

# Encourage or Discourage Employee Proactivity: The Role of Trust in Managerial Relationships

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## ABSTRACT

*The recent economic recession has brought to light the importance of human capitals. The contributions of employees who go above and beyond typical expectations in their performance necessitate that recreation agencies overcome their financial crises and secure their organizational survival with innovative alternatives. The notion of employee proactivity, which is characterized by self-directed and future-focused and an attempt to improve and challenge status quo in an organization (Bindl & Parker, 2010; Crant, 2000), describes as a form of behavioral manifestation that exceeds what is specified by role prescriptions. It is imperative that managers in recreation agencies have a better understanding about the ways to solicit employee proactivity. The aim of this study is to empirically investigate the relationship of being trusted by and trusting in managers with two forms of proactivity (i.e., taking charge and feedback seeking behavior) from a perspective of employees.*

**Keywords:** *trust, proactive behaviors, taking charge, feedback seeking.*

## INTRODUCTION

The recent economic recession has brought to light the importance of human capitals. The fulfillment of assigned tasks by employees is no longer sufficient in response to increasing economic uncertainty and socio-cultural and technological changes (Grant, Parker, & Collins, 2009). The contributions of employees who go above and beyond typical expectations in their performance necessitate that recreation agencies overcome their financial crises and secure their organizational survival with innovative alternatives. The notion of employee proactivity, which is characterized by self-directed and future-focused and an attempt to improve and challenge status quo in an organization (Bindl & Parker, 2010; Crant, 2000), describes as a form of behavioral manifestation that exceeds what is specified by role prescriptions. While organizational researchers have arrived at a consensus that there are multiple forms of proactive behavior (Bindl & Parker, 2010), there are increasing research attempts, at different levels of analysis, devoted to identifying factors that predispose employees to exhibit proactive behaviors (e.g., Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006).

Trust in managers has been shown to be associated with numerous desirable organizational outcomes, such as employees' job performance, organizational citizenship behavior, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007; Connell, Ferres, & Travaglione, 2003). Brower, Schoorman, and Tan (2000) note that an employee's trust in the leader and the leader's trust in the employee are distinct constructs that should not be expected to converge. Accordingly, the employee's perception of the leader's trust in him/her and the employee's trust in the leader may convey different meanings and behavioral

cues to employees. To date, there is relatively little research that examines the effects of trust within vertical dyads on employee proactivity. The aim of this study, therefore, is to empirically investigate the relationship of being trusted by and trusting in managers with two forms of proactivity (i.e., taking charge and feedback seeking behavior) from a perspective of employees.

## **HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT**

Taking charge refers to “voluntary and constructive efforts to effect organizationally functional change with respect to how work is executed within the contexts of their jobs, work units or organizations” (Morrison & Phelps, 1999, p. 403). Feedback seeking refers to that, in order to adapt to new or uncertain environments, individuals may actively seek out information in guiding their behavior (Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Cummings, 1983). Feedback seeking deploys two major strategies: feedback monitoring (employees observe various situational cues or others’ reactions to their words and deeds), and feedback inquiry (employees either explicitly or implicitly inquire as to how others perceive and evaluate their behavior). Callister, Kramer, and Turban (1999) further differentiated feedback seeking into two types based on the source of feedback: supervisor feedback seeking and peer feedback seeking. This study will focus on employees seeking feedback from supervisors.

According to leader-member exchange theory, trust evolves as a result of reciprocal exchanges between the leader and the follower, motivating them to expend efforts beyond formal contracts, help each other, and take on additional responsibilities within the organization (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The growth of trust may also reduce the propensity to be calculating (Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997) as well as mitigate the perceived risk of opportunism (Korsgaard, Brodt, & Whitener, 2002). Since taking charge is not always welcomed or valued in a work context due to fear of uncertainty, sense of insecurity, or conflict of interest (Morrison & Phelps, 1999; Grant et al., 2009), trust in managers or perceptions of being trusted by managers are likely to reduce employees’ perceptions of running the risk of being stabbed in the back when they take on personal initiative.

Ashford, Blatt, and VandeWalle (2003) suggest three primary motives underlying feedback seeking: instrumental motives, ego-based motives, and image-based motives. According to Fedor, Rensvold, and Adams (1992), employees will be more likely to use their managers as an information source when managers are more trustworthy and can provide accurate and diagnostic information. Since asking for feedback involves interacting with others and monitoring involves observing situational cues, inquiry is more visible to others and may entail greater face loss considerations than monitoring (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford et al., 2003). Perceptions of being trusted by the manager may evoke employees’ awareness to secure a positive image by reducing their feedback inquiry from their supervisors, because others may view the act of inquiry as an indication of insecurity and lack of confidence (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). On the other hand, the perception of being trusted may enhance employees’ self-confidence, which was found to be positively related to the frequency of feedback monitoring (Ashford, 1986).

Hypothesis 1: When employees’ trust in their managers is higher, they will perform taking charge, supervisor feedback inquiry, and supervisor feedback monitoring more frequently.

Hypothesis 2: When employees perceive being more trusted by their managers, they will perform taking charge and supervisor feedback monitoring more frequently, but have less frequent engagement in supervisor feedback inquiry.

Hypothesis 3: Employees' perceptions of being trusted by their managers will moderate the relationship of employees' trust in their managers with employees' taking charge, supervisor feedback inquiry, and supervisor feedback monitoring.

## METHODS

This proposed study will be conducted among full-time employees from the public sector in the recreation industry in the state of Illinois. Due to the fact that some employees working for public recreation agencies may not have email accounts, a mail survey method that is inexpensive and laborsaving will be used to collect data. The Illinois Association of Park Districts/Illinois Park & Recreation Association membership directory will be used to recruit the sample. Executive directors or human resource directors of agencies will be contacted and asked for permission to conduct this research. The questionnaire for subordinates will include demographic items, measures of trust and trust propensity, measures of self-rated taking charge and feedback seeking behavior, and supplemental items that describe relationship length, interaction frequency, promotion opportunity, and basic organizational information. A follow-up procedure will be adopted to increase the response rate. Hierarchical regression will be performed to test the direct and moderated relationships proposed in the hypotheses.

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