

Supervisor Support and Customer Orientation: Learning Goal Orientation as a Substitute for Leadership

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Abstract

Grounded in organisational support theory, supervisor support is a leadership construct that describes the extent to which managers and frontline supervisors value their employees' contributions and care for them. Large-scale cross-cultural comparisons show that supportive leader behaviors are universally effective across cultures in producing various positive employee outcomes. Supervisor support is also an antecedent of employee customer orientation, which is key to success in service industries. However, not all supervisors are competent or willing, or have the time, due to delayed organizational structures, to display supportive supervisory behaviors.

Recently, research has emerged that points at learning goal orientation as a potential substitute for leadership, i.e., an employee characteristic that renders the behavior of the superior unnecessary. Grounded in goal orientation theory, the relatively stable disposition of learning goal orientation refers to a mastery orientation where individuals aim to acquire new skills and increase their competence. Drawing from substitutes for leadership theory, we present and test a model in which learning goal orientation moderates the relationship of supervisor support and customer orientation.

Participants were 328 employees of 4- and 5-star hotels in Singapore who reported their perceived supervisor support (4 items), learning goal orientation (5 items), and customer orientation (14 items). The Cronbach alpha reliabilities of the three scales were above .80. We used moderated regression analysis to test the hypotheses on the moderating effect of learning goal orientation.

In the regression analysis, supervisor support and learning goal orientation were related to customer orientation. Organizational tenure, which was included as control variable, was not related to customer orientation. In support of the hypothesis, learning goal orientation significantly moderated the relationships between supervisor support and customer orientation ($b = -0.21$, $t = -4.08$, $CI = [-0.34, -.12]$). The negative sign indicates a weakening of the effect of supervisor support on customer orientation at higher levels of learning goal orientation. Unlike employees with low learning goal orientation, employees with high learning goal orientation do not require a high degree of supervisor support to show a high degree of customer orientation.

Our findings expand existing literature by suggesting a boundary condition for the influence of supervisor support on customer orientation, indicating the role of learning goal orientation as a substitute for this style of leadership. The findings have practical implications, highlighting the importance of supervisor support especially for employees with low learning goal orientation, and highlighting the importance of learning goal orientation as an employee characteristic that deserves a prominent role as selection and training criterion for service employees.