

THE MODERATING EFFECTS OF PERCEIVED ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT ON LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS: A STUDY OF ARMY CADETS

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we investigate the role that perceived organizational support might play in the—leadership behaviors of supervisors and managers. Our research was conducted with members of the military corps of cadets at a U.S. military college. Behavioral traits and perceptions of cadets were assessed when they entered the corps program, and compared with their leadership behaviors that were evaluated during a national leadership development camp. Specifically, we explore whether perceived organizational support moderates effects that the behavioral traits of hardiness, achievement striving, and grit have on leadership attributes.

INTRODUCTION

Perceived organizational support (POS) represents the degree to which employees believe their organization cares about their welfare and appreciates how their work output has aided their organization (the employer). Research into this notion was initiated by the work of Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson, & Sowa (1986) with the general idea that employees create organizational value by contributing work skills, personality, and life experiences that have formed them as individuals. In return, employees expect equitable resources and motivational support to constitute a fair exchange (Blau, 1964). The absence of fair exchange constitutes suboptimal performance. One objective of the job interview process is for employers to gauge the value of exchange between the strengths or weaknesses of potential employees and the associated fit with organizational goals and resources. Effective exchange depends not only upon the reality, but also upon the perception of reciprocity and mutual value added. Therefore, contributory performance of even high potential individuals may be constrained by real or apparent lack of support from their organizational units. Conversely, those individuals become more committed and achieve higher performance when they perceive more abundant organizational support or recognition.

We believe that this same notion applies to military settings. Those who join the military often do it out of a sense of duty, national allegiance, and honor. They offer years of their lives in service to their country for the general good of its citizens. The support and concern shown toward them by their military organization will likely impact their level of personal commitment and performance. Those in leadership roles in that military organization will be affected similarly

such that their positive or negative perceptions of organizational support would impact their performance as leaders in their military group.

The following sections discuss the continuation of a joint effort between the authors and the administration of a university Corps of Cadets program to investigate the potential effects of POS on cadet leadership attributes. Our prior research has assessed relationships between our survey data and rater-generated evaluation of cadets' leadership competencies. A recent manuscript (Teasley et al., 2021) reported impacts of the behavioral traits of hardiness, achievement striving and grit on cadet leadership performance as defined by the army's Leader Requirements Model LRM (U.S. Army, 2012). We found evidence that hardiness, achievement striving and the perseverance aspect of grit influenced some attributes of leadership and that cynicism demonstrated a significant moderating effect on the outcomes. In this article we report results of our investigation into the potential moderation of POS on relationships between the personal traits of hardiness, achievement striving, and grit and the aforementioned LRM leadership outcomes for our sample of US Army Cadets.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Teasley et al. (2021) developed a theoretical framework from existing literature relating hardiness, achievement striving, and grit to LRM leadership outcomes in a military context. The present study draws upon this framework but refers the reader to our previous manuscript for details. In the following discussion, we clarify the nature and specifics of the LRM leadership indicators and speculate how POS might directly influence leadership or moderate the effects of the aforementioned behavioral trait on the LRM leadership indicators.

Military Leadership Model

The Leadership Requirements Model (LRM) guides the training and development of potential US Army leaders. The LRM contains a set of leadership attributes grouped according to a leader's display of 1) Character, 2) Presence, 3) Intellectual Capacity, and 4) Core Leader Competencies (U.S. Army, 2012). Based upon principles in the LRM, the US Army develops its cadets (those contractually committed to become officers upon college graduation) at its national Leadership Development and Assessment Course (LDAC). This two week course is a strenuous physical and mental intervention for cadets where they are pushed to perform, plan and make decisions, and to lead others under stressful environments. During this time, existing officers attempt to develop and assess the military character and the core leadership competencies of the emerging cadet class. Near the conclusion of this dedicated training period, the Army formally assesses each cadet's military leadership capabilities.

The LDAC assessment considers three aspects of leadership competencies - Leads, Develops, and Achieves. The "Leads" competency assesses the indicators *extending influence*, *leading by example*, and *communicating* as it attempts to measure a cadet's character, abilities, presence, and intellect in guiding others toward mission accomplishment. The "Develops" indicators of *creates a positive environment*, *prepares self*, and *develops others* measures a

cadet's ability to cultivate teamwork, to accept personal responsibility, and to exhibit care for others. The third competency, "Achieves" assesses a cadet's ability to plan and accomplish a mission measuring through a single indicator, *gets results*.

Perceived Organizational Support

Perceived organizational support is the extent to which employees feel valued by the organization for which they work, and thereby, serves as a signal of the extent to which the employer is willing and able to meet increased work efforts with increased rewards (Eisenberger, Huntington, & Hutchison, 1986; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). In our military context, the cadet is the employee and the U.S. Army (Corps of Cadets) is the employer.

Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002), in their meta-analysis, found that POS influenced organizational commitment, job-related affect, job involvement, and desire to remain with the organization. It appears that individuals who perceive higher levels of support from their organizations are more likely to have attitudes that bond them with the organization. We speculate that higher levels of POS in leaders, because of their higher level of job involvement and desire to do their job function as a leader, will reveal itself in leadership traits such as leading by example or preparing self. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H1: POS will be positively related to the leadership performance.

Hardiness, Achievement Striving and Grit

Hardiness refers to a person's levels of commitment, control, and challenge. (Bartone, 2006). In the military setting, hardiness helps an individual respond to the intensity and difficulties that present themselves in and around combat situations.

Achievement striving, according to Mount & Barrick (1995), is the willingness and drive to achieve results. It has been connected with job performance, task performance, job dedication and interpersonal facilitation by Dudley (2006). From a military context, the outcomes from defense and combative actions are dependent on the completion of tasks by military personnel at all levels. Leaders play a critical role in the success of a mission, hence they need to strive to achieve goals and complete the planned tasks.

Grit is having the perseverance and passion to achieve long-term goals. Duckworth et al. (2007) contrive grit as being made up of two facets. One of these is consistency of interests for long term goals. The other side of grit is perseverance of effort. In the military setting, operations must continually adapt to the changes in a dynamic situation. To accomplish tasks successfully, leaders, especially, will need both to persevere in the face of setbacks and to maintain focus through the unexpected events that occur in military operations.

POS has been shown to serve as a moderator of important relationships. Simosi (2012) found that POS moderated relationships between supervisor support and coworker support as well as training transfer and affective commitment in new hires. They observed that POS strengthened the positive relationships between those variables. Jain, Giga, and Cooper (2013) found that POS moderated the negative relationship between organizational stressors and

organizational citizenship behavior in their study of call center operators. Suazo and Stone-Romero (2011) found POS to be a moderator in relationships involving the outcomes of psychological contract breach. Counter to their hypothesis, they observed that higher POS increased the likelihood of the negative outcomes to psychological contract breach.

In our prior study, we did not find that hardiness was directly related to the LDAC leadership indicators unless it was moderated by cynicism. It may occur, similarly, that POS will moderate the relationship between hardiness and leadership performance. We conjecture that when POS is high, a person (the army officer) will allow their inherent hardiness to even further increase their level of commitment to their [military] leadership function which, then, will be reflected in their leadership effectiveness. When POS is low, on the other hand, the relationship between hardiness and leadership performance will be weaker or might not exist at all.

H2: POS will moderate the relationship between hardiness and leadership performance, such that the relationship will be stronger when POS is high and weaker when POS is low.

We previously found that achievement striving did have a direct effect on the *communicates* attribute of leadership. Additionally, we found a relationship between achievement striving and the leadership attribute *develops others*, when moderated by cynicism. Similarly, we fathom that POS may moderate the relationship between achievement striving and leadership effectiveness. When leaders believe that there is a reciprocal relationship with the organization, they will be more likely to direct their internal drive toward their organizational obligations resulting in better observed leadership performance. Consequently, we hypothesize the following:

H3: POS will moderate the relationship between achievement striving and leadership performance such that the relationship will be stronger when POS is high and weaker when POS is low.

Similar to achievement striving, in our prior study we discovered that grit-perseverance was directly related to the *communicates* attribute of leadership and was moderated in its relationship with *develops others* depending on the level of cynicism. Grit-consistency did not show any relationships to the LDAC leadership outcomes. We suspect that POS may also play a role in how grit affects leadership performance. A leader who believes the organization will recognize and reward their efforts will draw on their innate perseverance and ability to maintain a consistent effort to complete tasks will be revealed in their leadership effectiveness.

H4: POS will moderate the relationship between grit and leadership performance such that the relationship will be stronger when POS is high and weaker when POS is low.

METHODOLOGY

In this section we discuss the measures used to test the model, provide an overview of the data collection process, and present the methods used for the statistical analysis. Note that the behavior and attitude measures came from surveys conducted as part of another research project.

For brevity in this article we refer readers to Gabriel et al. (2016) and Jordan et al. (2015) for the details about the data collection process.

Measures

Hardiness, achievement striving, grit (consistency and perseverance) and perceived organization support (POS) are multi-item scales. The data for these was obtained in a prior study of cadets when attempting to understand the likelihood of a cadet to contract for professional military service (Gabriel et al., 2016; Jordan et al., 2015). The scales for these measures were adopted from established research literature. Table 1 provides the literature source for the scales and the reliabilities for these five variables.

Table 1
Scale Reliabilities

Scale	Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Source
Hardiness	7	0.924	Bartone (2001)
Achievement Striving	10	0.887	Mount & Barrick (1995)
Grit-Consistency	6	0.843	Duckwoth et al. (2007)
Grit-Perseverance	6	0.792	Duckwoth et al. (2007)
Perceive Organization Support	10	0.902	Eisenberger, Huntington, & Hutchison (1986)

The LDAC instrument provides a systematic set of indicators to evaluate leadership potential within ROTC and Corps of Cadet programs. Those single item ratings are assessed at one of three levels – *excellent*, *satisfactory*, and *unsatisfactory*. Trained evaluators are used to assess the leadership traits exhibited by cadet trainees at Leadership camp through these LDAC items. We adopt the LDAC indicators as our dependent variables.

During the initial review of the data for each variable, we found that only three cadets earned *unsatisfactory* ratings. These were all pertaining to only one of the leadership indicators. We considered these to be extremely unique among all the ratings recorded in the sample data, therefore we judged these to be outliers. Consequently, all remaining ratings were either satisfactory or excellent and the indicators were then dichotomous. Of the 26 leadership indicators nine contained ratings of satisfactory for every cadet. These nine indicators were dropped from the analysis because there no variation in outcomes to measure. The indicators that were dropped were *loyalty*, *duty*, *respect*, *selfless service*, *honor*, *integrity*, *personal courage*, *empathy*, and *warrior ethos*. Additionally, *extends influence*, and *creates a positive environment* were not scored for any observations in our sample and these indicators were not analyzed. Of the 26 LDAC leadership indicators, 15 indicators could be analyzed in this study.

Sample Data

The sample utilized responses to surveys for the trait and moderator variables (Jordan et al., 2015) that had been previously conducted. We summarize the survey process as follows. Each fall, all newly enrolled cadets from the military program at one university completed the survey. In the following spring the same survey data was collected from arbitrarily selected cadets at all academic ranks (freshman through senior).

A Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request was submitted to the Department of Defense to obtain the LDAC data. The LDAC indicator ratings were matched to the survey responses for each cadet where matches existed. After cleansing of the merged data and the deletion of the indicator categories mentioned previously, there were 144 complete and usable responses. Table 2 reports the demographic summary for cadets making up research pool.

Table 2
Participant Demographics

Gender		Academic Year when Survey Completed	
Male	87.9%	Freshman	48.2%
Female	12.1%	Sophomore	10.6%
		Junior	21.3%
		Senior	19.9%

Multicollinearity of the sample was assessed by analyzing bivariate correlations and reviewing variance inflation factors (VIF). VIFs were produced in diagnostic regression runs that excluded the interaction terms, because, by their nature, the interactions share variance with the interacting variables. VIFs in these diagnostics were well below 2 for all models which we interpreted, based on Belsley et al. (1980), to mean that multicollinearity will not affect the regression results.

Hypothesis Testing

Logistical regression was used since the LDAC leadership effectiveness indicators were binary. Logistic regression estimates the probability that a predictor or predictors will associate with a certain bivariate result. The results should produce probability estimates that the behavioral trait variables (hardiness, achievement striving, and grit) and their interaction with POS, would predict excellence for a given LDAC leadership indicator.

To test the individual effects of each of our four behavioral characteristic variables, a series of multiple logistic regressions were performed on each LDAC leadership indicator. Subsequently, a separate model was run that included the behavioral trait, POS, and the interaction between the two to test for moderation.

RESULTS

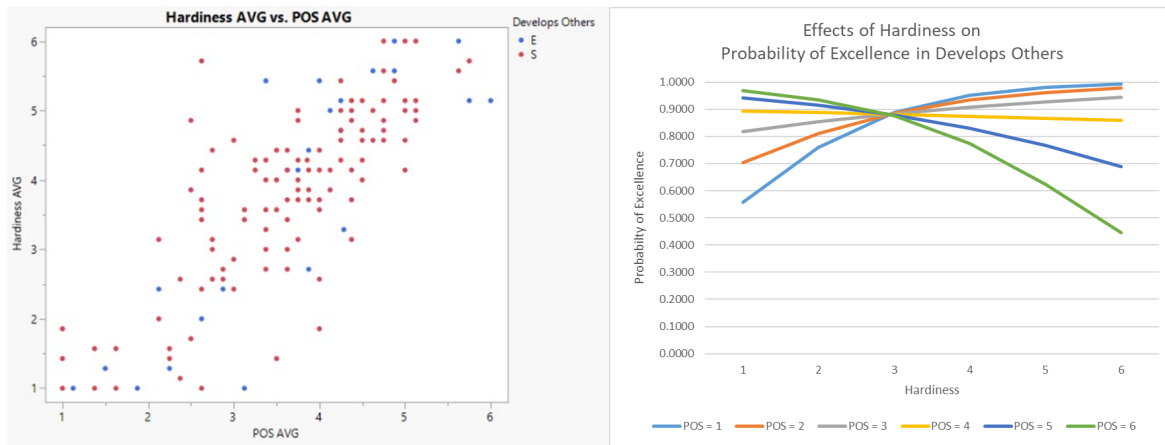
For only one of the LDAC indicators was there a moderation model with statistical significance. POS did not have a significant effect on any leadership indicator on its own. Hypothesis H1 was not supported. Only hypothesis H2 obtained partial support. The regression model testing the effect of hardiness as moderated by POS on the leadership indicator *Develops Others* had a p-value of 0.086 with a R^2 of 0.079. The regression results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3
Regression Results

Leadership Trait = Develops Others						
	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
H	1.256	0.538	5.455	1	0.020	3.513
POS	0.964	0.593	2.645	1	0.104	2.621
H*POS	-0.330	0.131	6.310	1	0.012	0.719
Constant	-1.662	1.482	1.259	1	0.262	

Because the interaction term's coefficient is the opposite direction than the main effects coefficient, there appears to be a "crossover" effect due to the moderation. Figure 1 displays the scatter plot of responses and our analysis of the crossover effect of the moderation of POS on hardiness. In the crossover plot, the predicted logits were converted to probabilities and then plotted against increasing levels of achievement striving (Likert scale points 1 through 6). From the scatter plot we noted that when POS is high (scores ≥ 5), hardiness was never observed to be below 4. Likewise, when POS was low (≤ 2), there were no occurrences where hardiness was above 2. Because of this, we were skeptical of interpreting those regression estimates for values in those ranges for hardiness and POS variables. Regardless, we observed that when cadets had perceived a low level of support from the Corps as an organization (response of 3 or below), higher levels of hardiness increased the probability that cadets demonstrate excellence for the *develops others* measure. However, when cadets perceived more support, the effect of hardiness was reversed such that higher levels of hardiness yielded lower likelihood of showing excellence on *develops others*.

Figure 1
The Effect of Hardiness as Moderated by POS for Develops Others



DISCUSSION

Our data analysis demonstrates partial support for the hypothesized effects and the overarching question of how POS may influence military leadership outcomes. However, the findings are an interesting addition to the conversation about POS and leadership. Our prior analyses (Teasley et al., 2021) demonstrated direct effects of achievement striving and grit perseverance on various leadership outcomes, but no direct effects for hardiness or cynicism. However, the moderating interaction of hardiness and cynicism was significant in that analysis for both the *communicates* and *develops others* leadership indicators. Similarly, in the present analysis, both hardiness and POS failed to demonstrate independent effects on leadership, but their interaction showed significant moderating outcomes on the LRM leadership indicator *develops others*.

We expected the moderating effect that POS had on hardiness to operate monotonically across the range of POS to create a consistent, linear effect (Schoonhoven, 1981). Instead, the interaction term produced a crossover result that modulated the actual direction of the relationship between hardiness and leadership performance. For cadets who had low POS, greater levels of hardiness resulted in higher leadership performance. On the other hand, for cadets who had high perceptions of POS, greater levels of hardiness resulted in lower leadership performance. The crossover draws unique inferences about the nature of hardiness, its potential relationships with the POS moderator, as well as the resultant leadership outcome.

As a psychological trait, hardiness entails a level of stress reaction, coping, social interaction, and care for oneself (Maddi, 2002). In the case of military leaders this caring could extend in various ways to a leader's chain of subordinate command. The POS of military supervisors might accentuate their personal stress levels to induce corresponding resource actions that most effectively support or develop their own subordinates. We believe this would

apply correspondingly to supervisors and managers in non-military organizations. Managers, similar to these military officers, as “middlemen” in the support chain, would buffer their own perceptions by applying as-needed support to assure the productivity and organizational well-being of their subordinates (Wo et al., 2015). After evaluating the provision for resources and emotional support given by the upper hierarchy, middlemen may adjust their own allocation according to the abundance of their own supply and perception of organizational support.

This perspective is enlightened by prior research noting “trickle-down effects” of supervisor-subordinate job relationships (Woznyj et al., 2017). To the extent that supervisors lead and motivate others, they fulfill roles requiring them to coordinate both above and below them in their organizational chain of responsibility (Gentry and Shanock, 2008). Supervisors are responsible not only for their own performance but for that of their subordinates as well, regardless of available resource levels. Military leaders are a unique variety of supervisor that should be especially keen to their subordinate responsibilities given their operation in life-threatening combat scenarios.

Literature suggests that effective supervisors assure subordinate commitment to the strategies, innovation, and change efforts of their organizations (Gentry and Sosik, 2010). Subordinate motivation, to a degree, depends upon perceptions of the extrinsic and intrinsic support from its supervisory command (Kurtessis, et al., 2015). The trickle-down logic implies conduit-like, in-role supervisory tasks (Woznyj et al., 2017) that military officers would conduct to ensure subordinates believe that the greater organization both values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Therefore, in-role actions of cadet leaders should bridge their own perceptions of organizational support with balanced reactions to support or nurture subordinates in their own roles.

The idea that POS “activates” a leader’s hardiness in a bi-directional manner illuminates supervisory bridging roles as adjusting resource allocations to the perceived needs of subordinates. Hence, our evidence suggests that trickle-down choices may be contingent upon supervisors’ perception of upstream resource availability coupled with their understanding of subordinate support requirements. This contingent view depicts a supervisor or military leader dedicating more effort to develop others in situations of scarcity, and more constrained efforts to do so in abundant organizational environments.

Such depiction of military supervision reflects a contingent or situational theory of leadership (Hersey and Blanchard, 1982) where effective leaders strategically pivot their behaviors to match specific situations at hand. Indeed, our findings reveal situational leaders striving to enhance unit performance by matching subordinate needs with developmental resources on an as-needed basis. While this situational approach is not consistent with our hypotheses, it demonstrates that leaders may be more efficient and effective by tailoring their developmental decisions to the organizational fit. It further implies that in their trickle-down position in the organizational resource chain, supervisors should act in a contingency manner to moderate the flow levels of support for their subordinates.

While our findings seem counter-intuitive at first glance, deeper analysis reveals an interesting perspective of supervisory leadership as related to the trickle-down nature of POS. This perspective warrants additional research on the multilevel nature of resource allocation and

motivational aspects of intangible benefits throughout the chain of command. The “middle man” effect of supervisors deserves clarity of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) in the sense that supervisors repay POS not only through organizational commitment and in-role performance, but also by assuring subordinate productivity and motivation for organizational well-being (Wo et al., 2015). We particularly suggest interrogation of these matters in the military context where bureaucracies are pronounced and the stakes of performance are high. Practically, military institutions promote a unique style of leadership as compared to most organizational forms, and supervisory conduct is instrumental to battlefield success. Better understanding the moderating effects of supervisor attitudes, motivations, and dedication can be profound to achieving the challenging goals of military landscapes.

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