The Separate, relative, and joint effects of employee job performance domains on supervisors' willingness to mentor

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A B S T R A C T

The purpose of our study was to further elucidate how employees should behave at work to increase their chances of being mentored by their immediate supervisor. To that end, we experimentally tested how three domains of employee performance [task performance (TP), organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) targeting the supervisor, and counterproductive work behavior (CWB) targeting coworkers] affect supervisors' willingness to mentor. Each performance domain affected willingness to mentor. OCB had the weakest of the three main effects. Finally, the positive effect of TP was stronger when employees displayed less CWB.

1. Introduction

How can employees increase their supervisor's motivation to mentor them? The receipt of mentorship is associated with various favorable behavioral, attitudinal, health-related, relational, motivational, and career outcomes (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008). Moreover, employees' supervisors, compared to other individuals in the organization, can serve as particularly valuable mentors to their employees (Fagenson-Eland, Marks, & Amendola, 1997). Our research goal was to give employees empirically-based advice on priorities they should make in terms of the specific types of behaviors they could display at work that would help them to more easily secure mentorship from their supervisor.

Mentor–protégé relational dynamics have been conceptualized using social exchange theory (Allen, Poteet, & Russell, 2000; Olian, Carroll, & Giannantonio, 1993). This theory predicts that a supervisor would be more willing to offer informal mentorship to an employee to the extent he/she believes the employee would bring desirable attributes and/or competencies to their relationship in order to develop a relationship of mutual satisfaction. This is consistent with research on leader–follower relationships, which suggests that a follower (employee) who displays higher performance will fuel the social exchange with the leader (supervisor) such that the leader will reciprocate by offering the follower greater support and career-enhancing opportunities (Bauer & Green, 1996; Graen, 1989; Lapierre & Hackett, 2007). Thus, employee performance likely plays an important role in supervisors' willingness to provide mentorship.

At least three broad domains of job performance exist: Task performance, organizational citizenship behavior, and counterproductive work behavior (Sackett, 2002; Viswesvaran & Ones, 2000). Each is considered by supervisors when judging an employee's overall job performance (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002). In our study, we used a policy-capturing (experimental) de-
sign to assess how supervisors’ willingness to mentor an employee is affected by the employee’s task performance, citizenship behavior aimed at the supervisor, and counterproductive work behavior aimed at coworkers. Our specific objectives were to (1) test the separate effect of each employee performance domain on supervisors’ willingness to mentor, (2) test for differences in the relative effect sizes of each performance domain, thus determining to what extent strength in one performance domain can compensate for weakness in another, and (3) examine whether these domains interact in affecting willingness to mentor.

We used an experimental design given the causal nature of our research question. Despite a call for such designs in mentoring research (Allen et al., 2000), little has been done in this regard, thus preventing us from drawing causal conclusions from the majority of studies in this area. Because supervisors typically have multiple direct reports, the repeated-measures nature of policy-capturing research was particularly fitting because it enabled us to have all respondents (supervisors) consider multiple employees and rate their willingness to mentor each of them.

1.1. The effect of task performance on supervisors’ willingness to mentor

Task performance (TP) involves employee activities that are formally recognized as part of the job (i.e., formally expected) and that contribute to the organization’s technical core (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). High TP suggests that employees have the necessary knowledge, skills, abilities, and motivation to do the work that is expected of them. Thus, TP should indicate whether an employee has potential for future success, which is an important consideration when deciding whether or not to mentor an employee (Kram, 1985; Olian et al., 1993). Without a belief in the employee’s high potential, the supervisor may see little chance of a good return on the investment of time spent mentoring the employee (Olian et al., 1993). This would be consistent with research showing that TP predicts supervisors’ contributions to the social exchange with employees (Bauer & Green, 1996).

To date, very little research has formally tested whether TP significantly predicts supervisors’ willingness to mentor their employees. Olian et al. (1993) found that information on employee performance predicted managers’ willingness to mentor employees. However, they used a global measure of performance that merged multiple dimensions of performance (i.e., “quantity of work”, “quality of work”, “job knowledge”, “dependability”, “human relations”). Our goal was to test the isolated effect of TP.

Hypothesis 1. TP will positively affect supervisors’ willingness to mentor employees.

1.2. The effect of organizational citizenship behavior targeting the supervisor on supervisors’ willingness to mentor

Organizational citizenship behavior or extra-role behavior denotes voluntary prosocial contributions that transcend specified task performance or the formal employment contract (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Organ, 1988; Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983; Spector & Fox, 2002). Different forms of citizenship behavior exist, such as citizenship intended to help specific individuals in the organization, and citizenship behavior that benefits the organization as a whole, such as attending functions that are not mandated but that help the organization (Bowler & Brass, 2006; Williams & Anderson, 1991). When choosing to perform different types of citizenship behaviors, employees consider both the target and/or the beneficiary of the behavior (Settoon & Mossholder, 2002; Williams & Anderson, 1991). Given our focus on the employee–supervisor social exchange, we focused on employee OCB directly targeting and benefiting the supervisor.

Recent research suggests that citizenship behavior can be used by employees to fuel the social exchange with their supervisor, which in turn gains them access to more satisfying work experiences (Lapierre & Hackett, 2007). Compared to TP, citizenship behavior is more likely to reflect employees’ motivation to work hard for reasons other than conforming to formal expectations (Motowidlo & Van Scottter, 1994; Spector & Fox, 2002). Allen, Poteet, and Burroughs (1997) noted that mentors may be more attracted to employees who display initiative and dedication, which citizenship behavior would reflect. Also, past research suggests that OCB targeting specific individuals is largely driven by one’s prosocial value motive (Finkelstein, 2006; Rioux & Penner, 2001). Thus, a supervisor who is the target of an employee’s OCB may interpret this behavior as a sign of that employee’s strong commitment to their relationship. Being the target of OCB may also reduce the supervisor’s perceived risk that mentorship would not be reciprocated by the employee. As a result, supervisors should be more willing to provide such employees with mentorship as part of the reciprocity dynamic of social exchange.

Hypothesis 2. OCB targeting the supervisor will positively affect supervisors’ willingness to mentor.

1.3. The effect of counterproductive work behavior targeting coworkers on supervisors’ willingness to mentor

Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) denotes behavior intended to harm specific individuals within the organization or the organization as a whole (Spector & Fox, 2002). As with OCB, such behavior is generally considered voluntary and more reflective of personal motives than is task performance, since the latter is more constrained and routinized. CWB is not simply the opposite of organizational citizenship behavior. Dalal’s (2005) meta-analysis revealed only a moderate relationship between both constructs even when the target of the behavior (individuals versus the organization as a whole) was the same. For example, it is possible for an employee to direct OCB at his or her supervisor, while behaving counterproductively...
with coworkers. While CWB may be directed at specific individuals, the organization, or both, we chose to focus on CWB targeting coworkers to remain consistent with the interpersonal nature of voluntary work behaviors selected for our investigation. Also, it is more likely that supervisors would observe (or at least hear about) employee CWB directed at other employees in the group than be the target of CWB him/her self. Indeed, employees are unlikely to actively (overtly) direct CWB at their supervisor given the high probability of subsequent punishment (Spector & Fox, 2002). Finally, measuring CWB targeting coworkers was useful for gauging how an employee’s behavior with others in the work group can influence the dyadic exchange between that employee and the supervisor. Past work suggests that such behavior would indeed be important to consider (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995).

CWB targeting coworkers, as an indicator of employees’ antisocial motives, should reduce supervisors’ desire to offer mentorship. Because effective social skills are important in organizations, particularly among those occupying more senior roles that would call for leadership (Mumford, Campion, & Morgeson, 2007), this type of CWB would probably cause the supervisor to doubt the employee’s potential for advancement. Also, CWB directed at coworkers may cause the supervisor to wonder whether this employee could eventually behave similarly with him/her, irrespective of the amount of OCB this employee has offered the supervisor in the past. Finally, the supervisor may feel awkward mentoring an employee who behaves so poorly with fellow coworkers since other employees in the group may feel it is unjust for the supervisor to offer such an employee support and consideration. In sum, mentoring an employee who directs CWB at coworkers bears some potential costs, which are disincentives for mentoring (Allen et al., 1997; Ragins & Cotton, 1993).

**Hypothesis 3.** CWB targeting coworkers will negatively affect supervisors’ willingness to mentor.

### 1.4. Differential effects of employee performance domains on supervisors’ willingness to mentor

While there are theoretical reasons to expect each of the three selected performance domains to influence supervisors’ willingness to mentor, it is also conceivable that these effects differ in magnitude. First, we expect TP to have a stronger effect than OCB targeting the supervisor. This prediction is largely based on the fact that our study addresses immediate supervisors as potential mentors. A supervisor’s own performance and reputation are more vulnerable to an employee’s weak TP than to an employee’s weak OCB. An employee’s inability to fulfill formal responsibilities could limit the supervisor’s capacity to meet his/her managerial objectives. OCB, while desirable, may be less crucial to actually getting the work done. This would be consistent with past research suggesting that supervisors’ overall ratings of employee job performance are more strongly related to employee’s TP than to their citizenship behavior (Conway, 1999; Motowidlo & Van Scotter, 1994; Rotundo & Sackett, 2002). Thus, from a social exchange perspective, a supervisor would be more motivated to nurture a social exchange with an employee that would benefit the supervisor’s reputation by ensuring the work actually gets done, even if that employee is not prone to offering the supervisor a great deal of OCB. Thus, offering the supervisor OCB would not fully compensate for poor TP in terms of influencing supervisors’ willingness to mentor.

**Hypothesis 4a.** TP will have a stronger effect on supervisors’ willingness to mentor than will OCB targeting the supervisor.

We also expect that employees’ CWB targeting coworkers would have a stronger influence on supervisors’ willingness to mentor than would OCB they offer the supervisor. While an employee’s high OCB may benefit the supervisor in ways that are not formally expected, the supervisor may view high CWB toward coworkers as potentially damaging for the morale and functioning of the group. Indeed, some research suggests that being the target of CWB can hamper employees’ job attitudes and concentration levels (Barling, Rogers, & Kelloway, 2001). From the supervisor’s perspective, it may be more important for an employee to avoid behaving counterproductively with coworkers than to be the direct beneficiary of that employee’s OCB. Put otherwise, in terms of employees’ capacity to motivate their supervisor to provide them with mentorship, the positive effect of offering their supervisor OCB would not fully compensate for the negative effect of behaving counterproductively with coworkers.

**Hypothesis 4b.** CWB targeting coworkers will have a stronger absolute effect on supervisors’ willingness to mentor than will OCB targeting the supervisor.

As argued above, there is reason to believe that TP and CWB would each have a stronger effect on supervisors’ willingness to mentor than would OCB targeting the supervisor. Extant theory was insufficient to allow us to predict a difference between the effects of TP and CWB. In fact, some research suggests that these two domains of performance may be equivalent, on the average, in terms of the magnitude of their influence on supervisors’ overall ratings of employee job performance (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002). Thus, they may not differ significantly in terms of their relative (absolute) effects on supervisors’ desire to mentor.

### 1.5. The moderating roles of OCB and CWB in the effect of TP on willingness to mentor

As noted earlier, OCB and CWB are each more likely to reflect employees’ interpersonal motives than is TP. Perceptions of another party’s interpersonal motives are paramount when deciding whether or not to invest in a social exchange relationship with that other party since by definition, social exchange partners make themselves vulnerable to the discretionary interpersonal actions of the other. Little OCB aimed at the supervisor and high CWB aimed at coworkers may hamper super-
visors’ belief that an employee will consistently act in the supervisor’s best interest, even if that employee displays high TP. Thus, offering the supervisor little OCB or behaving counterproductively with coworkers may cause supervisors to question employees’ interpersonal motives, thus weakening the positive effect of TP on supervisors’ willingness to offer employees mentorship.

**Hypothesis 5a.** The effect of TP on supervisors’ willingness to mentor will be more positive when OCB targeting the supervisor is high than when it is low.

**Hypothesis 5b.** The effect of TP on supervisors’ willingness to mentor will be more positive when CWB targeting coworkers is low than when it is high.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Forty participants voluntarily took part in this study as part of an activity carried out in an MBA course in which they were enrolled. Because we used a repeated-measures experimental design, each experimental condition (or “scenario”) involved 40 participants. The mean participant age was 31.55 years (SD = 8.69) and gender was almost evenly split (52.5% male). All participants had full-time work experience (M = 8.5 years, SD = 8.2), and most (70%) had full-time supervisory experience (M = 4.0 years, SD = 6.6).

2.2. Overview of procedure

Participants’ willingness to mentor a subordinate was elicited through a design known as “policy-capturing” (Aiman-Smith, Scullen, & Barr, 2002). Participants took the role of supervisor. They were presented with a series of written scenarios, each representing the profile of a different subordinate. Each scenario contained three cues, each representing one of our three independent variables (TP, OCB targeting the supervisor, and CWB targeting coworkers). The level of each cue was sys-

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Ken F.

**He sometimes performs his formal job duties well.** For example, while he sometimes clearly documents the steps he uses to develop a new program, at other times his documentation can be rather vague or incomplete. Also, after inquiring more about the steps he uses to develop his programs, you have discovered that some of them do not seem to be based on proper scientific analysis and mathematical models. Lastly, simulations have shown that a few of the programs he has developed would not function properly with a range of networks, workstations, or peripheral equipment commonly used by clients.

**He often tries to help you in ways that go beyond what you formally expect of him.** For example, he frequently volunteers to work overtime, he often takes on additional responsibilities within the division beyond those already given to him, and he regularly tells you about new structures, technologies, or approaches that could potentially improve the overall performance of the division.

**He sometimes behaves disrespectfully toward other engineers in the division.** For example, he sometimes puts people down in public because of their job performance, he starts arguments now and then that do not clearly benefit the group, and at times he makes fun of others.

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<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Moderately agree</th>
<th>Slightly agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Slightly disagree</th>
<th>Moderately disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. I would like to mentor this subordinate</td>
<td>[1]</td>
<td>[2]</td>
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<td>2. I have no desire to mentor this subordinate</td>
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Fig. 1. Example subordinate profile.
tematically manipulated across scenarios. After reading each profile, they indicated their willingness to mentor that subordinate. Fig. 1 provides an example profile.

2.3. Participant instructions

Participants were told that the simulation concerned the willingness of supervisors to mentor one or more of their subordinates. Participants read a definition of mentoring based on the one used by Allen, Poteet, Russell, and Dobbins (1997), which provides examples of typical mentoring behaviors (e.g., introducing the subordinate to others in the organization, listening to his/her personal problems, providing career guidance). Participants were then asked to imagine that they were a middle manager for a fictional software engineering company, the profile of which was described. They were instructed that they supervised a team of 28 software engineers, each of which directly reported to them (having such a number of direct reports is rather common in this industry). All subordinates had the same job duties, which participants read in a short job description. This description served to define TP expectations for each subordinate.

Participants were instructed to read through the 28 subordinate profiles, and to indicate, in turn, their willingness to mentor each of the subordinates. The 28 subordinates were each identified by a unique male name, each of which is commonly used in North America (e.g., John, Michael, Robert). Keeping the subordinate’s gender constant prevented any confound between gender and cue levels, and also reflected the reality that most software engineers are male.

2.4. Independent variables: Policy-capturing cues

Each of our three independent variables was represented by a separate cue in each subordinate scenario. Moreover, as shown in Table 1, each cue was multifaceted. That is, instead of simply stating a given subordinate’s standing in each of the three performance domains (e.g., this subordinate is low on TP), each cue contained several behavioral descriptors. This was done to increase the realism of the subordinate profiles and facilitate the degree that participants could immerse themselves in their role.

The TP cue contained three descriptors, which were common to various software development job descriptions (e.g., “computer programmer”, “computer software engineer”) found in national job analysis databases (e.g., O’NET). The three descriptors had been presented earlier to participants in the job description for the software engineer position. The wording for the OCB cue statement was based on items found in several scales capturing employees’ OCB that would directly benefit the supervisor (Lapierre, 2007; Lehman & Simpson, 1992; Morrison & Phelps, 1999; Smith et al., 1983; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998; Williams & Anderson, 1991). Finally, the wording for the cue statement reflecting CWB aimed at coworkers was derived from selected items of Spector et al. (2006) counterproductive behavior subscale labeled “abuse”. We favored behaviors most frequently reported by employees.

A completely crossed (full factorial) design was employed to create the subordinate profiles. Each of our three cues was varied on three levels, representing low, medium and high levels of that performance domain. Policy-capturing cues should be as realistic as possible and should each have similar ranges (Aiman-Smith et al., 2002; Karren & Barringer, 2002). The latter is because research has shown that the cue range (rather than the actual cues) may influence respondents. Indeed, when respondents are presented with profiles where some cues have narrow ranges and others have wider ranges, they may focus on the cues with the wider ranges (Highhouse, Luong, & Sarkar-Barney, 1999). To ensure that our cues would be appropriate, we asked three professors whose research focuses on employee performance dimensions to assess an initial version of our cues. To increase realism while preserving cue range similarity, they suggested that the Low TP cue description use the term “rarely” instead of “never” (since it is unlikely an employee would never display satisfactory TP), and the High TP cue description use the term “always” instead of “often”.

Given three cues, with three levels each, 27 different scenarios were created. A duplicate scenario was presented first as a practice scenario. Thus, each person was presented with 28 scenarios in total, although only 27 scenarios were substantive. During the debriefing session that followed the study, participants indicated that when reading the scenarios, they had no difficulty distinguishing between the three cues and each of their three levels.

2.5. Scenario order and cue order

To ensure our results would not largely reflect the presentation order of scenarios or cues within scenarios, we used multiple orders of each. We employed 10 different random orders of presentation of the 27 subordinate profiles. We also used two cue orders. In the first cue order, the TP cue was presented first and the CWB cue last. In the second, the CWB cue was presented first and the TP cue last. Participants were randomly assigned to order conditions.

2.6. Individual differences

We included multiple individual difference measures in our survey as potential moderators of our observed effects, namely age, length of full-time employment and length of full-time supervisory experience. Because these variables were highly correlated (correlations ranging between .79 and .95), we only included the length of full-time supervisory experience as this variable is most relevant to our research questions.
2.7. Dependent variable

Willingness to mentor was assessed using an adapted version of Ragins and Cotton’s (1993) 2-item Intention to Mentor scale (see items in Fig. 1). Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale. Ragins and Cotton (1993) reported an alpha coefficient reliability estimate of .81 for this scale. In our study, the average alpha coefficient (across the 27 scenarios) was .89 (ranged between .76 and .95).

2.8. Coding

Given that each policy-capturing cue had three levels, we created two dummy coded vectors for each cue. We used the “low” cue value (e.g., low TP) as the reference category.

3. Results

A policy-capturing design results in two levels of analysis (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000) since scenarios (i.e., subordinate profiles) are nested within participants. Thus, participant responses to each scenario can vary as a function of within-person variables (cue levels) and between-person variables (differences between participants). Our data revealed that 18.29% of the variance in willingness to mentor was between-persons and the remainder (81.71%) was within-persons. The amount of between-person variance was significantly greater than zero ($\chi^2 (39) = 274.65, p < .001$). Thus, we used multilevel modeling for our analyses (Hofmann, Griffin, & Gavin, 2000; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002).

3.1. Impact of performance domain variables on supervisors’ willingness to mentor

We tested two within-persons models. In the first model, we regressed willingness to mentor to the dummy coded vectors representing variation in performance domains. In the second model, we included the product terms representing the two hypothesized interactions between performance domains. Before turning to testing our hypotheses via these two models, we note that participants relied heavily on the performance information (i.e., variations in TP, OCB and CWB) embedded in the subordinate profiles to determine their willingness to mentor a subordinate, as indicated by the distribution of $R^2$ for participants’ individual judgment policies (see Cooksey, 1996). The median $R^2$ (across our 40 participants) for the first model

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<th>Organizational citizenship behavior targeting supervisor</th>
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<th>Counterproductive work behavior targeting coworkers</th>
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we tested was .79. The interquartile range (i.e., the range between the first and third quartile of the R² distribution) was from .71 to .82. These values indicate a substantial percentage of variance in willingness to mentor (the criterion) explained by the set of the three performance domains (the predictors). The values associated with the second model we tested were a median R² of .89 with an interquartile range of .85–.92.

Model 1: Main effects of performance domains. As shown in Table 2 (in the column labeled “γ for step one”), both vectors representing TP were positive and significant. Also, the coefficient for TP (high) was larger than the one for TP (medium). Hypothesis 1 was therefore supported. Supporting Hypothesis 2, both vectors representing OCB were positive and significant, and the coefficient for OCB (high) was larger than the one for OCB (medium). Supporting Hypothesis 3, both vectors representing CWB were negative and significant, with the coefficient for CWB (high) being larger than the one for CWB (medium).¹

Hypothesis 4a and 4b were tested by setting up formal contrasts between sets of dummy coded vectors. For example, Hypothesis 4a was tested by contrasting the two dummy vectors representing TP (TP (high) and TP (med)) with those representing OCB (OCB (high) and OCB (med)). Results provided support for Hypothesis 4a in that the overall effect of TP on supervisors’ willingness to mentor was stronger than that of OCB, χ² = 5.84 (df = 1), p < .05. Hypothesis 4b was also supported in that CWB had a stronger overall effect on supervisors’ willingness to mentor than did OCB, χ² = 4.26 (df = 1), p < .05.

Model 2: Interaction effects between performance domains. Hypothesis 5a addressed the interaction between TP and OCB, whereas Hypothesis 5b addressed the interaction between TP and CWB. Each hypothesis required the creation of four product terms. Looking again at Table 2 (in the column entitled “γ for step two”), only one product term, which served to test Hypothesis 5b, was statistically significant. We plotted this interaction (see Fig. 2). As expected, the positive effect of increasing TP from a low level to a medium level on supervisors’ willingness to mentor was stronger when CWB was low than when it was high. Thus, while Hypothesis 5b received some support, there was no support for Hypothesis 5a.

3.2. Cross-level moderation effects

We tested for cross-level moderation, where the strength of within-person (level 1) effects would vary as a function of between-person (level 2) variables, including length of full-time supervisory experience and cue order. Supervisory experience had no moderation effect. Cue order moderated the main effect of CWB (High) (γ = .30, p < .05) such that the effect was stronger when the CWB cue was presented last rather than first. However, the magnitude of this effect (R²) was very small (.001).

¹ Although not formally hypothesized, we also sought to determine whether the difference between the vectors representing the high and medium cue values [e.g., TP (high) vs. TP (medium)] were significantly different from one another. Following Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2003), we changed the dummy coding system such that the medium cue value was now the reference category and repeated the regression of our criterion, willingness to mentor, on the dummy coded vectors representing variation in performance domains. [Recall that the low cue value had been used as the reference category for the focal analyses.] Results indicated that the high cue value was significantly different than the medium cue value for all three performance domains as follows: TP γ = 0.24, OCB γ = 0.11; CWB γ = −.22, all ps < .01.
4. Discussion

4.1. Theoretical and practical implications

Each of the three domains of job performance affected supervisors’ willingness to mentor an employee. Consistent with the reciprocity dynamic of social exchange, supervisors appear more willing to offer mentorship to an employee viewed as having the behavioral attributes that would help make their relationship mutually beneficial. Our experimental research design was of particular value given the scarcity of mentoring studies lending themselves to causal conclusions.

As expected, OCB targeting the supervisor had the weakest of the three main effects. OCB has been said to be reflective of employees’ interpersonal motives, thus making it relevant to social exchange with the target of the behavior (the supervisor). While Lapierre and Hackett’s (2007) research suggested that employees can use citizenship behavior to fuel the social exchange with their supervisor, our findings suggest that other dimensions of performance may be more important for employees to be mindful of, at least in terms of motivating their supervisor to offer them the support and opportunities that typify mentorship. Supervisor’s desire to mentor seems more easily influenced by employees’ ability to carry out formal job responsibilities (TP) and the frequency with which they engage in abusive behavior directed at coworkers (CWB). As argued earlier in this article, these two dimensions of employee performance may be relatively more salient to supervisors’ interests. While employees who engage in OCB with their supervisor are attractive to some extent, our participants seemed even more willing to invest time and effort in employees whom they believe will get the job done and will not cause problems with other employees. Moreover, the relatively weaker effect observed for OCB may have been due to some participants interpreting this behavior more as impression management than an indicator of prosocial motivation. Individuals can sometimes attribute employees’ citizenship behavior to impression management motives, particularly when employees are male (Farrell & Finkelstein, 2007). This may have also explained why OCB was not found to moderate the positive effect of TP (Hypothesis 5a). If such citizenship behavior was not consistently interpreted by participants as an employee’s genuine care and concern for the supervisor, a significant moderating effect would have been more difficult to observe.

A practical implication of these findings is that employees wishing to increase their supervisors’ desire to mentor them should try to achieve high TP and avoid any intended or unintended abuse of coworkers. Examples of actions that may lead to higher TP include asking for and acting upon performance feedback as well as modeling successful peers. Providing the supervisor with OCB may further increase one’s chances of being mentored. However, our data suggest it is unlikely that high OCB will fully compensate for low TP or high CWB.

That CWB aimed at coworkers moderated the positive effect of TP is consistent with the view that the risk a supervisor may associate with CWB would be a prevailing factor in deciding whether or not to mentor employees. However, CWB no longer had a moderating effect when employees displayed the highest level of TP (see the product terms involving TP (high) in Table 2). Thus, perhaps the perceived risks associated with CWB aimed at coworkers are not severe enough to hamper the anticipated benefits that supervisors associate with the highest levels of TP. It may be that supervisors are willing to risk mentoring those who behave inappropriately with coworkers if they happen to demonstrate exemplary TP, but not if they display less than ideal TP.
Our research goal was to provide current and future employees with empirically-based advice on behaviors they should prioritize at work to more easily receive mentorship by their supervisor. We have shown that task performance and counterproductive work behavior aimed at coworkers are relatively more important than citizenship behavior targeting the supervisor, and that counterproductive behavior can thwart the positive effect of task performance, unless the employee demonstrates the highest level of task performance.

References


