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Why and When Paradoxical Leadership Predicts Followers' Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior: A Multilevel Model

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Abstract: Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) is one type of crucial organizational behaviors within work environments which aroused the academic interest of researchers recently over the past few decades. However, we still know little about how things are going under complex and uncertain environmental conditions. The present study explores the influence of paradoxical leader behaviors (PLB) on followers' unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) with followers perceived inclusive climate being the mediator and frequent change being the moderator based on the social information processing theory as overarching theoretical perspective. Using a multilevel and multi-source sample of 63 leaders and 218 followers in China, we found that (1) PLB negatively related to followers' UPB, (2) followers' perceived inclusive climate fully mediated the relationship between PLB and followers' UPB, and (3) frequent change moderated the relationship between PLB and followers perceived inclusive climate, specifically, when the level of frequent change is high the positive relationship will be stronger. Our findings extend the understanding of the relationship between PLB and followers' UPB, and specify how, why and when PLB can reduce followers' UPB. Theoretical contributions, practical implications, and future directions were discussed.

Keywords: paradoxical leadership; unethical pro-organizational behavior; inclusive climate; frequent change; multilevel model

JEL Classification: M19

1. Introduction

Employees' unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) is one form of unethical conduct in the workplace which is not beneficial to the long-term development of the organization. Previous research mostly focuses on how to predict and prevent UPB (Graham, Resick et al., 2020; Fehr et al. 2019; Chen et al., 2016). UPB refers to actions 'that are intended to promote the effective functioning of the organization or its members (e.g., leaders) and violate core social values, norms, or standards of proper conduct' (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Empirical research of organizational behavior has focused on antecedents of UPB, and found the important roles of leadership behavior on follower UPB (Chen et al., 2016; Graham, Resick et al., 2020; Veetkazhi et al., 2020).

Prior studies have suggested that leadership behaviors such as ethical leadership (Fehr et al., 2019; Ruiz-Palomino & Linuesa-Langreo, 2018; Demirtas, 2015; Eisenbeiß & Brodbeck, 2014; Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara & Suarez-Acosta, 2014; Miao et al., 2013; Shao et al., 2011), transformational leadership and charismatic leadership (Effelsberg et al., 2014; Graham, Ziegert et al., 2015), transactional (Graham et al., 2015), benevolent leadership (Shaw & Liao, 2020), responsible leadership (Cheng et al., 2019), as well as abusive supervision (Greenbaum et al., 2017) and Machiavellian (Umphress & Bingham, 2011), influence UPB.

Despite these findings, our knowledge of how to prevent UPB under complex and uncertain environmental conditions, is still limited. This is a crucial theoretical question because today's organizations are facing dramatically increasing environmental uncertainty and crisis, such as COVID-19. The current pandemic wave of COVID-19 has placed organizations under significant pressure, which maybe promotes more UPB. It becomes paramount to understand which leadership behaviors help prevent UPB under uncertain environmental conditions. As one new type of leadership behavior in an uncertain environment, paradoxical leadership behavior (PLB) describes leader behaviors 'that are seemingly competing, yet interrelated, to meet competing workplace demands simultaneously and over time' (Zhang et al. 2015). Building an overarching theoretical framework based on the social information processing theory, the present study tries to empirically examine why and when PLB predicts UPB under uncertain environment, to address above gap.

Specifically, this article has three major research goals. The first purpose is to explore the relationship between the PLB and UPB. Under the uncertain environment, organizations and employees inevitably face various conflicts (Schad et al., 2016). Paradoxical leader shows employees how to accept and embrace the contradictions under complex environment, while balancing high work requirements and high autonomy (Shao et al., 2019), enabling employees to do right things. As such, PLB maybe helps reduce follower UPB under the uncertain environment.

The second purpose is to propose inclusive climate as a mediator to understand how PLB influences UPB, based on social information processing theory. Social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) indicates that individuals shape their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors based on making sense of information cues from the social environment. As a key source of social information, leader's behaviors are very important to influence subordinates' perception and cognition of working condition, inclusive climate, which further influence their work behaviors. (Chiu et al., 2016). Accordingly, we further examine the mediating effect of inclusive climate on the relationship between PLB and UPB.

The last purpose is to explore the boundary conditions of the effect of PLB on inclusive climate, we propose and test the moderated effect of frequent change. Drawing on social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), followers rely more on information cues from workplace in uncertain ambiguous, or complex situations (Goldman, 2001; Larson & Callahan,1990). We predict that frequent change will moderate the relationship between

PLB and inclusive climate, and also propose that relationship will be stronger under high change frequency than under low change frequency.

In conclusion, by using a multilevel and multi-source sample of 63 leaders and 218 followers in China, we empirically examine: (a) the main effect of PLB on followers' UPB; (b) the mediating effect of perceived inclusive climate in linking PLB with followers' UPB; (c) the moderated effect of frequent change on PLB and followers perceived inclusive climate. Figure 1 shows the overall theoretical model and the proposed hypotheses.

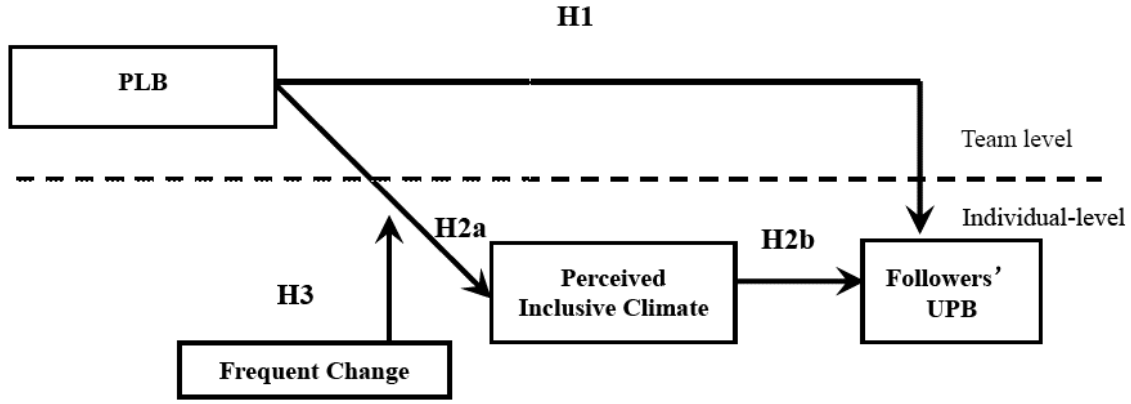

Figure 1. The overall theoretical model

1.1. PLB and UPB

The concept of paradoxical leadership stems from the application of philosophy concept 'paradox' in organizational management. Paradox is defined as 'long-term interdependent and contradictory elements' (Putnam et al., 2016,). Based on paradox thinking and Eastern Yin-Yang philosophical theories, PLB is defined as leaders adopting seemingly competitive but interrelated behaviors in leadership process (Zhang et al., 2015). And Zhang et al. (2015) use 'both–and' to describe five dimensions of PLB, including (1) combining self-centeredness with other-centeredness; (2) maintaining both distance and closeness; (3) treating subordinates uniformly, while allowing individualization; (4) enforcing work requirements, while allowing flexibility; and (5) maintaining decision control, while allowing autonomy (Zhang et al., 2015).

UPB was first proposed by Umphress et al. (2010), which refers to unethical behaviors that are intended to help organizations achieve better development, but violate the core values of society, morality, or laws. UPB appears to be a paradoxical phenomenon, that is, beneficial to the organization short-term efficiency yet detrimental to customer and long-term development (Chen et al., 2016; Tang et al., 2020). According to social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), as a key source of social information, leader's behaviors influence followers' thinking, attitudes and behaviors. PLB is to simultaneously support the forces of oppositional conflicts and balance and use contradictions (Putnam et al., 2016), which shows employees how to accept and respond the contradictions under complex environment (Shao et al., 2019), enabling employees to do right things. In addition, PLB with

a long-term perspective will not encourage follower UPB because such behavior can bring short-term benefits yet harmful to long-term development.

Accordingly, we propose that PLB helps reduce follower UPB under the uncertain environment as following hypothesis:

Hypothesis1: *PLB is negatively related to followers UPB.*

1.2. The Mediating Role of Inclusive Climate

Inclusive climate refers to the 'shared view of employees who identify the extent of organizational involvement in making employees feel valued, creating sense of belongingness by appreciating their presence in the organizations '(Mor Barak et al., 2016). It is believed that in an inclusive climate, every follower is treated fairly and different opinions are valued (Nishii, 2013).

PLB is helpful to climate for inclusion. Paradoxical leaders not only strictly implement work rules and standards, but also allow employees to maintain flexibility; they not only maintain decision-making control, but also allow followers' autonomy, namely high standards and high standards (Zhang et al., 2015). Using 'both-and' perspective, PLB shows high flexibility and high autonomy (Shao et al., 2019), the extent to which leaders' comfort with diversity, alter rules for acceptable behaviors to ensure flexible application, integration of differences and inclusion in decision making differences, may influence the extent to which employees perceived organizational inclusion (Shore et al., 2017). Thus, we predict that PLB has a significant positive effect on followers perceived inclusive climate.

Hypothesis2a: *PLB is positively related to followers perceived inclusive climate.*

Perceived inclusive climate is helpful to prevent UPB. Organizational inclusive climate clearly increases fairness, respect and trust among organization members (Shore et al., 2017). Within inclusive climates, fairness trust and respect enable employees to focus more on their own work without having to cater to others, and they do not have to deliberately be immoral to impress the organization or others (Lee, Schwarz et al., 2019). Thus, we predict that perceived inclusive climate has a significant negative effect on UPB.

Hypothesis 2b*: Followers perceived inclusive climate is negatively related to UPB.*

On the basis of social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), employees make meaning of social cues within the workplace and socially construct their perceptions and attitudes. Research revealed that focal leaders (McKay & Avery, 2009; Kozlowski & Doherty,1989) and climate for inclusion (Boekhorst, 2015; Rashid et al., 2020) were very important to influence followers' perceptions of job and circumstances. The information from leaders' behaviors and role models would help followers to judge how to present appropriate work behaviors (Rentsch, 1990), and perceive work climate through social interactions (Reichers & Schneider, 1990). Combing above argument, we propose the mediating hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2c*: Followers perceived inclusive climate mediates the effects of PLB on followers UPB.*

1.3. The Moderated Role of Frequent Change

Frequency of change refers to individual perceptions of how often change occurs in their organization (or sector) (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). Research identified the frequent change as an important feature of change which is pertinent to employees' workplace behaviors (Babalola et al., 2016).

On the basis of social information processing theory, social information would be more important when uncertainty is high (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). When followers perceive frequent change, they experience high level of uncertainty (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). Therefore, 'both-and' cognition and behaviors from paradoxical leaders would send subordinates more information about integration and tolerance for differences (Zhang & Han, 2019; Larson & Callahan, 1990). Thus, followers would perceive much more inclusive climate in work environment. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 3: *Frequent change plays the moderate role in the positive relationship between PLB and followers perceived inclusive climate, that is, when the level of frequent change is higher the above positive relationship will be stronger.*

2. Methodology

2.1. Sample and Data Collection

We collected 80 questionnaires for leaders and 300 questionnaires for subordinates. In the end, 63 valid questionnaires for leaders and 218 questionnaires for subordinates were obtained, yielding a response rate of 78.75% and 72.67% respectively. We collected data from multiple sources (i.e., focal leader and their subordinates). Perceived inclusive climate and frequent change and PLB were rated by subordinates. Leaders evaluated UPB for the subordinates. Participants were assured their survey results would stay confidential and anonymous and be used for the purpose of scientific research only. The valid samples come from 12 Chinese companies. The average age of the participants was 37, 62.15% of the participants were male, and 90% had a college or higher degree. Age, education level and tenure were normally distributed.

2.2. Measures and Analysis

We used established scales to measure all variables. Respondents provided their answers on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (= strongly disagree) to 5 (= strongly agree). PLB was measured with 22-item scale developed by Zhang et al. (2015) (see Appendix for the scale items), the Cronbach α for this scale was .826, and the average Rwg score for PLB was .87 (ranging from .76 to 1.00) was above the recommended cutoff of .70. UPB was measured with 6-item scale developed by Umphress et al. (2010), the Cronbach α for this scale was .789. Perceived inclusive climate was measured with 22-item scale developed by Nishii (2013), the Cronbach α for this scale was .927. Frequent Change was measured with 3-item scale developed by Rafferty and Griffin (2006), the Cronbach α for this scale was .823. Furthermore, followers age, gender, education, and organizational tenure were the control variables in this

research. We employed multilevel data to analyze the proposed model using SPSS13.0, LISREL8.80 and HLM7.0.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics Results

We firstly conducted descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. The results were summarized in Table 1. The individual-level results showed that follower perceived inclusive climate was negatively correlated with follower UPB (-.530, $p < .01$).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Individual-level variables									
1. Gender	26.88	6.18	1.000	.180	-.346**	.421**	-.268**	.449**	.095
2. Age	1.38	.66	----	1.000	-.146	.114	.119	-.171*	-.036
3. Education	3.95	.69	----	----	1.000	-.113	.138	-.200*	.074
4. Tenure	23.59	24.77	----	----	----	1.000	-.107	.217*	.083
5. UPB	2.44	.84	----	----	----	----	1.000	-.530**	.169*
6.IC	3.68	.64	----	----	----	----	----	1.000	.170*
7.FC	3.08	.71	----	----	----	----	----	----	1.000
Team-level variable									
PLB	3.90	.37	----	----	----	----	----	----	----

[1]Note: Two-tailed test; PLB: Paradoxical leadership behaviour; IC: Perceived inclusive climate; FC: Frequent change; UPB: Unethical pro-organizational behaviour; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, *$p < .05$; N = 218 for individual-level data and N = 63 for team-level data

3.2. Hypotheses Testing Results

We conduct confirmatory factor analysis to test the discriminant validities of PLB, perceived inclusive climate, frequent change, and UPB. The result shows that the hypothesized four-factor model yielded a better fit ($\chi 2/df=1.58<3$, RMSEA=0.06<0.08, GFI=0.92>0.9, CFI=0.98>0.9, NNFI=0.96>0.9), Above results showed an acceptable level of discriminant validity of four variables in our study.

We use HLM to examine the multilevel influences on UPB. Before testing the hypotheses, we run a null model to examine the significance of systematic between-group variance. The results show that the proportion of between-group variance in UPB is 32.37%, and the chi-square test is significant ($\chi 2$ (df = 62) = 104. 01, $p <0.001$), supporting the use of HLM.

Hypothesis 1 predicts that PLB is negatively related to UPB. As shown in Table 2, PLB had a negative relationship with UPB (γ=-0.645, $p<0.01$, Model 1 in Table 2), providing support for H1. To test multilevel mediating effect of perceived inclusive climate on PLB and UPB for H2a, H2b and H2c. The results indicate that PLB is significantly related to follower

perceived inclusive climate (γ = 0.745, p < .001, Model 2 in Table 2) and follower perceived inclusive climate is significantly related to UPB (γ = - 0.658, p < .001, Model 3 in Table 2). And controlling the effect of follower perceived inclusive climate, PLB is not significantly related to UPB (γ = -0.194, p > .0.05; Model 4 in Table 2), in accordance with H2a, H2b and H2c. The results further show the full mediating effect.

Regarding moderated effects H3, the interaction effect of frequent change and PLB in predicting follower perceived inclusive climate is positive (γ = 0.354, p < .0.05, Model 5 in Table 2). Furthermore, to better comprehend the moderation of frequent change, we plotted the effect in Figure 2. Figure 2 shows that the relationship of PLB with follower perceived inclusive climate strengthened more when frequency of change was high than when it was low. Thus, the results providing support for H3.

Table 2. Results of HLM.

Variables	Model1 Followers' UPB	Model2 IC	Model3 Followers' UPB	Model4 Followers' UPB	Model5 IC
Individua-Level Variables					
Gender	0.115(0.099)	-0.153**(0.060)	0.039(0.083)	0.039(0.083)	-0.151**(0.056)
Age	-0.003(0.021)	0.009(0.014)	-0.002(0.016)	-0.000(0.016)	0.004(0.013)
Education	0.121(0.120)	-0.176(0.091)	0.028(0.097)	0.042(0.096)	-0.186*(0.087)
Tenure	0.001(0.003)	-0.002(0.002)	0.001(0.003)	0.001(0.003)	-0.001(0.002)
IC			-0.658***(0.083)	-0.612***(0.094)	
FC					0.085(0.059)
Team-Level **Variables**					
PLB	-0.645**(0.213)	0.745***(0.119)		-0.194(0.195)	0.745***(0.120)
Interaction Variables					
PLB*FC					0.354*(0.141)
FC*IC					

[1]Note: Two-tailed test; PLB: Paradoxical leadership behaviour; IC: Perceived inclusive climate; FC: Frequent change; UPB: Unethical pro-organizational behaviour; *** p < .001，** p < .01，*p < .05; N = 218 for individual-level data and N = 63 for team-level data

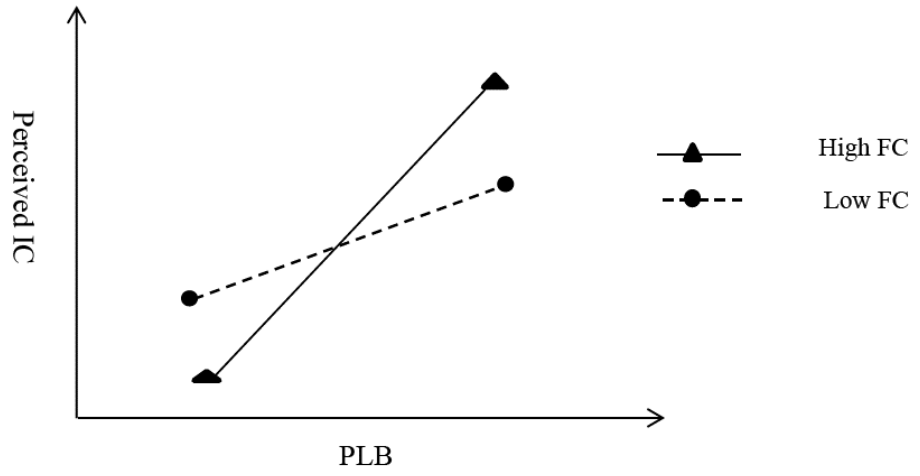

Figure 2. Interaction between PLB and frequent change on perceived inclusive climate

4. Discussion

Using a multilevel and multisource sample, from the social information processing perspective, the present study revealed three major findings: (1) PLB negatively related to followers' UPB, (2) followers perceived inclusive climate fully mediated the relationship between PLB and followers UPB, and (3) frequent change moderated the relationship between PLB and followers perceived inclusive climate.

4.1. Theoretical Implications

Our findings make some contributions as follows Firstly, our study focused on UPB prevention under uncertain context. As one of paradoxical phenomenon in organization, UPB was beneficial to short-term efficiency of organization, yet harmful to long-term development (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Prior studies mostly found that leadership styles such as transformational leadership (Graham et al., 2015) and benevolent leadership (Shaw & Liao, 2020) promote followers UPB. A few studies focused on preventing factors of UPB. Furthermore, even though the essential role of leadership play on the UPB has been found in the previous research, they potentially explored UPB in general context but not uncertain context. With the continuing rise in environmental complexity and dynamism, more studies should focus on how to prevent UPB under uncertain context. The present study starts from the important leadership behavior under uncertain context, PLB, conducting multilevel model on follower UPB. The result also demonstrated the important prevention effect of PLB in explaining the determinants of follower UPB, which extends previous UPB empirical research to uncertain context.

Secondly, our study enriched current research by explaining how PLB associates with UPB through followers perceived organizational climate. Using social information processing theory framework (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), we specified inclusive climate as a mediator, which links PLB and UPB. To date, there has been limited attention to how leaders contribute to preventing UPB under uncertain environment (Veetkazhi et al., 2020). Our result findings supported that paradoxical leaders were more likely to make followers perceive climate of inclusion, which consequently resulted in fewer UPB. Past research has shown that identification related variables mediate the relationship between leadership behaviors and follower UPB (e.g., Shaw & Liao, 2020; Effelsberg et al.,2014; Miao et al., 2013). Our study supplemented the UPB literature by identifying a climate mediator —inclusive climate, and it also contributes to the social information processing perspective. And inclusive climate plays more important role in preventing follower UPB. Our results contributed to inclusive workplaces research (Shore et al., 2018) by extending previous research to change and crisis context.

Thirdly, we considered frequency of change as one of critical context variables which influences the relationship between PLB on followers perceived organizational climate, contributing to PLB literature by extending the boundary conditions of the effectiveness of PLB (Tan et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2015). Our results found that high frequency of change

strengthened the relationship between PLB and followers perceived organizational climate. Individual differences have been the primary focus in exploring boundary conditions of PLB effectiveness, such as follower psychological safety (Yang et al., 2019) and cognitive closure needs (She & Li, 2017), workplace context, such as job stress (Shao & Liao, 2019). However, fewer study explored whether and how the uncertainty and crisis context could influence the relationship between PLB and outcomes. Our study unveils the contingent role of frequency of change in the relationship between PLB and followers perceived organizational climate, which extends previous PLB empirical research to change and crisis context.

4.2. Practical Implications

Above findings also had important practical implications. The present study indicated paradoxical leaders were effectively prevent followers UPB under change circumstances. We therefore recommend that organizations should encourage leaders to learn and adopt paradox thinking in leadership process, especially under uncertain context. Additionally, our study suggests the advantages and importance of inclusive climate both at work unit levels and individual level. Therefore, organizations should pay more attention to create or foster inclusive climate, which could further help to reduce followers' unethical work behavior.

4.3. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations of the present study provide possible opportunities for further research. First and foremost, the current research, like all survey studies, could not allow for exploring more dynamic mechanisms. Future research may use qualitative data or experimental design to examine the dynamic or causal relationships. Secondly, it incorporates Chinese-specific sample. Future research may examine the relationships using samples from other parts of the world and further do some comparing. Thirdly, PLB is developed on Eastern Yin-Yang philosophical theories. Future research may examine the preventing role of other leadership styles.

5. Conclusions

Today's organizations are facing increasing uncertain environment and frequent crisis. This paper provides an empirical investigation of preventing effects of PLB on unethical behavior intended to benefit the organization (UPB) through inclusive climate, especially under frequent change circumstances. We suggest avenues of future research encompassing leader traits, leader behaviors, context factors to comprehensively understanding how to prevent UPB under VUCA (i.e., volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) environments.

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Appendix

Paradoxical leadership behavior (PLB)

My direct supervisor:

1. Uses a fair approach to treat all subordinates uniformly, but also treats them as individuals.
2. Puts all subordinates on an equal footing, but considers their individual traits or personalities.
3. Communicates with subordinates uniformly without discrimination, but varies his or her communication styles depending on their individual characteristics or needs.
4. Manages subordinates uniformly, but considers their individualized needs
5. Assigns equal workloads, but considers individual strengths and capabilities to handle different tasks.
6. Shows a desire to lead, but allows others to share the leadership role.
7. Likes to be the center of attention, but allows others to share the spotlight as well
8. Insists on getting respect, but also shows respect toward others.
9. Has a high self-opinion, but shows awareness of personal imperfection and the value of other people.
10. Is confident regarding personal ideas and beliefs, but acknowledges that he or she can learn from others.
11. Controls important work issues, but allows subordinates to handle details.
12. Makes final decisions for subordinates, but allows subordinates to control specific work processes.
13. Makes decisions about big issues, but delegates lesser issues to subordinates.
14. Maintains overall control, but gives subordinates appropriate autonomy
15. Stresses conformity in task performance, but allows for exceptions.
16. Clarifies work requirements, but does not micromanage work
17. Is highly demanding regarding work performance, but is not hypercritical.
18. Has high requirements, but allows subordinates to make mistakes
19. Recognizes the distinction between supervisors and subordinates, but does not act superior in the leadership role.
20. Keeps distance from subordinates, but does not remain aloof.
21. Maintains position differences, but upholds subordinates' dignity.
22. Maintains distance from subordinates at work, but is also amiable toward them.