The downside of leader proactive personality at the team level:
the role of subordinate seeking resources behavior

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore the effect of leader proactive personality on team outcomes and the moderating role of subordinate seeking resources behavior. Using a sample of 53 work teams from a Chinese pharmaceutical sales company, we found that when the level of subordinate seeking resources is low, leader proactive personality increases team-level exhaustion, which in turn is negatively related to team success (i.e., team performance and team-level job satisfaction); when the levels of subordinate seeking resources is high, leader proactive personality does not influence team-level exhaustion. These findings indicate the downside of leader proactive personality on team outcomes and highlight the critical role of subordinates’ seeking resources in helping them adapt to change in work situations.

Key words: leader proactive personality, follower seeking resources, team-level exhaustion, team success
Introduction

Proactive personality refers to the dispositional tendency to initiate changes in various situations (Bateman & Crant, 1993). Individuals high in proactive personality may create situations and environments conducive to effective performance and persist with activities until their objectives are achieved (Crant, 2000). Proactive personality has been found to predict creativity (Kim, Hon, & Crant, 2009), task performance (Crant, 1995; Thompson, 2005), job satisfaction (Li, Liang, & Crant, 2010) and thus career success (Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999; Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001). However, the existing studies mainly focus on examining employees’ proactive personality and its influence on individual-level work outcomes, paying less attention to the role of leader proactive personality in work teams. As a result, how and when leader proactive personality is associated with team outcomes is less understood.

The present study aims to explore the effect of leader proactive personality on team outcomes and the moderating role of subordinate seeking resources behavior. While acknowledging that subordinate seeking resources may be caused by leader characteristics (e.g., Griffin, Parker, & Mason, 2010), we argue that they could also moderate the effect of leader characteristics. Specifically, we propose that leader proactive personality and subordinate seeking resources will jointly impact team-level exhaustion, which in turn will impact team success. Job satisfaction is commonly conceptualized as an indicator of individual subjective success (e.g., Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999). Accordingly, in this study job satisfaction is constructed at the team
level to represent a subjective indicator of team success, and team sales performance is an objective indicator of team success.

**Theory and Hypotheses**

Proactive personality is defined as “the relatively stable tendency to effect environmental change” (Bateman & Crant, 1993, p.103). People high in proactive personality tend to “identify opportunities and act on them, show initiative, take action, and persevere until meaningful changes occur” (Crant, 2000, p. 439), whereas people low in proactive personality are more likely to passively react and adapt to their environments.

Proactive personality is associated with individual career success (e.g., promotion; Seibert et al., 1999; Seibert et al., 2001), which implies that employees high in proactive personality may be more likely promoted to a higher position of leadership (Crossley, Cooper, & Wernsing, 2013). Different from the old role, their new leadership role requires them to focus their effort to motivate their subordinates and to achieve success as a whole team. On the other side, in today’s competitive and uncertain business environment, leaders are also urged to implement proactive goals and bring positive innovations and changes to their teams and organization, in order to ensure their survival and success in future (Crant, 2000; Wu & Wang, 2011). Hence, it is crucial to understand the association between leader proactive personality and team success.

Leaders high in proactive personality are inclined to take “self-initiated and future-focused leading actions that are persistently sustained to bring changes toward the environment” (Wu &
Wang, 2011, p.305). Research has found that proactive leaders promote unit performance via setting ambitious team goals and challenging the status quo (Crossley et al, 2013). Employees have to invest extra resources to manage this proactive leadership. According to the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2001), people strive to retain, protect and build resources. When there is a loss of resources, or a threat of loss, individuals are likely to experience a general state of stress (Hobfoll, 2001).

In addition, bringing about changes however may invoke resistance from employees and thus result in individual negative affective reactions to work like emotional exhaustion (Oreg, Vakola, & Armenakis, 2011). Further, emotional exhaustion is found to be contagious among employees within the same work team and thus could be displayed at the team level (Bakker, van Emmerik, & Euwema, 2006). The shared feeling of exhaustion among individuals in the same work team is referred to team-level exhaustion (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2003). Therefore we propose that:

\textit{Hypothesis 1. Leader proactive personality is positively related to team-level exhaustion.}

As we mentioned earlier, proactive leaders are intrinsically motivated to initiate future-focused leading actions and are persistent until meaningful change occurred to their environment (Crant, 2000; Wu & Wang, 2011). We suggest that subordinate seeking resources behavior may play a central role in moderating the effect of proactive leadership. According to Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2014), job
characteristics can vary widely across occupations but can always be classified into two categories: job demands and job resources. Job demands refer to “physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological (cognitive and emotional) effort or skills and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs” (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 312). Job resources refer to “physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of the job that are either/or: (a) functional in achieving work goals; (b) reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs; (c) stimulate personal growth, learning and development” (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 312). Examples of job demands are work pressure, emotional demands, cognitive demands, and physical demands. Examples of job resources are job autonomy, social support, performance feedback, and skill variety. These job demands and resources are generic and can be found across different types of jobs and industries, although they may vary in strength and relevance.

Employees are often not passive recipients. They may make changes in their level of job demands or job resources. Seeking resources may include behaviors such as asking feedback and advice from colleagues and supervisors, enhancing the amount of communication with people at work to get more information, seeking opportunities to learn new technologies, or increasing skill variety to improve work efficiency. Seeking resources therefore is seen as a form of proactive behavior (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007). In new and uncertain situations, seeking resources behavior enables employees to successfully cope with and adapt to challenge and change (Lyons, 2008). According to
COR theory, when people have resources available to address demands, they are unlikely to experience high levels of stress (Hobfoll, 2001). Therefore in teams where employees have more seeking resources behaviors, proactive leadership is not expected to increase exhaustion among team members. In contrast, when teams with low levels of seeking resources behavior are confronted with proactive leadership who requires them to invest their time, energy, and other resources, they are more likely to experience proactive leadership as a demand and consequently would manifest strain outcomes. Based on the above literature we suggest that the link of leader proactive personality and team-level exhaustion may be weaker for teams of subordinates who have more seeking resources behaviors.

**Hypothesis 2.** Subordinate seeking resources moderates the association between leader proactive personality and team-level exhaustion. The positive relationship between leader proactive personality and team-level exhaustion is stronger when subordinate seeking resources is low (vs. high).

It is well demonstrated that individual level exhaustion is negatively related to job performance (e.g., Wright & Cropanzano, 1998) and job satisfaction (e.g., Lee & Ashforth, 1996). We suggest that this negative relation between exhaustion and career success would generalize from individual level to team level, namely team-level exhaustion is negatively related to both team performance and team-level job satisfaction, which is referred to “shared internal state that is expressed by affectively and cognitively evaluating shared job experiences with some degree of favor or disfavor”
Accordingly we propose that:

**Hypothesis 3.** Team-level exhaustion is negatively related to team success (i.e., team-level job satisfaction and team performance)

**Hypothesis 4.** The conditional indirect effect of leader proactive personality on team success via team-level exhaustion is stronger when subordinate seeking resources is low (vs. high).

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**Method**

**Sample and Procedure**

Data was obtained from a Chinese pharmaceutical sales company. Participants are sales representatives and their leader in the sales territory (one leader per sales territory). Two research assistants distributed the questionnaires to 56 sales territories for the targeted leaders and their subordinates. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and completed the survey on a voluntary basis. We obtained complete data from 53 sales territories, making a response rate of 94.6%. The respondents were 53 sales territory leaders and 370 subordinates. There are an average of 7 subordinates in each sale territory (range = 3 to 29).

Of the 53 leaders, 30 are males. Leaders’ average tenure at the current position is 22 months (SD = 25.0). For subordinates, there is 49.1% male (n = 231), and 57.1% female (n = 227), with 12 unidentified cases. The average age of the workers was 31 years (SD = 5.5), with 33 months (SD = 31.2) of tenure at their current working position.
Measurement

**Leader proactive personality.** Leaders rated their own proactive personality using a ten-item Proactive Personality Scale (Seibert et al., 1999). A sample item is, “I am constantly on the lookout for new ways to improve my life”. The measure used a six-point response scale, ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 6 “strongly agree”. In the current study, the Cronbach’s alpha was .75.

**Seeking resources.** We measured subordinate seeking resources using four items from the Job Crafting Scale developed by Tims et al. (2012). A sample item is, “I ask colleagues for advice”. Employees answered using a five-point response scale ranging from 1 “never” to 5 “always”. The Cronbach’s alpha in this study was .85.

**Emotional exhaustion.** Emotional exhaustion was measured using the five-item subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory- General Survey (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). A sample item is, “I feel emotionally drained from my work”. All items were rated on a six-point response scale from 1 “strongly disagree” to 6 “strongly agree” (5). The Cronbach’s alpha in this study was .89.

**Job satisfaction.** Job satisfaction was measured using a three-item Job Satisfaction Scale (Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, & Klesh, 1983). A sample item is, “All in all, I am satisfied with my job”. Each item was scored on a six-point response scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 6 “strongly agree”. The Cronbach’s coefficients were .83.

**Team performance.** Team performance was the percentage of sales quotas (i.e., team achieved total sales divided by team expected sales target), which was obtained from company records.
Analysis Strategy

Given that our analyses were conducted at the team level, we checked the viability of the constructs formed via aggregation: team-level seeking resources, exhaustion, and job satisfaction. Specifically, we first assessed interrater agreement by calculating Rwg(j) (e.g., James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1984). After this, we obtained mean values of .87 for seeking resources, .89 for exhaustion, and .95 for job satisfaction. The results from one-way analyses of variance (AVONA) indicated that there was significant between-groups variance for all the three constructs. We further computed the following intraclass correlation (ICC1) and reliability of group mean (ICC2) values: seeking resources, .17 and .90; exhaustion, .23 and .92; job satisfaction, .17 and .90. These values are consistent with conventional standards for aggregating individual questionnaire responses into a group level response (e.g., Bliese, 2000).

Results

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations for the variables. Leader proactive personality is not significantly related to team-level exhaustion ($r = .13, p > .05$); team-level exhaustion is negatively related to team-level job satisfaction ($r = -.65, p < .001$) and team performance ($r = -.25, p < .10$). Therefore Hypothesis 1 is not supported and Hypothesis 3 is supported. As shown in Table 2, the interactive term between leader proactive personality and team-level seeking resources is statistically significant for team-level exhaustion ($\beta = .36, p < .05$). We examined the simple slopes at $\pm 1$ standard deviation of team-level seeking resources (see
Leader proactive personality is positively related to team-level exhaustion at LOW levels of team-level seeking resources ($b = .54, p < .05$), but not at HIGH levels of team-level seeking resources ($b = -.01, p > .05$). These results indicate that leader proactive personality seems to increase the level of team-level exhaustion when team members are less proactive (i.e., team-level seeking resources is low); yet it appears that leader proactive personality does not lead to increased team-level exhaustion when team members are more proactive (i.e., team-level seeking resources is high). Therefore Hypothesis 2 is supported.

Tables 2 shows that team-level exhaustion is significantly related to team performance ($\beta = -.30, p < .05$) and team-level job satisfaction ($\beta = -.59, p < .001$). Table 3 presents the estimates and bias-corrected bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals for the conditional indirect effects of leader proactive personality on team performance and team-level job satisfaction via team-level exhaustion. As expected, the conditional indirect effects of leader proactive personality on team performance and team-level job satisfaction are significantly negative when team-level seeking resources is low. However, when team-level seeking resources is high, leader proactive personality does not have significant indirect effects on team performance and team-level job satisfaction via team-level exhaustion. It appears that when team members are less proactive (i.e., team-level seeking resources is low), leader proactive personality negatively influences team success via team-level exhaustion; when team members are more proactive (i.e., team-level seeking resources is high), team-level
exhaustion however does not play a mediating role between leader proactive personality and team success. Thus, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

Discussion

Our study explored the effect of leader proactive personality on team outcomes and the moderating role of subordinate seeking resources. The results from moderated regression and bootstrapping estimate indicated that when subordinate perform more seeking resources behavior, leader proactive personality is not related to team-level exhaustion; by contrast, when subordinate perform less seeking resources behavior, leader proactive personality is positively related to team-level exhaustion, which in turn is negatively related to team success. These results suggest that leader proactive personality might have its ‘dark side’ in influencing team-level outcomes. Past researchers also suggest that the effectiveness of leader characteristics and behaviors is not universal and often depends on contextual variables including subordinates characteristics (Judge, Piccolo, & Kosalka, 2009; Li, Chiaburu, Kirkman, & Xie, 2013; Perry, Witt, Penney, & Atwater, 2010). When subordinates’ characteristics are congruent with leadership behaviors, the two parties may develop high quality of relationships (Zhang, Wang, & Shi, 2012). When there is a mismatch between leader and followers characteristics, leadership could hinder team performance (Grant, Gino, & Hofmann, 2011) and cause subordinate emotional exhaustion (Perry et al., 2010) even for the ‘bright’ leadership. In Perry’s et al. (2001) study, it was found that goal-focused leadership was associated
with heightened exhaustion among individuals who were low in both emotional stability and conscientiousness. Perry et al. (2001) argued that low-conscientiousness and low emotional-stability individuals are not predisposed to direct resources toward goal achievement and are more likely to experience goal-focused leadership as demands. Our study corroborates the study by Perry et al. (2001) by showing that leader proactivity, which is also goal-focused, was positively related to team-level exhaustion for teams with low levels of seeking resources behaviors.

Theoretical Contribution

The present study contributes to the literature in the following ways. First, studies adopting leader trait perspective often understand the effect of leader characteristics in the framework of the big five-factor model of personality (e.g., Bono & Judge, 2004; Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). Yet some researchers criticize that big five personality is too broad and thus narrow yet powerful personality is suggested to provide more implication for leadership behaviors (see review, Judge et al., 2009). Therefore we add knowledge to the leadership literature by studying leader proactive personality.

Second, it is well demonstrated that proactive personality is linked to individual career success (Seibert et al., 1999; Seibert et al., 2001). In the modern economy, teamwork has been emphasized and successful work group is the key to organizational success. Yet the association between proactive personality and team success is hardly investigated. Our study suggests that leader proactive personality may not lead to team success as one may expect. In fact, leader proactive
personality might be harmful to subordinate well being and thus hinder team success when subordinates are passive (e.g., seeking resources is low). This study provides a fuller understanding of proactive personality by demonstrating its negative impact on team outcomes.

Third, this study also contributes to the literature on proactive behavior by examining subordinate seeking resources as a moderator of the effect of leader proactive personality. We suggest that seeking resources is not only caused by leader characteristics (e.g., Griffin et al., 2010), but also can help subordinate adapt to proactive leadership. Leaders high in proactive personality initiate future-oriented goals and leading behaviors to improve the status quo (Wu & Wang, 2011). Seeking job resources is suggested to facilitate employees adapt to the demands of a changing situation (Grant & Parker, 2009; Kira, van Eijnatten, & Balkin, 2010). This study provides evidence that subordinate seeking job resources is an important contingency for the effect of leader proactive personality on team outcomes.

**Limitation and Future direction**

There are several limitations in this study. First, our study found that when the level of subordinate seeking resources is high, leader proactive personality did not influence team success through team-level exhaustion. These results imply that future studies can explore other mediating processes underlying the joint effect of leader proactive personality and subordinate seeking resources on team success. For instance, as proactive leader is engaged to bring change to working unit, employee readiness to change may play a role mediating the effect of leader proactive
personality (Lyons, 2008). Second, our study is also limited in the cross-sectional data. We encourage future studies employing longitudinal design to replicate our findings. Third, Chinese culture is characterized by high levels of power distance (Hofstede, 1991). Because high power distance values likely enhance the legitimacy of a leader’s authority, employees in high power distance societies may be more responsive to a leader’s behaviors. We recommend future work explore the generalization of the current findings in other cultures with low power distance.

Practical Implication

As the world of work becomes increasingly uncertain, it is not enough for team leaders to just fulfill the defined responsibilities and complete the assigned missions. Proactive team leaders, who go beyond their required leadership roles and challenge work goals, can bring about positive changes to their team and organization (Crant, 2000; Cross et al., 2013; Wu & Wang, 2011). Our study, however, found the ‘dark side’ of proactive leadership namely leader proactive personality causing team-level exhaustion and thus hindering team success particularly for passive teams. Subordinate seeking resources plays a critical role in buffering the negative effect of leader proactive personality. Our study suggest that managers could consider facilitating this proactive behavior specifically when organizations or work teams undergo some change, for instance, by providing employees more autonomy on the job and creating a more relaxing work environment.
References


Kim, T. Y., Hon, A. H., & Crant, J. M. (2009). Proactive personality, employee creativity, and


Table 1


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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<td>1. Leader proactive personality</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Team-level seeking resources</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>-.074</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Team-level exhaustion</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.132</td>
<td>-.134</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Team-level job satisfaction</td>
<td>5.47</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.121</td>
<td>.183</td>
<td>-.647**</td>
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<td>5. Team performance</td>
<td>112.62</td>
<td>23.26</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td>-.197</td>
<td>-.250*</td>
<td>.148</td>
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<td>6. Team size</td>
<td>9.57</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>.166</td>
<td>-.049</td>
<td>-.100</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td>.252</td>
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<td>7. Leader gender</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>-.093</td>
<td>-.129</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>.042</td>
<td>-.184</td>
<td>-.023</td>
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<td>8. Leader tenure</td>
<td>22.43</td>
<td>25.04</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>-.033</td>
<td>.120</td>
<td>-.004</td>
<td>-.030</td>
<td>-.020</td>
<td>.272*</td>
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Note. N = 53; * p < .10, * * p < .05, ** p < .01.
<table>
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<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Team-level exhaustion</th>
<th>Team-level job satisfaction</th>
<th>Team performance</th>
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<td>Control variables&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leader proactive personality</td>
<td>.377*</td>
<td>-.100</td>
<td>.041</td>
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<td>Team-level seeking resources</td>
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<td>Leader proactive personality × Team-level seeking resources</td>
<td>-.362*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Team-level exhaustion</td>
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<td>-.593***</td>
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<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.229</td>
<td>.670***</td>
<td>.385*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* a: Team size and nine dummy variables for district were controlled in every regression equation. Values are standardized beta coefficients.* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$. 

Regression equations for testing Hypothesis 2-3
Table 3

*Estimates and Bias-corrected Bootstrapped 95% Confidence Interval for the Conditional Indirect effects of Leader Proactive Personality on Team-level Job satisfaction and Team Performance at Different Levels of Team-level Seeking Resources*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team-level seeking resources</th>
<th>Level of moderator</th>
<th>Team-level job satisfaction</th>
<th>Team-level performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Estimates (SE)</td>
<td>Confidence interval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.SD</td>
<td>-.18 (.10) [-.42, -.05]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>-.09 (.06) [-.24, -.01]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+.SD</td>
<td>.00 (.05) [-.09, .11]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Bootstrapped estimates for the standard error (SE) are presented. N=53
Figure 1. The proposed research model
Figure 2

Moderating effect of team-level seeking resources on the relationship between leader proactive personality and team-level exhaustion