

REGULATORY FOCUS AND EFFECTIVENESS IN THE WORKPLACE

Professors Alison Konrad and Lynn Imai wrote this note solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to provide legal, tax, accounting or other professional advice. Such advice should be obtained from a qualified professional.

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Version: 2013-11-13

Today, people add value to workplace organizations even more so than they did in the past. The introduction of robotics in manufacturing organizations has changed the employee's job from relatively unskilled manual labour to a considerably more complex responsibility for interacting with and maintaining sophisticated machinery. Service organizations rely on employees to fulfil brand promises of high-quality service that both meets customer needs and provides an enjoyable customer experience. Firms gain competitive advantage through the problem-solving, creativity and innovation of their people, which means that knowledge workers add more value than ever before.

Given the critical importance of people to business effectiveness in all sectors, leaders wisely strive to enhance the engagement of their workforces. For fully engaged employees, work is a positive, fulfilling experience, and the performance of these workers is characterized by high energy, dedication, and absorption in the task.¹ Engagement is the opposite of burnout, where employees are tired, stressed, and unable to muster sufficient energy to perform at their peak.² No wonder leaders prefer engaged employees to their unengaged counterparts.

Motivating employees has long been a topic of fascination for business leaders. Psychologists have developed many useful insights that are helping businesses to accrue value from their workforces. Regulatory focus theory³ stands out as one of the newer theories that is gaining traction as well as substantial empirical support. The purpose of this reading is to explain the basic tenets of regulatory focus theory and to discuss how it can be used to enhance motivation and engagement in the workplace.

THE TENETS OF REGULATORY FOCUS THEORY

Higgins's regulatory focus theory extends the widely known hedonic principle — that people approach pleasure and avoid pain — by specifying different ways in which individuals seek to fulfill that principle.

¹ B.L. Rich, J.A. Lepine, & E. R. Crawford, "Job Engagement: Antecedents And Effects On Job Performance," *Academy of Management Journal*, 2010, 53(3), pp. 617-635.

² W.B. Schaufeli, A.B. Bakker, & M. Salanova, "The Measurement Of Work Engagement With A Short Questionnaire: A Cross-national Study," *Educational & Psychological Measurement*, 2006, 66(4), pp. 701-716.

³ E.T. Higgins, "Beyond Pleasure And Pain," *American Psychologist*, 1997, 52(12), pp. 1280-1300.

Regulatory focus theory states that when people are primarily concerned about fulfilling their need for advancement and growth, they become “promotion-focused,” concentrating on their aspirations and ideals. When people are promotion-focused, they tend to frame situations in terms of the gains they may or may not achieve, such as developing a new skill or not. (i.e., approaching the presence of a positive outcome and avoiding the absence of a positive one). Furthermore, when people are primarily concerned about fulfilling their need for safety and security, they become “prevention-focused,” concentrating on their oughts and duties. When people are prevention-focused, they tend to frame situations in terms of the losses they may or may not experience, such as losing the respect of one’s coworkers. (i.e., approaching the absence of a negative outcome and avoiding the presence of a negative one).

What is the relevance of regulatory focus to the workplace? A recent meta-analytic summary of 147 studies identified several systematic effects.⁴ A meta-analysis is a statistical aggregation of the findings from all of the empirical studies available. By combining data from dozens of independently conducted studies, meta-analysts can attain more accurate estimates of the direction and size of associations between variables than can be obtained from any individual study. Each individual study contains its own random error. By combining multiple studies, meta-analysts identify the central tendency among the various findings, on the assumption that normally distributed random errors will counterbalance each other to allow the true relationship among the variables to emerge. The next section details the results of the meta-analysis and presents some findings from other research to describe the impact of regulatory focus in the workplace.

IMPACT OF REGULATORY FOCUS IN THE WORKPLACE

Gorman and colleagues’ meta-analysis identified several key outcomes. A promotion focus among employees is associated with higher task performance and more discretionary effort on the job. Discretionary effort means exerting oneself beyond what is necessary to perform the job satisfactorily, and includes actions that are not part of the job description but help to ensure that team goals and organizational goals are accomplished.⁵ In contrast, a prevention focus among employees is unrelated to task performance or discretionary effort. As such, promotion-focused employees are likely to produce work that is higher in quantity and quality and to exert themselves on behalf of team goals and organizational goals. Prevention focus does little to enhance task performance or discretionary effort.

Regulatory focus also relates to employee attitudes and morale on the job. Prevention focus relates negatively to job satisfaction and to employee relationships with leaders, while promotion focus remains unrelated to job satisfaction and is positively associated with relationships with leaders.⁶ Promotion focus is positively related to affective commitment to the organization, meaning that employees are more likely to care about the organization and share its values.⁷ Prevention focus is positively related to continuance commitment, which means that employees stay with the organization because they have few attractive alternatives.⁸

⁴ C.A. Gorman, J.P. Meriac, B.L. Overstreet, S. Apodaca, A. L. McIntyre, P. Park, and J.N. Godbey, “A Meta-Analysis Of The Regulatory Focus Nomological Network: Work-Related Antecedents And Outcomes,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 2012, 80, pp. 160-172.

⁵ P.M. Podsakoff, S.B. MacKenzie, J.B. Paine, and D. Bachrach, “Organizational Citizenship Behaviors: A Critical Review Of The Theoretical And Empirical Literature And Suggestions For Future Research,” *Journal of Management*, 2000, 26(3), 513-563.

⁶ C.A. Gorman, et al. “A Meta-Analysis Of The Regulatory Focus Nomological Network: Work-Related Antecedents And Outcomes,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 2012, 80, pp. 160-172.

⁷ J.P. Meyer and N.J. Allen, *Commitment in the workplace*, 1997, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Promotion-focused employees are more likely to believe in the mission and values of the organization and to rate their relationship with their leader positively. Prevention-focused employees are more likely to rate their relationship with their leader negatively, to experience low job satisfaction, and to remain with the organization only until a better alternative materializes.

Other studies have documented more specific effects of regulatory focus in the workplace. For instance, prevention focus increases the negative effect of breach of the psychological contract on work motivation.⁹ This finding indicates that when employees expect to receive particular resources or rewards from the organization, but such returns fail to materialize, those individuals with a stronger prevention focus experience a steeper drop in their work motivation than do employees with a low level of prevention focus. By comparison, promotion focus is positively associated with creativity and helping on the job.¹⁰ Also related to creativity, teams with a collective promotion focus generate more ideas and are more likely to promote their ideas to others in the organization.¹¹ Another study showed that when R&D teams were faced with a challenge, promotion focus was positively associated with idea generation and performance on an insight task.¹²

Prevention focus need not be viewed as entirely negative, however. Given that prevention focus is associated with efforts to avoid mistakes and errors, some employees might benefit from an enhanced prevention focus. For instance, employees with issues concerning lateness or absenteeism or employees whose work consistently contains numerous errors may benefit from a heightened awareness of the potential negative consequences of these behaviours. Indeed, a study of 250 workers over time showed that prevention focus was associated with reductions in deviant behaviours, such as taking property from work without permission or spending too much time daydreaming instead of working.¹³ A series of laboratory experiments also showed that, compared to a promotion focus, a prevention focus leads people to act more ethically,¹⁴ suggesting that framing ethical decisions as avoidance of loss may represent an effective strategy for reducing unethical behaviours in the workplace.

PREDICTORS OF WORKPLACE REGULATORY FOCUS

Given the significant effects of regulatory focus in the workplace, what induces a promotion focus or a prevention focus among employees? Gorman and colleagues' meta-analysis identified anxiety, negative affect (i.e., negative emotions), and neuroticism as positive predictors of an employee's level of prevention focus, while predictors of promotion focus included optimism, positive affect (i.e., positive emotions), extraversion, and self-esteem.¹⁵ Interestingly, conscientiousness stood out as a positive

⁹ A. H. de Lange, P.M. Bal, B.I.J.M. Van der Heijden, N. de Jong, and W.B. Schaufeli, "When I'm 64: Psychological Contract Breach, Work Motivation And The Moderating Roles Of Future Time Perspective And Regulatory Focus," *Work & Stress*, 2011, 25(4), pp. 338-354.

¹⁰ M.J. Neubert, K.M. Kacmar, D.S. Carlson, L.B. Chonko, J.A. Roberts, "Regulatory Focus As A Mediator Of The Influence Of Initiating Structure And Servant Leadership On Employee Behavior," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2008, 93(6), pp. 1220-1233.

¹¹ E.F. Rietzschel, "Collective Regulatory Focus Predicts Specific Aspects Of Team Innovation," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 2011, 14(3), pp. 337-345.

¹² C.A. Sacramento, D. Fay and M.A. West, "Workplace Duties Or Opportunities? Challenge Stressors, Regulatory Focus, And Creativity," *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, 2013, 121, pp. 141-157.

¹³ Neubert, M.J. et al., "Regulatory Focus As A Mediator Of The Influence Of Initiating Structure And Servant Leadership On Employee Behavior," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2008, 93(6), pp. 1220-1233.

¹⁴ F. Gino, and J.D. Margolis, "Bringing Ethics Into Focus: How Regulatory Focus And Risk Preferences Influence (Un)ethical Behavior," *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, 2011, 115, pp. 145-156.

¹⁵ Gorman, C.A. et al., "A Meta-Analysis Of The Regulatory Focus Nomological Network: Work-Related Antecedents And Outcomes," *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 2012, 80, pp. 160-172.

predictor of both prevention and promotion focus, indicating that conscientious workers strive to build accomplishments *and* work to prevent errors and mistakes.

The impact of emotions on regulatory focus is worth noting for its implications for leadership. Factors that raise anxiety levels and lead to negative emotions or reductions in employee morale are likely to be associated with an increased prevention focus among employees. Leaders should note that actions resulting in negative emotional reactions among employees will lead to a prevention focus. While the avoidance behaviours associated with prevention focus may reduce mistakes and incidents of workplace deviance, they are not likely to generate creativity, satisfaction, commitment, or discretionary effort among employees. Thus, while inducing anxiety might well be necessary in workplaces that are performing particularly poorly, messages of optimism and actions that raise positive emotions are more likely to generate innovative problem-solving, exemplary performance, and commitment to the organization's values and ideals.

Another positive predictor of promotion focus in the workplace is a learning-goal orientation among employees.¹⁶ Learning-goal orientation means that employees aim to develop their competencies by acquiring new skills, mastering new situations, and learning from experience.¹⁷ This finding also has implications for leadership, indicating that leaders who encourage growth and development are likely to nurture a promotion focus among their employees.

Leader actions have been directly linked to employee regulatory focus. When leaders initiate structure, they increase prevention focus among employees.¹⁸ In other words, employees develop a prevention focus when leaders do things like deciding what needs to be done and how it will be done, thereby maintaining definite standards of performance and letting employees know what is expected of them. By initiating structure, leaders set the boundaries that define acceptable behaviour, and employees seem to respond by avoiding violations of those boundaries.

On the other hand, servant leadership increases promotion focus among employees.¹⁹ Servant leadership is defined as a leadership style concerned with the interests of others, particularly employees and the community.²⁰ Servant leaders form quality relationships with and build a sense of community among their employees; they emphasize the growth and development of their employees and are sensitive to employees' responsibilities outside of the workplace. Such actions on the part of the leader result in promotion focus among employees, who respond by striving to build their capabilities and add to their personal achievements.

MEASURING REGULATORY FOCUS AT WORK

Do you tend to be prevention-focused or promotion-focused at work? Do certain work situations bring out a promotion focus in you, while others encourage you to take a prevention focus? Neubert and colleagues developed a paper-and-pencil measure of regulatory focus at work, which is reproduced in Exhibit 1. Nine of the questions seek to assess prevention focus or efforts to enhance security and avoid losses. The

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ J.F. Brett, J. F. and D. VandeWalle, "Goal Orientation And Goal Content As Predictors Of Performance In A Training Program," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 1999, 84, pp. 863-873.

¹⁸ M.J. Neubert, et al., "Regulatory Focus As A Mediator Of The Influence Of Initiating Structure And Servant Leadership On Employee Behavior," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2008, 93(6), pp. 1220-1233.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ M. G. Ehrhart, "Leadership And Procedural Justice Climate As Antecedents Of Unit-level Organizational Citizenship Behavior," *Personnel Psychology*, 2004, 57(1), 61-94.

other nine questions measure promotion focus or efforts to seek gains, build achievements, and attain personal ideals.

Think about your current or most recent work situation, and then answer the 18 questions in Exhibit 1. Are you higher in promotion focus, prevention focus, or both? Why did you respond the way you did?

You can also answer the questions while considering your most favourite and least favourite jobs. In your best job, were you higher in promotion focus, prevention focus, or both? What about in your worst job? Why? What were you responding to in these different situations?

Your answers to these questions will help you to gain insight into how certain work situations and leadership styles can induce higher levels of prevention focus and promotion focus among their employees. You will also learn what effects the resulting regulatory focus can have on employee behaviour.

EXHIBIT 1: MEASURE OF REGULATORY FOCUS AT WORK

Think about a specific job while answering the following questions. Spaces are provided for you to answer each question multiple times, once about your current or most recent job, once about your best job, and once about your worst job. The first nine questions assess prevention focus, and the second nine questions measure promotion focus. Note that it is possible to score high on both dimensions, low on both dimensions, or high on one and low on the other.

For each job situation, indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following 18 statements using this scale:

1 = strongly disagree
2 = disagree

3 = neutral

4 = agree
5 = strongly agree

When you are finished, calculate your prevention- and promotion-focus scores for each job by adding the numbers you assigned to the prevention- and promotion-focus questions.

Prevention Focus:

Job you are rating:

	Current	Best	Worst
I concentrate on completing my work tasks correctly to increase my job security.			
At work, I focus my attention on completing my assigned responsibilities.			
Fulfilling my work duties is very important to me.			
At work, I strive to live up to the responsibilities and duties given to me by others.			
At work, I am often focused on accomplishing tasks that will support my need for security.			
I do everything I can to avoid loss at work.			
Job security is an important factor for me in any job search.			
I focus my attention on avoiding failure at work.			
I am very careful to avoid exposing myself to potential losses at work.			
TOTALS			

EXHIBIT 1 (CONTINUED)**Promotion Focus**

Job you are rating:

	Current	Best	Worst
I take chances at work to maximize my goals for advancement.	_____	_____	_____
I tend to take risks at work in order to achieve success.	_____	_____	_____
If I had an opportunity to participate on a high-risk, high-reward project, I would definitely take it.	_____	_____	_____
If my job did not allow for advancement, I would likely find a new one.	_____	_____	_____
A chance to grow is an important factor for me when looking for a job.	_____	_____	_____
I focus on accomplishing job tasks that will further my advancement.	_____	_____	_____
I spend a great deal of time envisioning how to fulfil my aspirations.	_____	_____	_____
My work priorities are affected by a clear picture of what I aspire to be.	_____	_____	_____
At work, I am motivated by my hopes and aspirations.	_____	_____	_____
TOTALS	_____	_____	_____

Note. This measure was developed by Neubert et al. A total score of 18 or less on either the prevention- or the promotion-focus dimensions indicates a low level of that type of focus. A total score between 19 and 27 indicates a low to neutral level. A total score of 28 to 35 indicates a neutral to high level of focus on that dimension, and a score of 36 or higher indicates a high level of that type of focus.

Once you've calculated your scores indicating your regulatory focus in different job situations, write some notes here to indicate why you had the focus you did in each of the different situations. Was it the organization, the task you were doing, your leader, or your teammates that led you to a particular type of regulatory focus? What are the implications of your responses for leadership?
