



Author response

Building a business case for developing supportive supervisors

Samantha C. Paustian-Underdahl^{1*}, Linda R. Shanock², Steven G. Rogelberg², Cliff W. Scott², Logan Justice² and David G. Altman³

¹Department of Management & Marketing, Culverhouse College of Commerce and Business Administration, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, USA

²Organizational Science, The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

³The Center for Creative Leadership, Greensboro, North Carolina, USA

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

*Correspondence should be addressed to Samantha C. Paustian-Underdahl, Department of Management & Marketing, Culverhouse College of Commerce and Business Administration, University of Alabama, Box 870225, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0225, USA (e-mail: spaustian@cba.ua.edu).

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_1^2) could be determined ($R_2^2 - R_1^2$; 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

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of study variables

| | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|-------------------------------|-------|------|------|------|--------|--------|--------|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. Leader Gender ^a | .29 | .45 | — | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Number of Direct Reports | 3.66 | 1.33 | -.06 | — | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Job Level 1 ^b | .14 | .35 | .00 | .07 | — | | | | | | | |
| 4. Job Level 2 | .16 | .37 | .05 | -.08 | -.18** | — | | | | | | |
| 5. Job Level 3 | .34 | .47 | -.04 | -.01 | -.29** | -.32** | — | | | | | |
| 6. Job Level 4 | .30 | .46 | .02 | .00 | -.26** | -.29** | -.47** | — | | | | |
| 7. Organization Tenure | 11.11 | 8.06 | .06 | .05 | .10 | -.05 | -.04 | .05 | — | | | |
| 8. Supportiveness (centred) | .00 | .52 | .10* | .07 | .11** | .01 | -.05 | .01 | .13** | (.90) | | |
| 9. Performance (standardized) | .01 | 2.53 | .02 | .03 | .03 | .09* | -.06 | .00 | .09** | .27** | (.79) | |
| 10. Promotability | 3.61 | .84 | .01 | -.02 | .04 | .00 | -.06 | .03 | .05 | .24** | .77** | (.88) |

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.

^a0 = Male, 1 = Female.

^b0 = 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

- Baran, B., Shanock, L., & Miller, L. (2012). Advancing organizational support theory into the twenty-first century world of work. *Journal of Business and Psychology, 27*, 123–147. doi:10.1007/s10869-011-9236-3
- Blau, P. M. (1964). *Exchange and power in social life*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Cohen, J., & Cohen, P. (1983). *Applied multiple regression/correlation analysis for the behavioral sciences*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Conway, J. M., & Huffcutt, A. I. (1997). Psychometric properties of multi-source performance ratings: A meta-analysis of subordinate, supervisor, peer, and self-ratings. *Human Performance, 10*, 331–360. doi:10.1207/s15327043hup1004_2
- Dreher, G. F., & Ash, R. A. (1990). A comparative study of mentoring among men and women in managerial, professional, and technical positions. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 75*, 539–546. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.75.5.539
- Ellinger, A. D. (2013). Supportive supervisors and managerial coaching: Exploring their intersections. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 86*, 310–316. doi:10.1111/joop.12021
- Gentry, W. A., & Sosik, J. J. (2010). Developmental relationships and managerial promotability in organizations: A multisource study. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 77*, 266–278. doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2010.04.010
- Gentry, W. A., Weber, T. J., & Sadri, G. (2008). Examining career-related mentoring and managerial performance across cultures: A multilevel analysis. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 72*, 241–253. doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2007.10.014
- Graves, L. M., Ohlott, P. J., & Ruderman, M. N. (2007). Commitment to family roles: Effects on managers' attitudes and performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 92*, 44–56. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.92.1.44

- Judiesch, M. K., & Lyness, K. S. (1999). Left behind? The impact of leaves of absence on managers' career success. *Academy of Management Journal*, *42*, 641–651. doi:10.2307/256985
- Kram, K. E. (1985). *Mentoring at work*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, and Company.
- McCall, M., Lombardo, M., & Morrison, A. (1988). *The lessons of experience*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Ng, T. W. H., Eby, L. T., Sorensen, K. L., & Feldman, D. C. (2005). Predictors of objective and subjective career success: A meta-analysis. *Personnel Psychology*, *58*, 367–408. doi:10.1111/j.1744-6570.2005.00515.x
- Paustian-Underdahl, S. C., Shanock, L. R., Rogelberg, S. G., Scott, C. W., Justice, L., & Altman, D. G. (2013). Antecedents to supportive supervision: An examination of biographical data. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, *86*, 288–309. doi:10.1111/joop.12019
- Raabe, B., & Beehr, T. A. (2003). Formal mentoring, versus supervisor and coworker relationships: Differences in perceptions and impact. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *24*, 271–293. doi:10.1002/job.193
- Ragins, B. R., & Scandura, T. A. (1999). Burden or blessing? Expected costs and benefits of being a mentor. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *20*, 493–509. doi:10.1002/(SICI)1099-1379(199907)20:4<493::AID-JOB894>3.0.CO;2-T
- Rhoades, L., & Eisenberger, R. (2002). Perceived organizational support: A review of the literature. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *87*, 698–714. doi:10.1037//0021-9010.87.4.698
- Scandura, T. A., & Williams, E. A. (2004). Mentoring and transformational leadership: The role of supervisory career mentoring. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *65*, 448–468. doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2003.10.003
- Sosik, J. J., & Godshalk, V. M. (2000). Leadership styles, mentoring functions received and job-related stress: A conceptual model and preliminary study. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *21*, 365–390. doi:10.1002/(SICI)1099-1379(200006)21:4<365::AID-JOB14>3.0.CO;2-H
- Zeni, T., Macdougall, A., Chauhan, R., Brock, M., & Buckley, M. R. (2013). In search of those boundary conditions which might influence the effectiveness of supportive supervision. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, *86*, 317–323. doi:10.1111/joop.12024

Received 29 May 2013; revised version received 29 May 2013