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The Role of Inspirational Leadership and Technology Support for Contextualization on Psychological Contract in Distributed Teams

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ABSTRACT
This study investigates how inspirational leadership and technology support for contextualization influence individuals’ psychological contract and knowledge sharing in distributed teams. Drawing on the intersection between social identity, psychological contract and leadership theories, the current research highlights the importance of inspirational leaders who foster two kinds of psychological contract obligations, namely commitment and reciprocity. The results show a significant impact of inspirational leaders on psychological contract obligations. The impact of inspirational leadership on obligations of reciprocity is strengthened when there is technology support for contextualization. Our findings suggest that psychological contract obligations can motivate employees to engage in knowledge sharing. This provides interesting implications for theory and practice in distributed teams.

Keywords
Technology contextualization, inspirational leadership, psychological contract, knowledge sharing, distributed teams

INTRODUCTION
Distributed teams face a number of unique challenges because of the problems of physical separation and technology-mediated interaction (Chang and Rousseau 2005; Jarvenpaa et al. 1998; Piccoli and Ives 2003). A key challenge is the role of leadership on team members’ motivation and behaviors (Joshi et al. 2009). In previous research, leaders are able to influence members based on the assumption that they maintain close and personalized contact with their teams. However, physical separation and geographic dispersion of distributed teams can weaken the development of close relationships and shared contexts (Kiesler and Cummings 2002). The reduced awareness and lack of common ground in technology-mediated interaction may inhibit shared understanding between leaders and members (Cramton 2001; Hinds and Bailey 2003). Therefore, this paper aims at redirecting attention to the role of leaders in distributed work environments, and the impact of inspirational leadership on members’ obligations and knowledge sharing behaviors.

Inspirational leadership involves communicating a compelling vision, expressing confidence, and energizing team members (Bass 1985). Communicating a vision helps inspirational leaders to reinforce the team’s common goals, expressing confidence in members enhances the team’s distinctiveness, and energizing members encourages interpersonal interaction in the team (Joshi et al. 2009). Prior studies suggest that the ability of leaders to communicate and create a sense of shared identification is an important determinant for motivating and sustaining work-related behaviors in their members (Reicher et al. 2005). In distributed teams, leadership creates shared identification among members from the perspectives of social and technological axes (Ye 2006). The social axis emphasizes on personalized and socialized relationships, whereby identification is formed through interactions based on the acceptance of the leader’s message (Howell and Shamir 2005; Shamir et al. 1993). The technological axis complements the social axis by supporting the communication process through contextual cues to help members to frame decisions, engage in sense making, and structure messages for better understanding and easy absorption.
(Majchrzak et al. 2005; Te' eni 2001). This is critical in distributed teams where the influence of inspirational leadership on members can be further enhanced by the use of technologies that support contextual cues.

The cognitive-affective model of communication (Te' eni 2001) has established that individuals should communicate the context in the communication process. In geographically dispersed contexts which are characterized by spatial and temporal separations, contextualization helps team members to interpret physical and social cues (Majchrzak et al. 2005; Te' eni 2001). Technology support for contextualization is the ability of technologies to support sharing of task relevant contextual information such as team accomplishment and task process. Facilitated by technology support for contextualization, members are provided collective message consistently and comprehensively. Their socialized identification becomes more salient which results in the formation of psychological contract obligations.

This study investigates how inspirational leadership, supported by technology support for contextualization, influences members’ obligations from the psychological contract perspective. A psychological contract represents the mutual beliefs and informal obligations between two parties (Chang 2008; Chang and Rousseau 2005; Coyle-Shapiro 2002; Rousseau 1995). The obligations can be formed through a developmental process that reflects leader-member exchanges over time. When these obligations are formed, a psychological contract is relatively stable and plays a fundamental role in distributed teams (Chang and Rousseau 2005). Although research has found that behaviors of leaders can inform members of their contractual obligations (Aselage and Eisenberger 2003; Rousseau 1995), very few empirical studies have examined leadership from the contractual perspective. We propose two kinds of psychological contract obligations: obligations of reciprocity and obligations of commitment. Obligations of reciprocity are defined as individuals’ beliefs that they are in the debt of benefiting others in the future when they receive treatment from others (Chang 2005; Onyx and Bullen 2000). Obligations of commitment refer to the identification with, affective attachment to, and involvement in the team (Meyer and Allen 1997; Wilson 2000). By developing good psychological contract obligations, organizations can facilitate knowledge sharing (Chang 2008), build trust (Piccoli and Ives 2003), and enhance interpersonal helping (Podsakoff et al. 2000).

Therefore this study examines the role of inspirational leadership in influencing members’ psychological contract obligations, and the effects of psychological contract obligations on knowledge sharing. It also investigates how technology support for contextualization interacts with inspirational leadership to play a role in influencing psychological contract obligations. The key research questions are:

1. What are the effects of inspirational leadership on members’ psychological contract obligations (i.e. reciprocity and commitment)?
2. What are the effects of members’ psychological contract obligations on their knowledge sharing?
3. What is the moderating effect of technology support for contextualization on the relationship between inspirational leadership and psychological contract obligations?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Leadership and Social Identity

The social identity view of leadership has been well documented to explain the leader-member relationships in organizational research. Leadership research in distributed teams argues that members’ identification depends on socialized relationship. Socialized relationship emphasizes the individuals’ collective identity based on the acceptance of the leader’s collective message (Ellemers et al. 2004). It is characterized by social identification through group membership and a perception of group successes and failure as personal successes and failures (Ashforth and Mael 1989). It involves the collective message delivered by the leader in technology-mediated communication due to infrequent face-to-face interactions (Joshi et al. 2009; Purvanova and Bono 2009). Inspirational leadership is built on the strong links between members and the leader, the collectivity led by the leader, and the collective mission of the team (Howell and Shamir 2005). Therefore, leaders who are able to create a socialized identification among members may be more effective in distributed teams.

Psychological Contract Theory

Psychological contract theory posits that individuals form beliefs about the particular types of resources that they are obligated to provide to the organization and that the organization is obligated to provide to them in return (Morrison and Robinson 1997; Rousseau 1989; Rousseau 1995). From the members’ perspective, psychological contracts are
comprised of expectations regarding what the organization should provide for individuals, as well as obligations regarding what individuals owe their organization in return. Several studies have been done to understand the role of psychological contracts in distributed teams. Piccoli and Ives (2003) used psychological contracts to explain the effects of behavior control on team members’ interpersonal trust. Chang’s (2008) study explained knowledge exchange from the perspective of psychological contracts of knowledge sharing, which examined the obligations of an individual to share knowledge with others in the organization. As research on psychological contracts in distributed teams is in the infancy stage, psychological contract theory in the rich body of organizational literature provides a good conceptual foundation to examine the influence of leadership on members’ obligations in geographically dispersed work environments.

Technology Support for Contextualization

Member dispersion and electronic interaction may lead to conflicts. Sharing of contextual cues may reduce conflicts, and result in more effective communication (Cramton 2001; Hinds and Bailey 2003; Jarvenpaa et al. 1998). It may also affect the emergence, operation, and effectiveness of leadership (Avolio and Bass 1988; Bass 1985; Bryman 1992). Prior work such as the cognitive-affective model of communication (Te’ eni 2001) describes contextualization as the explicit presentation of information such as definitions of a situation, intentions and feelings about an issue, and not only the desired reaction or core message. Technology support for contextualization helps team members to interpret cues, frame decisions, engage in sense making, and structure messages for easy absorption (Majchrzak et al. 2005; Te’ eni 2001).

Technology support for contextualization is the support of technologies in sharing of contextual information relevant to tasks and processes of completing the task, such as work content, appropriate tasks, assignment of team activities and team history. According to Boland et al.’s (1994) theory on how technology can be designed and used to facilitate a contextualization strategy, we incorporate three strategies into the design of technology support for contextualization: ownership, easy travel and multiple perspectives. Ownership allows members to easily identify who authored a message. Easy travel enables members to move effortlessly among messages to examine historical, analytic, motivational, and situational layers. Multiple perspectives enable comparisons of different perspectives.

RESEACH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

Effects of Inspirational Leadership on Obligations of Reciprocity

Reciprocity has been highlighted as a benefit for individuals to engage in social exchange (Blau 1964). Individuals feel obligations to reciprocate others when they receive treatment from others. Inspirational leaders build confidence in team members, to make them aware that their expertise is valued by teams. The compelling vision makes employees have a strong feeling of group membership too. With enhanced confidence and socialized identification with the team, individuals are willing to reciprocate the leaders in the expectations to get appraise and acknowledgement in the future to maintain the strong sense of belonging to a team. Besides, inspirational leaders provide team members a chance to appreciate team accomplishments and other team members’ contribution by showing collective skills, expertise, achievement, and contribution of team members. As a result, they feel obligated to reciprocate to fulfill their obligations that owe to what their leader and coworkers have done to improve the team performance. Therefore we propose that:

H1: Inspirational leadership will be positively related to obligations of reciprocity.

Effects of Inspirational Leadership on Obligations of Commitment

In dispersed settings where the most effective face-to-face communication seldom happens, inspirational leaders build enduring linkages between an individual’s self-concept and a social group (Joshi et al. 2009; Ellemers et al. 2004). They emphasize the socialized identification with the team by communicating a compelling vision and encouraging members’ about their abilities. Socialized identification draws members’ attention to a common vision and shared values of the team. It encourages team members align their individual interests with team interests. Leaders who displayed inspirational behaviors fulfill their obligations that employee expected, which motivate members to feel obligated to form the sense of identification with the team as a whole, and involve in the team activities in return. Thus we predict:

H2: Inspirational leadership will be positively related to obligations of commitment.
Effects of Technology Support for Contextualization on the Relationship between Inspirational Leadership and Psychological Contract

Technology support for contextualization requires a team-based, reviewable and revisable repository. It allows members access to task information anytime anywhere. It compensates inspirational leaders to help team members easily access information about team accomplishment, team member’s contribution and team member’s expertise (Joshi et al. 2009). Facilitated by technology support for contextualization, leaders maintain the effectiveness of their confidence in members through posting the encouragement and appreciation in the repository. The lasting effect of the emphasis on collective message and encouragement enhance the social identification between members and the team. When a shared team identity is salient, team members tend to be more involved in team activities to accomplish shared team goals.

H3a: The positive relationship between inspirational leadership and obligations of commitment will be strengthened under the condition of technology support for contextualization.

Technology support for contextualization enables members to review the information including historical team activities, team vision, and current progress too. Such collective message is helpful for members to be aware of the interdependence of their task. Together with the awareness of members’ contribution and team accomplishment, they feel their responsibility to behave like others to reciprocate what others have done to improve team performance. Provided by contextual information, members’ socialized identification with the team is maintained and enhanced. Members who are in salient socialized identification are more intended to form the obligations as the fulfillment toward their leaders (Ashforth and Mael 1989).

H3b: The positive relationship between inspirational leadership and obligations of reciprocity will be strengthened under the condition of technology support for contextualization.

Effects of Psychological Contract on Knowledge Sharing

Psychological contract perspective highlights the reciprocal nature of the relationship between leaders and members (Robinson and Morrison 1995). Members who feel obligated to commitment and reciprocity to the team have a strong sense of shared identity. Team member tend to be more concerned about accomplishing shared team goals. Their desire to maintain the shared identity provides them with the intrinsic motivation to exert effort on behalf of the team. As a result, they are intended to take engaging in knowledge sharing to improve team efficiency to repay the treatment they received. Besides, members with social identity with the team perceive team successes and failure as personal successes and failures (Ashforth and Mael 1989). They realize knowledge sharing increase commonalities and reduce misunderstanding. They would like engaging in these activities as one way of reciprocity when they feel their leaders and colleagues has fulfilled or surpassed their obligations. Therefore, we predict:

H4: Obligations of reciprocity will be positively related to knowledge sharing.

H5: Obligations of commitment will be positively related to knowledge sharing.

The research model is shown in Figure 1.

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Figure 1. Research Model
METHOD

We used paper-based survey to collect data. Participants were knowledge professionals who were part-time students pursuing post-graduate degrees in a large university. The participants were selected because they were working in geographically dispersed teams in knowledge intensive industries. Participation was completely voluntary. A token payment was given to each participant for completing the survey. 141 questionnaires were returned from 165 target respondents, yielding a response rate of 85.5%.

Measurement

Independent Variables

Inspirational Leadership measures the extent to which leaders communicate a compelling vision for the team, express confidence in team members, and energize the team (Bass 1985). We used the six-item version of Bass’s (1985) inspirational leadership questionnaire adapted by Spreitzer et al. (1999) to measure individual perceptions of inspirational leadership.

Technology Support for Contextualization is operationalized as the support of technologies in sharing of contextual information relevant to work tasks and processes. Respondents were asked to indicate whether three aspects of contextualization strategy can be supported by the usage of technology: ownership, easy travel and multiplicity (Boland et al. 1994; Majchrzak et al. 2005).

Dependent Variables

Obligations of Reciprocity was measured by the items adapted from previous studies (Eisenberger et al. 1987; Tetrick et al. 2004; Wasko and Faraj 2000).

Obligations of Commitment was measured by the items adapted from Meyer et al. (1993)’s study.

Knowledge Sharing refers to the behaviors that enable members to share task-relevant information with each other. It was measured using knowledge sharing items (Koh and Kim 2003; Wasko and Faraj 2005).

All the responses were obtained by team members reporting their level of agreement with the statements on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Control Variables

Employee tenure in the organization as well as tenure in the team was controlled at the individual level since they might influence individual’s overall attitudes toward team members and the organization. We also collected demographic data including employee age, gender and overall experiences in the organization or in the team. At the team level, we controlled for overall team size because the size of the team may influence individual’s attachment to the team. The extent of geographic distribution was controlled and measured by the number of geographic regions that the team was located. We also examined the level of face-to-face interaction in the team as it might have a significant effect on performance and identification (Kirkman et al. 2004; Mortensen and Hinds. 2001).

Assessment of Measurement Validation

SmartPLS 2.0 was used to analyze the data. Before testing the structural model, it is important to develop valid constructs and measures for further research. To validate our measurement model, reliability was assessed using Cronbach Alpha. A value of 0.707 or larger for Cronbach Alpha indicates adequate internal consistency (Nunally 1978). For our study all construct measures exhibited scores of Cronbach Alpha well above the acceptable threshold (see Table 1).

Convergent validity was assessed by examining composite reliability (CR), item loadings and average variance extracted (AVE) from the measures (Hair et al. 2006). As shown in Table 1, CR values range from 0.79 to 0.96, which are higher than the recommended value of 0.7 (Chin 1998). AVE values range from 0.55 to 0.89, which are above the acceptable value of 0.5 (Fornell and Larcker 1981).

Discriminant validity was verified by examining the square root of the AVE as recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981), and checking the factor loading. The square root of the variance shared between a construct and its measures should be larger than the correlations between the construct and any other construct in the model. The factor loadings indicate the extent to which each scale (questionnaire item) is associated with an underlying factor. As shown in Table 2, all items load higher on their intended constructs than on other constructs, with a minimum
loading of 0.59 (greater than the commonly accepted threshold of 0.5 (Hair et al. 1998). Thus all items passed the
discriminant validity test and the adequacy of factor analysis tests.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>AVE</th>
<th>Composite Reliability</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Inspirational leader (IL)</td>
<td>0.71</td>
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<td>0.92</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technology Support for contextualization (TAC)</td>
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<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.84</td>
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<tr>
<td>Obligations of Reciprocity (PCR)</td>
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<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.71</td>
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<tr>
<td>Obligations of Commitment (PCC)</td>
<td>0.60</td>
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<td>0.81</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge sharing (KS)</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.94</td>
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Table 1. Composite Reliability, AVE and Cronbach’s Alpha

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<th>Components</th>
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<th>3</th>
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<td>0.27</td>
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<td>KS3</td>
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<td>0.27</td>
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<tr>
<td>PCC1</td>
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<td>0.15</td>
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<tr>
<td>PCC4</td>
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</table>

Table 2. Results of Factor Analysis

Hypothesis Testing
With adequate psychometric properties in the measurement model, we examine the structural model. Path
coefficients and the R squares for each dependent variable are shown in Figure 2. A summary of hypothesis testing
is presented in Table 3. Among these hypotheses, the impact of inspirational leadership on obligations of
commitment is very strong (β=0.47) with relative high stability (t=5.44, p<0.01), thus H2 was supported. The impact
of inspirational leadership on obligations of reciprocity is significant (t=1.99, p<0.05), indicate that H1 is supported
too. The hypotheses about the effects of obligations of reciprocity (H4) and commitment (H5) on knowledge sharing
were all supported with path coefficients of 0.21 and 0.33 respectively. Accordingly, the variance explained by
psychological contract obligations was 21% (R²= 0.21). H3b was supported (t=2.49, p<0.05), indicates that the
effect of inspirational leadership on obligations of reciprocity can be strengthened under the condition of technology
support for contextualization. However, H3a was not supported.
DISCUSSION

This study shows how inspirational leadership influence members’ psychological contract in distributed teams by employing a contractual perspective. This study also investigates the role of technology in the process of leader-member interaction to see how technology support for contextualization compensates the insufficient communication to improve the effectiveness of inspirational leadership.

Leaders who display inspirational behaviors can be one important factor that predicts members’ psychological contract obligations. In dispersed settings, lack of physical proximity, shared context and spontaneous communications with team members reduce the salience of a team identity. In these settings inspirational leaders act as a representative the group. They have the potential to “replace the physical, social and psychological markers of team membership and shape attitude directed at the team” (p241, Joshi et al. 2009). Leaders are able to foster team members’ attitudes directed at the collective team entity by delivering a collective message and emphasizing the mission and goals of the team. As argued in the previous research, dispersed context represent “situational enhancers” that strengthen the role of inspirational leadership (Joshi et al. 2009). The effects of inspirations are manifested when team members are physically distributed. It is more effective for inspirational leaders to motivate members to generate the obligations of engaging in desirable behaviors.

The results suggest leaders in distributed teams that have a team-based knowledge repository are able to influence obligations of reciprocity more effectively. As we hypothesized, the sharing of contextual information relevant to team task and process of completing the task can be helpful for team members to form socialized identification toward the team. Therefore they feel obligated to reciprocate what others have done to improve team performance by working hard and helping others. However, the effect of task-related contextualization on obligations of
commitment is not significant. It may be due to the task-related contextualization more focuses on task relevant information that not contains personal perception and emotions. While obligations of commitment are a concept that is more related to affective and emotional aspect of individuals’ perception.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study compensates leadership research that leaders can inform employees’ psychological contract obligations by showing their support to employees. Our findings draw attention to inspirational leadership as a specific set of leader behaviors that can enhance group members’ socialized identification, hence, their engagement in knowledge sharing. It also investigates the role that technology plays in the process of leader-member interaction by examining technology support for contextualization, which compensates the existing literature lacking empirical studies of whether advanced technology is helpful in leadership practice in distributed teams.

Except for theoretical implications, this study provides implication for practice too. First, though the importance of self-management in teams is often emphasized, the result of this study implies that certain aspects of leadership may have a pivotal role for influencing important outcomes in dispersed settings. It points out that what kind of leadership is desirable in distributed teams. This study also provides leaders a good chance to think about the proper technology that can be adopted to compensate the insufficient communication. They can think about adopting a knowledge-based repository for members to review and revise task information anytime anywhere.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

First, all of our variables are measured in a single survey, which means common method bias may have inflated the observed relationships among these variables. Future research may include add objective measure, for example, knowledge sharing can be measured by counting the posts that recorded in knowledge repositories.

Second, Psychological contract contains not only obligations, but also more constructs existing in the reciprocal relationships like expectations. Future research may examine other psychological constructs that can cover the comprehensive aspects of psychological contract to improving explanatory power.

Third, our study employed a cross-sectional design. Recent findings suggest that time is an important factor that developing positive attitudes and collaboration in distributed teams (Wilson et al. 2006). We suggest more longitudinal research that is interesting to investigate the time point that inspirational leadership behaviors matter more or less.

CONCLUSION

Distributed settings represent a new context to identify the critical role of leadership in enhancing linkages between an individual’s self-identity and identification with the team. Our findings underscore the importance of inspirational leaders in developing identification-related outcomes, psychological contract obligations of reciprocity and commitment in dispersed settings. Further, our study also suggests that psychological contract obligations are associated with members’ engagement in knowledge sharing. In addition, our study suggests that the effects of inspirational leadership behaviors can be strengthened when technology can support for them to communicate the contextual information.

REFERENCES