 1993; Hofstee, De Raad, & Goldberg, 1992; Johnson & Ostendorf, 1993). GFL is likely to create angst among these workers for at least two reasons. First, because they are not predisposed to direct resources toward goal achievement (i.e., low conscientiousness), they likely experience GFL behaviors as demands rather than as resources. For instance, maintaining focus on tasks may be draining, and goal monitoring may be experienced as undue pressure. Second, they have few resources available overall with which to manage the demands of a goal-focused leader, as they are frequently distracted by emotional fluctuation (i.e., low emotional stability). For instance, goal-related feedback may threaten their self-worth, inducing additional negative affect and consuming their already limited resource supply. Accordingly, we expected a positive GFL–exhaustion relationship among low-conscientiousness, low-emotional-stability individuals.

Hypothesis: The GFL–exhaustion relationship is jointly moderated by conscientiousness and emotional stability. The relationship is positive among low-emotional-stability, low-conscientiousness workers and negative among workers with all other combinations of emotional stability and conscientiousness.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We collected data from two samples. In Sample 1, 252 customer service providers with 47 supervisors in an inbound call center completed a paper-and-pencil survey during work hours (83% female; 69% White/Caucasian, 19% African American, 4% Hispanic, 6% Asian, and 2% Native Indian; mean age = 34.7 years; mean tenure = 5.71 years). In Sample 2, 392 manual laborers with

41 supervisors working in an organization that provided light repair and construction services (85% response rate) completed an anonymous paper-and-pencil survey during preshift meetings. The organization did not allow inclusion of demographics.

Measurement

Exhaustion. In Sample 1, we used the four-item ($\alpha = .75$; e.g., “I feel drained after dealing with customers”) Witt, Andrews, and Carlson (2004) exhaustion scale. It is similar to the exhaustion subscale of the commonly used Maslach Burnout Inventory–General Survey (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996) but was designed specifically for workers in customer service roles. In Sample 2, we used the five-item ($\alpha = .84$; e.g., “I feel emotionally drained from my work”) exhaustion subscale of the inventory. Participants answered using a 5-point response scale in both samples (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

Personality. In Sample 1, 30 items from Mount and Barrick’s (1995) Personal Characteristics Inventory assessed conscientiousness ($\alpha = .74$), and 20 items measured emotional stability ($\alpha = .80$), both featuring a 3-point scale (1 = *inaccurate*, 3 = *accurate*). In Sample 2, 10 items from Goldberg’s (1999) Big Five factor markers in the International Personality Item Pool assessed emotional stability ($\alpha = .76$), and 10 items measured conscientiousness ($\alpha = .71$), both featuring a 5-point scale (1 = *very inaccurate*, 5 = *very accurate*).

Goal-focused leadership. In both samples, we used Colbert and Witt’s (2009) five-item GFL scale ($\alpha = .90$; e.g., “This supervisor follows up to make sure the job gets done”). Employees rated their first-line supervisors using a 5-point response scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

Control variables. We assessed four demographics in Sample 1: ethnicity, tenure, age, and gender. Maslach et al. (2001) noted that younger workers experience more burnout, whereas research is equivocal on the effect of gender and ethnicity. The lack of

information on ethnicity may be due to its broad treatment in burnout studies (i.e., nonminority vs. minority; e.g., Cropanzano et al., 2003). However, given the prevalence of cross-cultural differences in many workplace phenomena, including exhaustion (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2001; Kern & Grandey, 2009; Meglino & Korsgaard, 2004; O’Reilly & Roberts, 1973), we were interested in systematic differences in exhaustion across specific ethnic groups. We also measured tenure because call-center-based customer service is a profession with high burnout rates, and we expected that longer tenure might predict higher levels of exhaustion (Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Singh, Goolsby, & Rhoads, 1994; Tsai, 2001). We followed common practices for measuring each of these (i.e., age and tenure in years, ethnicity in terms of five categories represented in the organization, and gender as 1 = male and 2 = female).

Results

Because we assessed all constructs using self-report measures, we first applied confirmatory factor analysis to test the impact of common method variance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). We allowed every item to load on its respective construct and an uncorrelated latent variable (method factor). The variance explained by the method factor was 7% in Sample 1 and 18% in Sample 2; both were below the 25% average in published studies (Williams, Cote, & Buckley, 1989). Hence, we proceeded with hypothesis testing.

Table 1 presents correlations for Sample 1 above the diagonal and for Sample 2 below the diagonal. Emotional stability and conscientiousness were negatively related to exhaustion in both samples (Sample 1: $r_s = -.33$ and $-.30$, respectively; Sample 2: $r_s = -.42$ and $-.25$, respectively; $p < .01$). GFL was negatively related to exhaustion in Sample 2 ($r = -.14$, $p < .05$) but not in Sample 1 ($r = -.07$, *ns*).

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations of Study Variables and Demographics

Variable	Sample 1			Sample 2													
	M	SD	α	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Ethnicity ^a																	
1. African American	0.19	0.39					—	-.10	-.12	-.72**	-.03	-.11	.03	.09	.05	-.13*	-.06
2. Hispanic	0.04	0.20						—	-.05	-.32**	.04	.08	-.11	-.08	.07	.08	.03
3. Asian	0.06	0.24							—	-.38**	-.12	.02	.02	.18*	-.07	-.08	.08
4. White/Caucasian	0.69	0.46								—	.08	.06	.02	-.11	-.06	.11	-.03
5. Tenure	5.71	4.92									—	.43**	-.02	-.03	-.01	.08	.08
6. Age	34.55	9.83										—	.03	-.09	.11	.12	.13*
7. Gender ^a	0.83	0.38											—	.02	-.07	.03	-.08
8. Exhaustion	2.00 ^b	0.65	.75	2.87	1.02	.84								—	-.33**	-.30**	-.07
9. Emotional stability	2.39 ^c	0.36	.80	3.24	0.73	.76									—	.40**	.10
10. Conscientiousness	2.73 ^c	0.19	.74	3.66	0.68	.71										—	.03
11. Goal-focused leadership	3.31 ^b	0.96	.90	3.42	1.06	.90											—

Note. Correlations for Sample 1 ($N = 252$) are presented above the diagonal, and those for Sample 2 ($N = 392$) are presented below the diagonal. All variables in Sample 2 were measured on a 5-point scale.

^a Categorical variables were dummy-coded such that for each category of ethnicity, 1 indicates group membership in that category and 0 indicates nongroup membership (reference group was Native Indian), whereas for gender, 1 indicates female. For the Native Indian ethnic group, $M = 0.02$, $SD = 0.13$; and correlations with the study variables were $-.10$, $.08$, $.03$, and $.03$ for exhaustion, emotional stability, conscientiousness, and goal-focused leadership, respectively (none reached significance at $p < .05$). ^b Measured on a 5-point response scale. ^c Measured on a 3-point response scale.

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

After dummy-coding ethnicity and gender in Sample 1 (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003), Asian ethnicity was the only control significantly associated with exhaustion ($r = .18, p < .01$; Asians were more likely than non-Asians to experience exhaustion). However, Sample 1 results were identical with and without this control, so we report only the results without it (Becker, 2005).

Participants were naturally clustered into workgroups by virtue of reporting to different supervisors. Therefore, before testing the hypothesis, we used analysis of variance to calculate intraclass correlations (ICCs) to determine whether this clustering influenced the results. The results suggest that they did not. The ICCs were low, and the F values were nonsignificant in both samples (Sample 1: $ICC = .05, F = 1.30, ns$; Sample 2: $ICC = .03, F = 1.30, ns$). Nevertheless, we conducted both multilevel modeling (PROC MIXED in SAS) and ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Specifically, we created cross-product terms using centered predictors and then entered the main effects at Step 1, the three two-way interaction terms at Step 2, and the three-way interaction term at Step 3 (see Table 2). The results of the multilevel modeling and OLS regression analyses were essentially identical; for the sake of parsimony (i.e., multilevel modeling does not have a direct equivalent for R^2 in OLS), we report only the results of the OLS regression analyses.

At Step 1, both emotional stability and conscientiousness reached significance in Sample 1 ($\beta_s = -.26$ and $-.19$, respectively; $p < .01, R^2 = .13$), but only emotional stability was significant in Sample 2 ($\beta = -.40, p < .01, R^2 = .18$). At Step 2, only the Emotional Stability \times GFL term was significant ($\beta = -.14, p < .05, \Delta R^2 = .03, p < .05, R^2 = .16$) in Sample 1. In Sample 2, the Emotional Stability \times GFL ($\beta = -.17, p < .01$) and Emotional Stability \times Conscientiousness ($\beta = .13, p < .05$) terms

contributed unique variance ($\Delta R^2 = .04, p < .05, R^2 = .22$). At Step 3, the three-way interaction terms added unique variance in both samples (Sample 1: $\beta = .12, \Delta R^2 = .01, p < .05, R^2 = .17$; Sample 2: $\beta = .12, \Delta R^2 = .01, p < .05, R^2 = .23$). These are meaningful effect sizes warranting further investigation (Champoux & Peters, 1987).

To illustrate the form of the three-way interactions, we created four combinations of emotional stability and conscientiousness (cutoffs at one standard deviation above and below the mean) and plotted one GFL–exhaustion slope for each group (Dawson & Richter, 2006; Stone & Hollenbeck, 1989). We present the plots in Figures 1 and 2 for Samples 1 and 2, respectively, and present the simple slopes and slope difference tests corresponding to these figures in Table 3. As expected, the GFL–exhaustion relationship was positive among low-emotional-stability, low-conscientiousness individuals (Group 4) in both samples, and this slope was significantly different from those of the other three groups. The slopes for the two low-conscientiousness groups (Group 2, high emotional stability, and Group 4, low emotional stability) were significantly different from each other in both samples, suggesting a compensatory effect of high emotional stability. In Sample 1, all slopes except for Group 4 were nonsignificant, rather than negative as we predicted. In Sample 2, however, all slopes except for Group 4 were negative as predicted. Thus, our hypothesis was partially supported in Sample 1 and fully supported in Sample 2.

We were concerned that our results could have been influenced by the degree to which different individuals perceived or actually received varying amounts of GFL, thereby affecting the GFL–exhaustion relationship. For example, perhaps high-conscientiousness, high-emotional-stability individuals receive less GFL from their leader because the leader does not consider it

Table 2
Hierarchical Regression Coefficients for Exhaustion: Goal-Focused Leadership \times Conscientiousness \times Emotional Stability

Predictor	Sample 1		Sample 2	
	β	t	β	t
Step 1				
Emotional stability	-.26**	-4.11**	-.40**	-7.35**
Conscientiousness	-.19**	-3.08**	-.04	-0.80
Goal-focused leadership	-.00	-0.00	-.09	-1.78
Step 2				
Emotional stability	-.22**	-3.45**	-.39**	-6.89**
Conscientiousness	-.19**	-2.95**	-.11	-1.03
Goal-focused leadership	.03	0.53	-.11*	-2.17*
Emotional Stability \times Conscientiousness	.02	0.39	.13*	2.58*
Emotional Stability \times Goal-Focused Leadership	-.14*	-2.27*	-.17**	-3.15**
Conscientiousness \times Goal-Focused Leadership	-.07	-1.22	-.04	-0.74
Step 3				
Emotional stability	-.22**	-3.45**	-.41**	-7.23**
Conscientiousness	-.20**	-3.06**	-.06	-1.07
Goal-focused leadership	-.01	-0.15	-.15**	-2.87**
Emotional Stability \times Conscientiousness	.01	0.16	.16**	3.10**
Emotional Stability \times Goal-Focused Leadership	-.15*	-2.32*	-.17**	-3.02**
Conscientiousness \times Goal-Focused Leadership	-.06	-1.00	-.07	-1.30
Emotional Stability \times Conscientiousness \times Goal-Focused Leadership	.12*	2.05*	.12*	2.23*

Note. Step 1, Sample 1: adjusted $R^2 = .13$. Step 1, Sample 2: adjusted $R^2 = .18$. Step 2, Sample 1: adjusted $R^2 = .16, \Delta R^2 = .03, p < .05$. Step 2, Sample 2: adjusted $R^2 = .22, \Delta R^2 = .04, p < .05$. Step 3, Sample 1: adjusted $R^2 = .17, \Delta R^2 = .01, p < .05$. Step 3, Sample 2: adjusted $R^2 = .23, \Delta R^2 = .01, p < .05$.

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

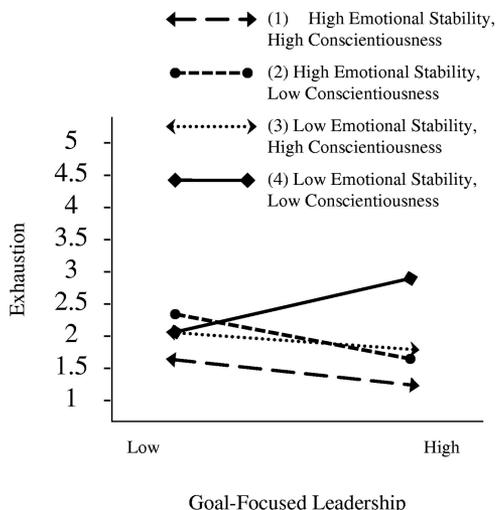


Figure 1. Three-way interaction plot of goal-focused leadership, emotional stability, and conscientiousness predicting exhaustion: Sample 1.

necessary. Alternatively, they may perceive less GFL because such leadership behaviors are consistent with their own demeanor. Therefore, we conducted a two-way analysis of variance with post hoc comparisons of GFL scores across all four personality trait combinations to rule out these alternative explanations, using the same four groups as in Figures 1 and 2.

For Sample 1, the *F* omnibus test was not significant ($F = 0.63, ns$), indicating that no group means were significantly different from one another. For Sample 2, however, the model omnibus test was significant ($F = 4.74, p < .05$), indicating that at least two groups were significantly different. The Tukey post hoc comparisons revealed that only Groups 1 and 2 were significantly different from each other (high-high vs. high emotional stability, low conscientiousness). Because the results of the two-way analysis of variance in both studies indicated that only one pair among the 12 pairwise comparisons was significantly different, we concluded that different treatment or perceptions of GFL among the trait groups were not driving results of the regression analyses in either sample.

Discussion

We tested hypotheses based on COR theory in two samples to explicate how personality influences the GFL–exhaustion relationship. Personality traits are compensatory in determining preferences, predispositions, and behaviors, including resource availability and utilization (Halbesleben et al., 2009; Hetland et al., 2007; Zellars et al., 2006). Our results suggest that GFL is likely to be helpful among high-conscientiousness workers but harmful among those low in conscientiousness. However, our results also suggest that high emotional stability compensates for low conscientiousness by protecting individuals from exhaustion when paired with a goal-focused leader. In contrast, subordinates low in both traits appear most likely to experience increased exhaustion when paired with a goal-focused leader.

Research Contributions

This study contributes to the literature in at least two ways. First, we have advanced the field’s knowledge of the nomological network of GFL by exploring it in conjunction with two personality traits and exhaustion. In responding to House’s (1996) call for research on the contingencies of leadership theory, we found that GFL behaviors are associated with favorable outcomes for some subordinates but not others.

Second, our study contributes to stress research by exploring the role of personality in exhaustion. The three-way interactions in two independent samples highlight the compensatory nature of distinct personality traits and the importance of exploring their joint (rather than isolated) effects in stress research. We contribute specifically to COR theory by suggesting ways in which personality traits may act as compensatory personal resources and influence the degree to which situational demands are related to exhaustion.

Implications for Practice

Our findings may also hold implications for practice. Specifically, in line with individualized leadership practices (e.g., Gerstner & Day, 1997; House, 1996; Kellerman, 2007), we suggest that efforts to promote employee well-being include consideration of fit between leadership style and subordinate personality. Supervisors who adapt their communication style, resource allocations, and motivational approach to subordinate personalities are likely to be most effective. Although a supervisor’s natural reaction to low-conscientiousness, low-emotional-stability employees may be increased interaction, providing more goal direction, communication, and monitoring (i.e., GFL), our results suggest that these tactics might be harmful and perhaps counterproductive. Furthermore, these activities consume energy of the supervisor, increasing his or her risk for exhaustion (Hobfoll, 1989). Some research shows that both positive and negative leadership styles can be construed as stressful; some employees fare best when interactions

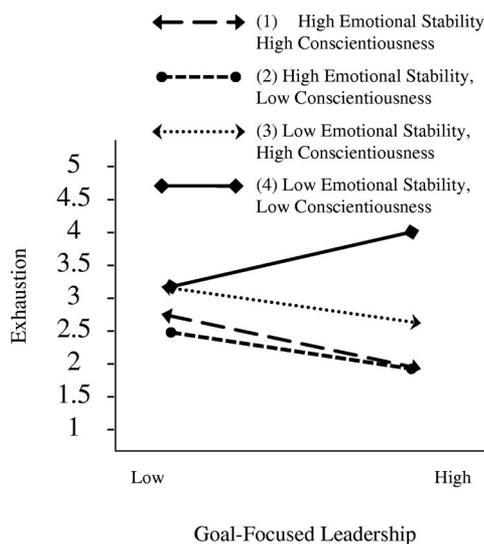


Figure 2. Three-way interaction plot of goal-focused leadership, emotional stability, and conscientiousness predicting exhaustion: Sample 2.

Table 3
Simple Slopes

Group	Sample 1		Sample 2	
	Slope	<i>t</i>	Slope	<i>t</i>
1 (high emotional stability, high conscientiousness)	-.06	-0.77	-.27	-3.30**
2 (high emotional stability, low conscientiousness)	-.17	-1.53	-.30	-2.91**
3 (low emotional stability, high conscientiousness)	-.06	-0.54	-.14	-1.23
4 (low emotional stability, low conscientiousness)	.26	2.95**	.16	2.00*
Slope difference				
1 and 2		0.99		0.74
1 and 3		-0.03		-0.28
1 and 4		-2.60**		-3.87**
2 and 3		-0.70		-0.85
2 and 4		-4.07**		-3.63**
3 and 4		-3.45**		-2.37*

Note. Group numbers correspond to groups listed in Figures 4 and 5. Slope difference tests were calculated with Dawson and Richter's (2006) recommendations.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

with management are minimal (Hall et al., 2006; Hetland et al., 2007; Wilk & Moynihan, 2005). Future research is needed to identify the ideal strategy for managing these types of employees.

Even when leadership behaviors are perceived as stressors, they may be more feasible to address than other situational stressors (e.g., workload). Consultants typically target personal characteristics, despite evidence suggesting that a combination of person- and situation-focused strategies is superior in reducing exhaustion (Halbesleben, Osburn, & Mumford, 2006; Le Blanc & Schaufeli, 2008; Maslach & Goldberg, 1998). Our study highlights a personal and situational factor (i.e., leadership) that can be more easily addressed than most; leaders can adjust their own styles of leadership more easily than they can change the entire work environment.

Limitations

We emphasize four limitations of this study. First, we exclusively used self-report methodology. Confirmatory factor analyses revealed that common method variance likely did not bias our results any more than has been the case in previously published studies. Given this empirical evidence, the common practice of using self-report to assess these constructs (e.g., Diefendorff & Mehta, 2007; Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007; Le Blanc, Hox, Schaufeli, Taris, & Peeters, 2007), and the need for self-reports of these constructs from a conceptual standpoint (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Parasuraman & Alutto, 1981), we cautiously suggest that self-report provided the most relevant view of each construct. Still, we emphasize that a range of potential sources of variance in responses must be considered, and these may have biased our results (Spector, 2006).

Second, our data were cross-sectional. Hence, we cannot rule out the possibility that exhaustion affects how employees report on GFL. However, personality is largely stable and thus unlikely to be significantly affected by exhaustion (Barrick & Mount, 2005).

Third, we were not able to explicitly test the processes by which personality and GFL relate to exhaustion. In developing our hypotheses, we emphasized the role of personality in resource availability and utilization. These resource processes may further determine how individuals perceive potential resources and demands (Lazarus &

Folkman, 1984; Spector, 1998), as well as the fit experienced between subordinates and supervisors. Therefore, we encourage future researchers to explicitly examine these and other mechanisms by which personality and GFL may predict the development of exhaustion to shed light on which mechanisms may be dominant.

Fourth, although our hypothesis was fully supported in Sample 2, the slopes for Groups 1 and 2 in Sample 1 were nonsignificant rather than negative, as expected. However, the distinct contexts across the two samples (e.g., differing degrees of interaction with supervisors) and lower variance across variables in Sample 1 may have affected the results.

Conclusion

Our results suggest that personality trait combinations—specifically of conscientiousness and emotional stability—play a central role in determining the nature of the association between GFL and subordinate exhaustion. In support of extant research, it appears that high-conscientiousness subordinates are inherently compatible with goal-focused leaders (Colbert & Witt, 2009). However, our results also suggest that high levels of emotional stability compensate for incompatibility, protecting subordinates from exhaustion even when they are low in conscientiousness. We recommend that researchers explore other personality traits in conjunction with GFL and other facets of leadership to better understand the relationships of leadership with strain and other work-related outcomes. Explicit measurement of the mechanisms underlying these relationships is an important next step as well. COR theory may continue to provide a useful theoretical foundation for these efforts. Given the significant cost of burnout to organizations, continued study of these issues may have important implications for organizations and employees.

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