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UNDERSTANDING
PROACTIVE LEADERSHIP

Chiahuei Wu and Ying Wang

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses proactive leadership by elaborating the meaning of leaders’ proactivity, the required competencies of proactive leadership, and the potentially different evaluations of leaders’ proactivity by different observers, including leaders themselves, their supervisors, peers, and subordinates. Specifically, based on the goal generation – goal striving process view of proactivity, we define leaders’ proactivity as “generating and enacting self-initiated and future-focused leading actions that are persistently sustained to bring changes toward the environment.” In line with the process view, we also propose the competency requirement of proactive leadership, by benchmarking against a scientifically developed, comprehensive competency dictionary, the Universal Competency Framework (UCF). Finally, we discuss the possibility that leaders’ proactivity can be observed and evaluated differently by raters at different positions. Overall, this chapter provides a conceptual analysis of proactive leadership and points to potential research directions subject to empirical investigation.

INTRODUCTION

In today’s global economy, organizations face complex environments that require their rapid responses to the changing external environments.
To succeed in these increasingly uncertain operating environments (Campbell, 2000), work behavior that supports responsiveness to environmental challenges is called for (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007). Proactive behavior, characterized as self-initiated efforts to bring about change to the environment and oneself (Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006), is among the critical and desirable behaviors in the current business situation.

The benefits of proactive behavior have been widely demonstrated. For example, Fuller and Marler (2009) reported a meta-analysis showing that individuals with a proactive personality reported higher career success and job performance. Specific proactive behaviors, such as taking personal initiative, making voice, building networks, taking charge, and championing innovation, were all found to be positively related to individuals’ performance rated by either direct supervisors or employees themselves (e.g., Bledow & Frese, 2009; Grant, Parker, & Collins, 2009; Howell & Shea, 2001; Thompson, 2005; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998).

Nevertheless, research on proactivity usually focuses on the proactivity of employees and rarely pays attention to understanding the meaning of proactivity for managers and leaders. Although proactivity indicates certain common features shared by all employees, such as showing self-initiative, change orientation, and future focus (Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010), the content and purpose of proactive behaviors being engaged in can be different across employee groups. For instance, research on newcomers emphasizes proactive socialization behavior to address how newcomers adapt to their new work environment (e.g., Morrison, 1993a, 1993b), whereas research on ordinary employees emphasizes proactive work behavior to address how employees master and change their work environment to achieve higher performance (e.g., Parker et al., 2006). Accordingly, for leadership roles, proactivity may have a different meaning in terms of its content and purpose. The required abilities for building and sustaining leaders’ proactivity would also differ from those for nonmanagerial employees. In fact, the current environmental challenges are more prominent for leaders, pressing them to go beyond focusing on core tasks and to provide direction to and maintain the motivation of their subordinates in the course of creating and implementing undefined tasks that are potentially beneficial for themselves, their team, and the entire organization. In facing these demands, leaders should become even more proactive to think, plan, and execute so as to master the uncertainty of the environment and bring about necessary changes, without losing focus on their core missions. Therefore, it is important to understand the meaning of leaders’ proactivity and the required competencies for proactive leadership.
Moreover, past studies usually relied on supervisors to evaluate employees’ proactivity (e.g., Parker et al., 2006; Grant et al., 2009) as supervisors tend to be most familiar with subordinates’ job contents and should best understand the major constituents of job performance; therefore, they can provide valid judgment in evaluating subordinates’ proactivity. However, in comparison with nonmanagerial employees, managers and leaders interact with a wider range of people, who may observe different aspects of proactive behaviors. In particular, evaluations from their subordinates may be just as important as the evaluations from their supervisors, as subordinates would directly observe how leaders direct and motivate them in creating and achieving proactive, untraditional goals. Thus, the measurement of leaders’ proactivity is as important as the conceptual definition of proactive leadership. Hence, in this chapter, we focus on three main questions to understand leaders’ proactivity: (1) What is the meaning of proactivity for leaders, (2) What competencies are needed for proactive leadership, and (3) Who can evaluate leaders’ proactivity?

In the following section, we first provide a brief review of proactivity as a concept. We then review the existing findings on leaders’ proactivity. Next, we elaborate on the meaning of proactivity for leadership roles and propose relevant competencies that are crucial for building up leaders’ proactivity. We also discuss the potential differences in the perceptions of leaders’ proactivity from different raters’ perspectives (i.e., self, supervisor, peers, and subordinates). In summary, with these conceptual analyses, this chapter aims to extend previous literature on proactivity and discuss proactivity in leadership roles.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PROACTIVITY

Although the concept of proactivity has been widely mentioned and discussed (see Crant, 2000), the characteristics of proactivity are mainly discussed in the research on proactive personality (Bateman & Crant, 1993) and personal initiative (Frese & Fay 2001).

In the theme of person–environment relationship, Bateman and Crant (1993) indicated that human beings are not only passively interacting with the environments but can also actively master their environments through selecting situations, reconstructing their perceptions and appraisals, unintentionally evoking other’s reactions, and intentionally manipulating their interpersonal environments. Bateman and Crant (1993) further indicated that there are individual differences in enacting proactive behavior. They
proposed the concept of proactive personality to describe the person “who is relatively unconstrained by situational forces and who effects environmental change” and also indicated that “proactive people scan for opportunities, show initiative, take action, and persevere until they reach closure by bringing about change” (p. 105). By interviewing a sample of proactive businesspeople, Bateman and Crant (1999) found that proactive individuals are actively involved in the following seven behaviors: (1) scanning for change opportunity, (2) setting effective, change-oriented goals, (3) anticipating and preventing problems, (4) doing different things or doing things differently; (5) taking action, (6) persevering, and (7) achieving results. These seven behaviors can be roughly viewed as the chain of behaviors in a progress of proactive goal achievement (Bindl & Parker, 2009; Frese & Fay 2001; Grant & Ashford, 2008).

In contrast to the concept of proactive personality that focuses on personal traits, the concept of personal initiative focuses more on behavioral implications. Frese and his colleagues (Frese, Kring, Soose, & Zempel, 1996; Frese, Fay, Hilburger, Leng, & Tag, 1997; Frese & Fay, 2001) proposed the concept of personal initiative as “a behavior syndrome resulting in an individual’s taking an active and self-starting approach to work and going beyond what is formally required in a given job” (Frese et al., 1996, p.38). The three main facets of personal initiative outlined by Frese and Fay (2001) are (1) self-starting, (2) proactivity, and (3) persistence. Specifically, self-starting means that people do things out of their own will, without external forces such as assigned task or explicit role requirement. Second, the word “proactivity” used by Frese and Fay (2001) is specific for goals with a long-term focus, which suggests that people are future-oriented in response to opportunities or challenges in advance, rather than only focusing on problems or demands at hand. Finally, because enacting change would involve facing various difficulties, such as lack of resources or resistance from others, which in turn requires more effort from individuals, the characteristic of persistence is needed to overcome barriers in the progress of enacting change. All of these three facets reinforce each other at each step of a sequence of actions consisting of goal development, information collection and prognosis, plan and execution, and monitoring and feedback (Frese & Fay, 2001).

Proactivity can also be understood as a goal process to bring about change and lead to positive outcomes. For example, Bateman and Crant (1993) have proposed a rough process to achieve a proactive goal by stating that “proactive people scan for opportunities, show initiative, take action and persevere until they reach closure by bringing about change” (p. 105). Recently, the process view was further elaborated by several scholars,
including Bindl and Parker (2009), Frese and Fay (2001), and Grant and Ashford (2008). Although there are differences among their models, they all covered stages of goal generation (goal envisioning and planning) and goal striving (enacting and reflecting) (Chen & Kanfer, 2006; Parker et al., 2010). In brief, in the goal generation stage, to achieve a proactive goal, an individual has to first envision possible futures, search for relevant information, and set a relevant goal. Then, an individual has to outline the steps and scenarios to achieve the goal set previously. In the goal striving stage, an individual needs to implement the plan with concrete behaviors so as to turn their goals into reality. After enacting actions, an individual needs to evaluate the consequences and implications of his/her behavior to see if the taken behavior is effective in achieving the goal.

The process view of proactivity has recently been brought into empirical research. For example, within the context of career self-management, Raabe, Frese, and Beehr (2007) showed that goal commitment and information collection first contribute to career planning, which then leads to active career self-management behavior that helps to achieve career success in the end. On the basis of two longitudinal studies on samples of graduates making the transition from college to work, De Vos, De Clippeleer, and Dewilde (2009) also illustrated that career progress goals sustain career planning, which then contributes to networking behaviors and, one step further, leads to higher career success in the end, supporting the chain of goal generation and striving process in proactivity. In summary, according to the process view, proactivity can be described as a self-initiated and future-focused action that is persistently sustained to bring changes toward self or environment through a process consisting of goal generation and striving.

**CURRENT FINDINGS ON LEADERS’ PROACTIVITY**

As reviewed in the previous section, proactivity can be defined as personality traits, behaviors, or a sequence of actions that aim to bring about change. Both proactive personality and proactive behavior have been linked to leaders’ characteristics.

Using the concept of proactive personality, two studies reported that leaders who are high in proactive personality tend to be viewed as charismatic leaders from others. For example, Deluga (1998) found that American presidents who were rated as having higher proactive personality were also rated as having higher charismatic leadership and creativity and
also have higher rated performance on greatness, war avoidance, and great decisions cited. Crant and Bateman (2000) found that managers who were high in proactive personality were more likely to be perceived as charismatic by their immediate supervisors. Although these two studies suggested that proactive leaders may be perceived as possessing high charisma, to our knowledge, there is no study empirically examining if leaders with higher proactive personality can actually exhibit better leading behaviors.

More studies focused on the positive effect of leader’s proactivity on the organizational outcomes. For example, Becherer and Maurer (1999) found proactive personality of small company presidents was positively related to the entrepreneurial posture of the firm and changes in sales, both of which were related to change in profits. Frese and Fay (2001) found in three separate samples that owner’s personal initiative was positively related to firm success. Moreover, Frese, Van Gelderen, and Ombach (2000) found that owners who adopt critical point strategy (concentrating on the most difficult, unclear, and important point), which implies high proactivity, have higher economic and self-rated firm success; whereas owners who adopt reactive strategy (reacting to immediate situational demand without any plans or goals), which implies low proactivity, have lower economic and self-rated firm success. In the context of public education, Goerdel (2006) found that levels of proactive networking management adopted by superintendents in different school districts were positively related to performance indicators of school districts, such as percentage of students passing exams, attendance, and pass rate of minority students, after controlling environmental resources and constrains. Finally, Zhao, Frese, and Giardini (in press) indicated that small business owners’ social competency in social skills, proactive and elaborated social strategies, and relational perseverance was beneficial to network development and business growth. All of these findings reveal that proactive managers do have a positive influence on organizational performance.

In the aforementioned studies, leaders’ proactivity was defined either as proactive personality traits or as proactive behavior. These studies show that leaders with proactive personality are more likely to be charismatic leaders and that leaders adopting proactive behavior associated with an organizational mission are more likely to bring about success in their organizations. However, these studies represent a rather fixed and sporadic view toward proactive leadership, which does not encompass all the relevant leadership behavior and competency characteristics and does not reveal how proactive goals are created and achieved through the mechanism of leadership. In the next section, we draw from the process view of proactivity
and discuss the desired leadership characteristics that are needed for devising and achieving proactive goals.

**PROACTIVE LEADERSHIP**

According to the reviews on the concept of proactivity, we defined leaders’ proactivity as “generating and enacting self-initiated and future-focused leading actions that are persistently sustained to bring changes toward the environment.” Several features of this definition are further elaborated.

First, in this definition, we emphasize both goal generation and goal striving stages of proactivity. In this way, we imply that proactivity is about thinking as well as doing. In the goal generation stage, leaders should engage in deliberate thinking to target goals and identify strategies, so that appropriate actions for achieving these goals can be planned. In goal striving, leaders should enact and implement concrete actions to achieve the targeted goals according to previously created plans. Hence, with these two goal process components, we emphasize both thinking and doing in proactive leadership.

Second, self-initiative and future focus are stressed because not all leading actions can be qualified as proactive actions. For example, passive leaders only take on leadership roles when required to lead and when missions were assigned to them by the organization. Thus, both their goals and their leading behaviors are prescribed by others rather than by themselves. In contrast, we conceptualize that proactive leaders actively think about what they can do to improve the status quo in their leadership roles. Both their goals and leading behaviors are self-initiated and are aimed at bringing about a better future for the organization. These two features could be the most important characteristics to differentiate proactive leaders from other leaders.

Third, we specifically focus on leading behaviors and actions because we are concerned with proactivity in leadership roles. An individual can devise and achieve a self-initiated and future-focused goal only by him/herself without getting others involved. In this sense, he/she is a proactive individual but cannot be regarded as a proactive leader. Proactivity in the actions associated with leading and managing should thus be highlighted.

Fourth, the feature of persistence is also stressed because leading is not a one-shot action; rather, it is a lengthy and energy-consuming process for leaders to communicate with others, coordinate resources, assign tasks, and resolve conflicts or disagreements. Moreover, bringing about change is potentially risky as it involves challenging the status quo and can thus
invoke resistance from others, including subordinates who will play important roles in executing change-oriented initiatives. As such, proactive leaders should be as perseverant and tough-minded as possible when facing possible setbacks and pressure during the course of leading the team toward achieving proactive goals.

We hope the aforementioned elaborations have helped clarify the meaning of proactivity in leadership roles. In the next section, we discuss the required competencies for proactive leadership. A good understanding of these competencies will help better assess, identify, and develop proactive leaders.

**COMPETENCY REQUIREMENT OF PROACTIVE LEADERSHIP**

In this section, we investigate the required abilities and competencies that are central to proactive leadership. Competencies refer to the sets of patterned behaviors that are instrumental in the delivery of desired results or outcomes (Kurz & Bartram, 2002; Woodruffe, 1992), and competency frameworks provide useful guidance in identifying the required behavioral repertoires for achieving desirable leadership outcomes, including developing and executing proactive goals. Indeed, using competencies to describe and interpret managerial behaviors has been very common over the past two or three decades. The problem with competency, however, is that there is considerable confusion and disagreement about what competencies should be considered and how they should be measured (Shippmann et al., 2000). Additionally, many competency models were developed for practical purpose (e.g., by consultancies) with insufficient scientific rigor and insufficient coverage of all critical components in the world of work (Kurz & Bartram, 2002). To provide a good linkage of leaders’ proactivity to the competency requirement, we will draw from Universal Competency Framework (UCF) that has been scientifically developed and that provides a comprehensive dictionary of job competencies.

Emerged from meta-analysis using criterion-centric performance outcome data, the UCF provides a comprehensive summary of all the competencies in theory and in use (Bartram, 2005). This dictionary of competency makes it easy to select competencies that are theoretically meaningful to our interested proactivity construct. This framework summarized all existing competencies into eight broad, generic dimensions that are suggested to be fundamental to all types of jobs throughout all industries and across
different cultures. This is a hierarchical framework in that each of the eight dimensions can be broken down into several scales, with each scale further separated into several facets. The Great Eight competencies are UCF1 Leading and Deciding; UCF2 Supporting and Coordinating; UCF3 Interacting and Presenting; UCF4 Analyzing and Interpreting; UCF5 Creating and Conceptualizing; UCF6 Organizing and Executing; UCF7 Adapting and Coping; and UCF8 Enterprising and Performing. On the basis of this framework, we provide our hypothesized relationship between each stage of proactivity (goal generation and goal striving) and the related UCF competencies as summarized in Table 1. We suggest that leaders need different competencies in different stages to demonstrate their proactivity. We also specify the subscales that are selected from the whole list provided in the appendix of Bartram (2005).

In the goal generation stage, leaders should first generate a proactive goal based on current information and future projection. To come up with a reasonable, attainable, and future-oriented goal, it is important for leaders to possess competencies UCF5 Creating and Conceptualizing and UCF8 Enterprising and Performing. First, proactive leaders should be dedicated to continuous learning and researching and staying open-minded to new information and knowledge, so as to spot the areas that need improvement or change. Second, they should think broadly, strategically, and entrepreneurially. This means that they need to possess good knowledge about their organization and the industry. This will help them predict future trends and proactively identify opportunities that are beneficial to their organizations and that are applicable in their organizational context. Some goals, despite being highly innovative and leading edge, may not be relevant for certain organizations; thus, it is up to the leaders’ decision to only select goals that are likely to be achieved and will bring benefit to their organizations.

We additionally propose critical competencies in translating a proactive idea into feasible working steps in the goal generation stage: UCF4 Analyzing and Interpreting and the planning aspect of UCF6 Planning and Executing. In addition to idea generation, it requires a down-to-earth, pragmatic mindset from leaders to pin down their ideas and not to allow them to float around until forgotten. The analyzing and interpreting competency suggests that leaders need to apply their expertise, knowledge, and analytical thinking to develop achievable plans for their ideas. They should be able to assess which parties to be involved and aligned so as to effectively coordinate the right people and resources into the delivery phase within an achievable timescale. They should also know where to seek support when it comes to problems at each specific phase of their plans and
Table 1. Required Competencies for Different Stages in Leaders’ Proactivity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage of Proactivity</th>
<th>Mission</th>
<th>Corresponding Great Eight Competencies</th>
<th>Corresponding Subscales of Great Eight Competencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal generation</td>
<td>To develop a proactive idea based on the current information and future projection; to set up procedures that can be used to achieve the goal</td>
<td>Creating &amp; Conceptualizing (UCF5)</td>
<td>Learning and Researching (UCF5.1)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Enterprising &amp; Performing (UCF8)</td>
<td>Creating and Innovating (UCF5.2)</td>
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<td>Analyzing &amp; Interpreting (UCF4)</td>
<td>Formulating Strategies and Concepts (UCF5.3)</td>
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<td>Planning (UCF6)</td>
<td>Entrepreneurial and Commercial Thinking (UCF8.2)</td>
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<td>Applying Expertise and Technology (UCF4.2)</td>
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<td>Planning and Organizing (UCF6.1)</td>
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<td>Deciding and Initiating Actions (UCF1.1)</td>
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<td>Leading and Supervising (UCF1.2)</td>
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<td>Working with People (UCF2.1)</td>
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<td>Relating and Networking (UCF3.1)</td>
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<td>Persuading and Influencing (UCF3.2)</td>
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<td>Presenting and Communicating Information (UCF3.3)</td>
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<td>Delivering Results and Meet Customer Expectations (UCF6.2)</td>
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<td>Adapting and Responding to Change (UCF7.1)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Coping with Pressure and Setbacks (UCF7.2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goal striving</td>
<td>To enact tasks as previously set in the action plans; to achieve proactive goals through leading and managing others</td>
<td>Leading &amp; Deciding (UCF1)</td>
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<td>Supporting &amp; Coordinating (UCF2)</td>
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<td>Presenting &amp; Communicating (UCF3)</td>
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<td>Adapting &amp; Coping (UCF7)</td>
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should be prepared for alternative solutions if some or all of their plans fall apart. In addition, planning involves careful consideration of the implications that the developed plans may have on different stakeholders within and out of the organization. As proactive plans almost always involve changes to the status quo, and any change, no matter how small, would bring about discomfort to individuals being affected and may potentially evoke resistance, it is thus crucial for leaders to develop the ability to plan ahead and be mentally prepared for any such circumstance.

In the goal striving stage, competencies are more critical if they can help to bring the proactive goals into reality. With this purpose, we think most of the remaining UCF competencies are critical – this includes UCF1 Leading and Deciding; UCF2 Supporting and Coordinating; UCF3 Presenting and Communicating; the executing aspect of UCF6 Planning and Executing; and UCF7 Adapting and Coping. As can be seen from this list, interpersonal skills become crucial at this stage, as the first three competencies (UCF1, UCF2, and UCF3) are all relevant to the competencies needed in leading, coordinating, and interacting with others. Clearly, to achieve the change-oriented proactive goals, the ability to present one’s own ideas and persuade others, communicate the message, obtain buy-in from various parties, sustain the motivation of others and build team spirit, and demonstrate listening and understanding are all necessary for leaders to carry out their plans developed in the second stage of the proactivity process. However, while a high level of interpersonal sensitivity and being open to input can help leaders better respond to others’ needs and obtain buy-in, it is also important for them to be considerably tough-minded and firm about their decisions. To achieve both is frequently a challenge for many leaders, but proactive leaders need to strike a balance in this dilemma; they need to stick to the defined goals and objectives, but remain flexible about the process in reaching those goals. Accordingly, the competency adapting and coping is needed in that the tough implementation process requires leaders to adapt to new ideas, be prepared to change some part of their plans, be tolerant of ambiguity and uncertainty, and cope with setbacks, resistance and pressure. Finally but equally important to the interpersonal and self-management skills, proactive leaders should be task-oriented and follow through on the plans by regularly checking the progress, maintaining productivity and quality, and driving projects to results.

In sum, using a scientifically established competency framework, we can map the leadership competencies required in different stages for achieving proactive goals. This mapping has both theoretical and practical values. First, it brings together recent theoretical development on proactivity,
leadership, and competency and offers the possibility that leaders’ proactivity can be measured through the use of competency terms. Second, it provides a model open to further empirical validation so as to test whether the hypothesized competencies can well predict leaders’ effectiveness in different stages of achieving proactive goals. Third, the use of proactivity-related competencies can help select proactive leaders and identify leaders’ development needs in specific aspects of the proactivity process.

LEADERS’ PROACTIVITY FROM DIFFERENT OBSERVERS’ PERSPECTIVE

So far, we have proposed the concept of proactive leadership, which can be differentiated from the meaning of proactivity for other job roles and which can be interpreted and measured using leadership competencies. In the following section, we further argue that the perception of proactivity can be different through the lens of different observers. Drawing on attribution theory, Grant et al. (2009) indicated that the benefit of employees’ proactivity in supervisors’ view is an attribution process such that supervisors will use employees’ personal cues as a reference to evaluate the benefit of employees’ proactivity. In line with this view, it can be expected that different observers, including leaders themselves, their supervisors, colleagues, and subordinates, would rely on different cues when judging a leader’s proactivity. It is important to consider this implication as this would suggest empirically different results when different rater groups are used to evaluate proactivity. First, leaders’ proactivity can be assessed by leaders themselves, which has not been frequently applied in proactivity research, possibly due to the concern with common method bias as the predictor variables are frequently reported by the self or with self-lenient effect of overestimating one’s positive behaviors such as proactivity. However, we think using self-ratings does have meaningful values especially when the process view of proactivity is considered. Self-ratings may provide a more accurate assessment of the mental activities that are hard to be observed by others. The first stage in the proactivity process, goal generation, is mostly cognitive activities within an individual’s mind and are usually inaccessible by others; therefore, the latitude and quality of these activities may hardly be evaluated by other raters if the target leader does not explicitly express his/her thinking and planning process. In addition, for the proactive behavior, self-ratings may also reflect personal interpretation and perception of these behaviors. For example, proactive behavior in literature is usually described as an explicit
behavior that is very transparent to others, such as innovation, problem solving, voice, and feedback seeking (Parker & Collins, 2010). However, for a leader, he/she may use seemingly passive behavior to enact constructive change. For example, listening is a passive behavior and is not usually considered a proactive behavior, but it can facilitate his/her subordinates to buy into the leader’s change initiatives. In this case, leaders may perceive themselves to be proactive in terms of using this behavior to enact a constructive change. However, observers may perceive this as rather passive rather than proactive. Therefore, although self-rating on proactivity may be subject to self-lenient effect or common method bias, it may still have its own right for evaluating one’s proactivity with an idiosyncratic meaning.

Others’ ratings on proactivity are usually used as criteria in proactivity research, especially the most frequently used supervisor ratings. Yet, for a leader, his/her supervisors, peers, and subordinates may all provide valid assessment on his/her proactivity. However, different raters may evaluate a leader’s proactivity in different ways, according to the different expectations associated with their hierarchical relationship to the leader. For example, supervisors may evaluate the leader’s proactivity with a broad view by assessing whether the target manager proposes and implements proactive goals that contribute to the organization’s overall mission and strategy. Peers may derive judgment by observing the target person’s proactive behaviors in completing cross-functional tasks or in attending other joint activities such as leadership meetings; yet, they may be less likely to observe the target person’s proactivity in executing tasks and leading his/her own team. Subordinates may evaluate their leaders’ proactivity in terms of the ways they are led and directed in achieving proactive goals at the team level or individual level. They may focus on how their leader takes initiative in implementing specific tasks, seeking input from below, and solving problems within and across teams, but are less likely to perceive the strategic purpose of their leaders’ proactive decisions. Thus, given that supervisors, peers, and subordinates of leaders have a different understanding and expectation about the exemplary behaviors of proactive leadership, they might use different sources or cues to evaluate leaders’ proactivity.

Hence, it is possible that observers will have different evaluations on leaders’ proactivity, and it is also possible that these observers’ ratings would be different from self-ratings. Within existing findings, Van Dyne and LePine (1998) and Grant and Mayer (2009) have shown a moderate but positive correlation between peer and supervisor ratings for proactive behavior (e.g., $r = .55$ and $r = .44$ for voice in Van Dyne and LePine’s study and Grant and Mayer’s study, respectively; $r = .63$ for initiative in Grant and
Mayer’s study), suggesting that although ratings on proactivity from different sources are not exactly the same, they did display considerable consistency. Nevertheless, both studies focused only on proactive behavior in general, rather than other activities in the proactive process such as goal envisioning and planning; therefore, it is unknown whether ratings from different sources are also consistent on the cognitive, nontransparent proactive activities. More research is clearly needed in comparing leaders’ proactivity across different rating groups.

CONCLUSION

Proactivity, a self-initiated and future-focused action that aims to bring about changes, has been found to lead to multiple, positive performance outcomes. However, past studies mainly focused on employees’ proactivity and rarely discussed the implications for leaders. As we have mentioned previously, in today’s complex and uncertain business environment, leaders are especially pressed with the need to go beyond their defined responsibilities and to bring about positive changes to their team and organization. However, different from ordinary employees, their leadership role requires them to lead, engage, and motivate their peers and subordinates in the course of creating and implementing proactive goals. Hence, it is crucial to study proactivity for leadership roles. In this chapter, we call for this attention by elaborating on the concept of proactive leadership, the required competencies to measure and develop leaders’ proactivity, and the potentially different perceptions of leaders’ proactivity from observers at different positions. Our conceptual analysis not only highlights several important issues of leaders’ proactivity but also provides potential research directions that can be investigated empirically. Further conceptual and empirical analyses are encouraged to extend the understanding of leaders’ proactivity.

REFERENCES


