Building a business case for developing supportive supervisors

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A key theme from the previous commentaries is that the business case for developing supportive supervisors needs to be stronger for organizations to make the investments necessary to develop supportive supervisors. There are time constraints and other practical considerations for those in the role of supervisor that may get in the way of supportive supervision unless supervisor support is recognized as a valuable business expense (Ellinger, 2013; Zeni, MacDougall, Chauhan, Brock, & Buckley, 2013). As such, in our response to the commentaries, we present the findings of an additional analysis based on the data from our original sample that examine the relationship between supportive supervision (as rated by subordinates) and supervisor performance and promotability (as rated by the supervisor’s boss). We provide evidence that highly supportive supervisors are seen as more promotable and as better performers than are supervisors who are less supportive. Having empirical evidence that shows that upper-level leaders believe that supportive management contributes to the performance of supervisors is important because upper-level leaders are the ones making decisions in organizations about what is valued and promoted.

Building a business case for developing supportive supervisors

Upon reviewing the commentaries of our original article, we recognized a common theme among them – that there is a need to strengthen the business case for developing supportive supervisors. Zeni, MacDougall, Chauhan, Brock, & Buckley (2013) argued that the training involved in developing highly supportive supervisors can be costly to organizations. These authors proposed that ‘it is imperative that any training intervention explored by an organization be carefully evaluated in order to determine whether or not there is a business case that supports reallocation of resources’ (Zeni et al., 2013; p. 317). Ellinger (2013) agreed with this notion, arguing that a lack of time, rewards, and
awareness of the benefits of being supportive of subordinates may inhibit the extent to
which supervisors adopt supportive and coachlike behaviours. As such, in our response
to the commentaries, we present findings of an additional analysis based on data from our
original sample of supervisors who participated in week-long leadership development
programmes (see Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2013 for additional details). This new analysis
examines the quantitative relationship between supportive supervision (as rated by
subordinates) and supervisor performance and promotability (as rated by bosses of the
supervisors). In doing so, we aim to strengthen the business case for developing
supportive supervisors by providing support for the notion that such behaviours are not
only helpful for subordinates, but are also beneficial for the supportive supervisors and
their organizations overall.

While the concept of supervisor supportiveness has been linked consistently to
subordinate performance, we know little about its relationship with supervisors’
performance outcomes (e.g., Raabe & Beehr, 2003; Scandura & Williams, 2004; Sosik &
Godshalk, 2000). There are several reasons why supportive supervisors may receive
better performance and promotability ratings than less supportive supervisors. For
example, in the mentoring literature, there is evidence that those who mentor have higher
job satisfaction and motivation, feel more satisfied and rejuvenated, and gain a sense of
accomplishment and meaning in their jobs, all of which work to increase their reputation
among peers and managers (Kram, 1985; Ragins & Scandura, 1999). While not
performance outcomes, these factors are often related to increased performance. Gentry
and Sosik (2010) showed that supervisor-mentors who are seen as effective at mentoring
in the workplace receive higher performance ratings overall than those seen as less
effective at mentoring. The literature also suggests that supervisors with an interpersonal
orientation will be more effective (e.g., McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988). Supervisors
who establish supportive environments for their subordinates are likely to foster a culture
of personal growth and development, which leads to better performance of followers.
Better subordinate performance leads to better unit performance, which reflects upon
supervisors’ own performance.

Moreover, followership from subordinates may become the foundation for a
supportive leader’s organizational advancement and promotability (Dreher & Ash,
1990). Researchers have suggested that mentors may enhance their reputation among
organizational decision-makers who recognize the mentor’s contributions through the
achievements of protégés (Kram, 1985). Social exchange theory and the norm of
reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) provide support for the idea that a
supervisor provides extra support to his or her direct reports with the expectation that
direct reports will ‘reciprocate’ the favour for the supervisor in the future, providing the
supervisor with additional resources to help accomplish his or her work. Additionally, a
supportive supervisor may develop ‘protégé networks’, increasing the supervisor’s
reputation and power. Thus, it is possible that highly supportive supervisors are perceived
to have greater promotability by their superiors than are less supportive supervisors.

The available research described above suggests that supervisor supportiveness may
be linked to supervisors’ performance and promotability. However, the majority of
research on supportive supervision has focused on the outcomes related to the
subordinates of the supervisors, and not on the supervisors themselves. Further, previous
work has looked at the viewpoints of the subordinates of more or less supportive
supervisors, while largely ignoring the perspectives of organizational leaders working
above the supervisors (Raabe & Beehr, 2003; Scandura & Williams, 2004). The
perspectives of upper-level organizational leaders are important because these leaders
are the ones making decisions in organizations about what is valued and promoted. Thus, in response to the commentaries we received for our original article (Ellinger, 2013; Zeni, et al., 2013), and to establish a stronger business case for developing supportive supervisors, we test the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:** Subordinate ratings of supervisor supportiveness will be positively related to boss ratings of supervisors’ performance and promotability.

**Method**

**Participants and procedure**

Our sample consisted of 598 supervisors who participated in week-long leadership development programmes during a 1-year period. It was the same sample used for our article in which we focused on supervisors high and low in perceived supervisor support (see Paustian-Underdahl, et al. 2013 for additional details).

**Measures**

**Supportiveness**

The same measure of supervisor supportiveness from our original article was used in this analysis. Consistent with the first article, we utilized subordinate ratings of the supervisors’ supportiveness.

**Performance**

As part of the Benchmarks™ survey, the supervisors’ bosses were notified that the performance questions were for research purposes only and that no feedback would be given to the supervisor for these questions. The boss raters were primarily males (79.7%) and Caucasians (79.1%), and the average age of the bosses was 47.98 (SD = 7.49). We followed previous research suggesting boss ratings to be the most common and reliable way to measure performance outcomes of a supervisor (Conway & Huffcutt, 1997). The boss of each target-supervisor rated each supervisor on three separate questions from the Benchmarks™ measure: (1) participant’s performance in his or her present job (1 = among the worst to 5 = among the best; \(M = 4.17, SD = .85\), unstandardized); (2) participant’s performance as a leader compared to other supervisors inside and outside of the organization (1 = among the worst to 5 = among the best; \(M = 3.71, SD = .97\), unstandardized); and (3) participant’s likelihood of derailment in the next 5 years (1 = not at all likely to 5 = almost certain; reversed; \(M = 4.18, SD = .92\), unstandardized). Consistent with past research that used the same performance measure (e.g., Gentry, Weber, & Sadri, 2008; Graves, Ohlott, & Ruderman, 2007), we standardized these items to account for differences in the response scale and added them together to form a boss rating of supervisorial performance (\(\alpha = .79\) for the present study).

**Promotability**

The boss of each target-supervisor rated three items (cf., Gentry & Sosik, 2010) to measure the focal-supervisors’ promotability: How effectively would this person handle (1) being promoted into a familiar line of business (1 = among the worst to 5 = among the best; \(M = 4.01, SD = .80\); (2) being promoted in the same function or division (moving up a
level; 1 = not at all likely to 5 = almost certain; reversed; $M = 3.85, SD = .98$); and (3) being promoted two or more levels participant’s performance in his or her present job (1 = among the worst to 5 = among the best; $M = 2.95, SD = 1.00$). We added these items together to form a boss rating of promotability for each leader ($\alpha = .88$ for the present study).

**Control variables**

The sex of the leader, the number of subordinates, and the human capital variables of job level and organizational tenure were included as covariates in the regression analysis so as to control for their influences on performance outcomes (Judiesch & Lyness, 1999; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005).

**Results**

The objective of this response and analysis was to examine the relationship between supervisor supportiveness towards subordinates and both supervisor performance and promotability (H1). This hypothesis was tested using a hierarchical multiple regression. Supervisors who did not have scores for one or more of the following categories were removed from the sample: Performance (from bosses), promotability (from bosses), or supportiveness (from subordinates), reducing the sample size from 598 to 477. Table 1 provides means, standard deviations, and correlations among the quantitative variables. Step 1 of the hierarchical regression models contained our control variables as predictors. The performance ratings and promotability ratings served as the dependent variables in the two regression analyses. The variables in Step 2 were identical to Step 1 with the addition of supervisor supportiveness as the last entered predictor variable. Consequently, the additional variance in performance, and promotability, attributable to supportiveness ($R^2_2$), beyond that accounted for by the controls ($R^2_1$) could be determined ($R^2_2 - R^2_1$; Cohen & Cohen, 1983).

Supervisor supportiveness explained significant incremental amounts of variance in performance ratings (Model 2 vs. Model 1; $\Delta R^2 = .07$, $p < .01$), and the positive coefficient ($\beta = .26, p < .01$) indicates a positive and significant relationship. Additionally, supervisor supportiveness explained significant incremental amounts of variance in promotability ratings (Model 2 vs. Model 1; $\Delta R^2 = .06$, $p < .01$), and the positive coefficient ($\beta = .25, p < .01$) indicates a positive and significant relationship. Thus, hypothesis 1 was supported.

**Conclusion**

In our original article (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2013), we contributed to the limited body of knowledge of antecedents to supervisor support by utilizing the ecology model to explore the biographical information that differentiated highly supportive supervisors from those who are less supportive. Yet, as highlighted by commentaries of Ellinger (2013) and Zeni et al., (2013), the business case to support the training of supervisors could use strengthening. There are business costs to developing supportive supervisors coupled with time constraints and other obstacles to being supportive, and thus, evidence is needed to show the organizational benefits of developing supervisors to be more supportive at work. As such, in our response to the commentaries, we begin to establish a
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*Note. $N = 477$. Supportiveness was rated by subordinates; performance was rated by the person who supervises the leader. Alpha reliabilities are reported in parentheses on the diagonal.

$^a$0 = Male, 1 = Female.

$^b$0 = Top level, 1 = First-level, 2 = Middle-level, 3 = Upper-middle-level, 4 = Executive.

*p < .05; **p < .01.
business case for developing supportive supervisors by providing evidence that supportive supervisors not only provide helpful guidance and mentoring to their subordinates, but they are also considered to be better performers and more promotable by senior organizational leaders than are less supportive supervisors. In doing so, we moved beyond the current literature which shows that subordinates perceive their supervisors’ supportiveness to be valuable and beneficial to them. We found that senior-level leaders also see value in supervisor’s supportiveness of their subordinates. Having empirical evidence that shows that upper-level leaders believe supportive management contributes to performance of supervisors is important because upper-level leaders are the ones making decisions in organizations about what is valued and promoted. As such, when organizations choose to develop the supportiveness of supervisors, they should reap benefits associated with the better development of lower-level employees, as well as the talent of the supervisors receiving such training.

We recognize, however, that there are likely to be boundary conditions for the utility of supportiveness as suggested by Zeni et al. (2013) in their commentary. We suggest that future research considers factors that may be limiting and exacerbating conditions in the business case for supportiveness. For instance, organization-level factors such as a high level of uncertainty resulting from a recent or upcoming merger could increase the need for supportive supervisors. As such, multi-level work could allow researchers to examine the influence of cross-level relationships (e.g., organization-level variables moderating the impact of supervisor support on group and subordinate-level outcomes; Baran, Shanock, & Miller, 2012).

References


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