Informal Leadership Status and Individual Performance: The Roles of Political Skill and Political Will

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Abstract

Informal leadership has been a topic of growing interest in recent years, with the recognition that much remains to be known about this phenomenon. In the present study, an integrative social–political conceptualization of informal leadership is proposed and tested. The research question was tested through individual self-report survey questions, a network-based consensus informal leadership measure whereby each employee identified informal leaders in their network, and individual performance provided by the organization. Specifically, the mediated moderation test demonstrated that employees high in political will, as operationalized by power motivation, were more likely to be collectively recognized as informal leaders than those low in political will, and the performance of these informal leaders was found to be contingent on their political skill. By capturing informal leadership using a consensus measure, the results of this study provide a first look at informal leadership in an organizational setting, not team or group. Furthermore, the current research offers a social network—political conceptualization of informal leadership in organizations that contributes to theory, research, and practice.

Keywords

informal leadership, need for power, political skill, social networks, performance

Introduction

The study of informal roles in organizations emerged with the discussion of informal and formal organizational structures. Informal structures develop as "unwritten laws," which derive from the interpersonal relationships between organizational members, and operate in parallel with the formal social structure of organizations (Selznick, 1948). One aspect of the study of informal organizational structures is informal leadership and leadership emergence. The acknowledgment of such phenomena has fueled inquiry into the identification of informal leaders and the organizational consequences of their behavior and effectiveness (e.g., Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Ensley, Hmieleski, & Pearce, 2006; Friedrich, Vessey, Schuelke, Ruark, & Mumford, 2009; Zhang, Waldman, & Wang, 2012). The research presented in this article is conducted in a setting without formal structures operating in parallel to the informal structure. Absent from these considerations is an examination of the formal and informal structure in parallel, and the social processes that contribute to the development of leadership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

The absence of informal considerations provides the opportunity for the current article to enter a complementary political perspective into the discussion of informal leadership. The

political arena inherent in organizations results in part from the informal behavior of organizational members (Mintzberg, 1983). We argue that the informal leader role is part of the informal structure, and as such, the nonprescribed nature of this role requires both political competency and ambition. Specifically, the likelihood of individuals flourishing in the space between the formal hierarchy and informal status requires both their willingness to invest and risk reputational capital, as well as the appropriate context within which to exercise their influence.

Although a complete understanding of political considerations in leadership is still underdeveloped, recent work has begun to better articulate the processes through which political inclinations, abilities, and contexts affect the leadership experience (e.g., Ammeter, Douglas, Gardner, Hochwarter,

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& Ferris, 2002; Treadway, Douglas, Ellen, Summers, & Ferris, 2014). The present study incorporates and expands on this literature to develop a model of the positioning and performance of informal leaders. Moreover, this article integrates the roles of political will and political skill with a social network perspective, and in doing so extends the literature in several meaningful ways.

Our study initially expands the domain of individual antecedents of informal leadership by considering contextually specific political will; that is, political will that is specific to the context of informal leadership. Political will is particularly relevant to the informal leadership process because personality and skill-related traits could not, by themselves, predict employees' acquisition of powerful positions (Mintzberg, 1983). As such, it is necessary to consider the willingness of individuals to invest themselves in political processes.

"Informal leaders emerge through a complex process of role taking and peer perceptual processes that determine who becomes leaders" (Neubert & Taggar, 2004, p. 176). It is not surprising that research on the antecedents of informal leadership has focused on the personal characteristics of employees that make them more likely to emerge in these roles. For example, employees' general mental ability and their personality traits (i.e., the Big Five) have been found to predict informal leader emergence (Neubert & Taggar, 2004; Taggar, Hackett, & Saha, 1999). Absent from this work is consideration of whether individuals are politically motivated to obtain the influence inherent in informal leadership status. More important, are individuals motivated in the inevitable competition for social status that occurs in informal groups?

We also add depth to the literature on political skill by investigating the role of political skill within informal leadership roles and, to some degree, within the broader context of social networks. Specifically, we investigate this ability to navigate the political arena is conveyed through the leaders' use of political skill (Ammeter et al., 2002; Ferris, Treadway, Brouer, & Munyon, 2012; Treadway et al., 2004). Politically skilled individuals more accurately comprehend the needs of organizations and the members within it, and they use that knowledge to influence others to help them map the informal communication pathways embedded within these organizations (Ferris et al., 2005; Mintzberg, 1983). Past research has linked political skill to both employee and manager performance (e.g., Semadar, Robins, & Ferris, 2006; Treadway, Hochwarter, Kacmar, & Ferris, 2005; for a meta-analysis, see Munyon, Summers, Thompson, & Ferris, 2015). The present study broadens this understanding to include the role of informal leadership recognition in determining the success of politically skilled employees.

Finally, much of the previous research on informal leadership has focused on the role of leader emergence in small
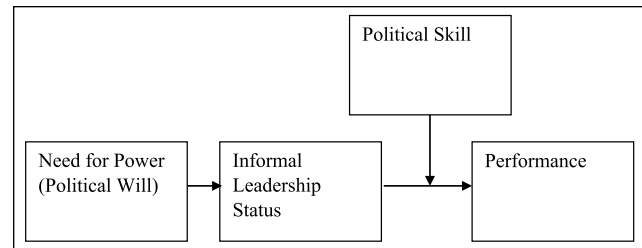
Figure 1. Mediated moderation model of informal leadership.

groups or teams, and is viewed as a within-group phenomenon (e.g., Neubert & Taggar, 2004). On the other hand, leader effectiveness often is a basis of comparison between groups based on their performance. Based on previous research, we suggest that the job performance of informal leaders is determined by leaders' ability to adequately and appropriately evaluate organization dynamics, and leverage the resources and latitude afforded by their leadership status into elevated job performance (Ammeter et al., 2002; Ferris et al., 2007; Treadway et al., 2004).

Pescosolido (2002) highlighted the role of emergent leader behavior in setting the norm for what is considered to be appropriate behavior. More specifically, it is the idiosyncrasy credits held by informal leaders that enabled them to influence the individuals in their immediate environment (Hollander, 1964). It is indeed the resources and latitude (i.e., idiosyncrasy credits) afforded to these leaders that provide them with the appropriate context within which to exercise their influence. Overall, this study unites both the emergence of informal leaders and their subsequent effectiveness through an integrative social network—political perspective on the individual job performance of individuals recognized as informal leaders.

Theoretical Foundations, Model, and Hypotheses

In recent years, informal leadership has been a topic of growing interest. In the present study, an integrative social–political conceptualization of informal leadership is proposed (presented in Figure 1) and tested. Specifically, the mediated moderation model argues that employees high in political will (i.e., as operationalized by power motivation) are more likely to be generally recognized as informal leaders, and the performance of these informal leaders should be contingent on their political skill.

Informal Leadership

Classic organizational theory suggests that the organization exists on two planes: the formal and the informal. Barnard (1938) defined the formal organization as a "system of consciously coordinated activities or forces of two or more

persons" (p. 73). The explicit and shared objectives unite employees to a common purpose, and the organization's success is dependent on their willingness to contribute to this purpose (Barnard, 1938). As a fundamental component of every formal organization, the informal organization represents the aggregation of employee attitudes and personal connections. From these definitions, it is apparent that the informal organization is a response to employees' social needs and the subsequent organic grouping outside of the formal organizational structure. As central actors in the informal organization, it is necessary to recognize informal leaders, identify their distinctive characteristics, and understand how they can support organizational effectiveness through their individual performance (Scott, 1961).

We conceptualize informal leadership status as a product of coworkers' social perceptions, reflected in the degree to which they are recognized as leaders. Indeed, an individual must be acknowledged and recognized in the aggregate perceptions of followers as a leader to exert influence over others (R. G. Lord & Maher, 1991; Phillips & Lord, 1981). L. Lord, Jefferson, Klass, Nowak, and Thomas (2013) conducted in-depth interviews highlighting the specific nature of leadership in a nursing context, similar to the organization used in the current study. The authors specifically cited informal leadership as the element that keeps the organization running smoothly and provides motivation to other coworkers. Interviewees further elaborated that "the informal leadership . . . is the stronger leadership" and that informal leaders were viewed as sources of knowledge for others and more likely to be able to get important work done. The research summarized highlights the unique role of informal leaders for their peers as well as in the organizational setting as a whole. The current research contributes to an understanding of the motivations of individuals to become informal leaders and how they are able to maintain their performance in parallel to their informal leadership status.

As such, we propose that leadership status may, in itself, be a goal, and as such, employees invest their social and reputational capital to obtain recognition as leaders by their peers when the organization does not formally confer such status on them. Because leadership status is viewed as a personal goal of employees, an appropriate measure of leadership effectiveness is an assessment of how this status relates to an increase in the informal leaders' personal performance in organizations. To capture these aspects of the informal leadership experience, the present study articulates a model incorporating political will and political skill.

Political Will and Informal Leadership. Previous research on political will has identified need for achievement and intrinsic motivation as indicators for the degree to which individuals will engage in political behavior (Treadway et al., 2005). Indeed, Treadway and colleagues found that these elements predicted the general propensity to engage in political behavior at work. Building on their findings, the current study seeks to explore a specific political context, namely, informal leadership. As such, given the context-specific nature of the question presented, this research specifically considers the need for power as an important element of political will in the recognition of informal leaders.

McClelland's (1961, 1965, 1971) work on needs introduced the notion that individuals differ in their motivations. In order to better understand the role of motives, subsequent research on the impact of different need motivations shifted to understand how these motivational values translate into goal-directed behaviors (McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989). As discussed by McClelland and colleagues, the explicit nature of personal motives indicates a cognitive orientation that could lead to sustained behaviors congruent with those values. These explicit motives are likely to be activated by social contexts, such that it can be expected in situations that require leadership, a person with high self-ascribed power motives will cultivate a cognitive penchant for exerting influence and affecting others (Kehr, 2004). On the other hand, implicit motives would be predictive of behaviors that ultimately could lead to managerial jobs, but are not limited to the context of the work environment (McClelland et al., 1989). For the current research, we are interested in a particular context (i.e., informal leadership), as it is likely to trigger these behaviors in individuals high in power motivation.

The motive to influence and exert control over others, as captured in power motivation, often has been a theme in organization politics research (Treadway, 2012). Indeed, power motivation illustrates a particular likelihood to "expend energy in pursuit of political goals" (political will; Treadway et al., 2005), and is a likely precursor to informal leadership. Treadway et al. (2005) represent the first attempt to connect the willingness to engage in organizational politics and the ability to do so effectively. More specifically, these authors suggested that the motivation or will to engage in political behavior would predict actual political behavior, and their political ability or skill would translate the behavior into organizational outcomes. The present study builds on their findings to consider need for power as political will and informal leadership as the context-relevant political behavior that interacts with political skill to affect performance.

Because power tends to be viewed as integral to effective leadership, power motivation is frequently examined in the leadership context. Individuals with a strong desire to influence others often find themselves in leadership positions (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). In fact, a high need for socialized power is a stronger predictor of the attainment of formal leadership status than is either a high need for affiliation or achievement (McClelland & Burnham, 1976). Early research on power motivation found support for the positive association between individual need for power and the

management role (Cornelius & Lane, 1984; Winter, 1973). Individuals' achievement need motivates their personal development and desire to obtain results themselves, which may decrease potential efficiency as a leader. Similarly, the need to be liked, emblematic of a high need for affiliation, may impede performance on task-related objectives.

In the interest of integrating research on leader characteristics and informal leadership, the present study seeks to understand the extent to which individuals with high power motivation are likely to be recognized as leaders. Individuals with a high power motivation are likely to display behaviors such as organizing the activity of others and taking advantage of leadership opportunities as they present themselves. These directive behaviors are consistent with our general expectation that leaders be decisive and dominant (e.g., leader prototype; R. G. Lord, Brown, Harvey, & Hall, 2001), whereby individuals who engage in these behaviors to a greater degree are more likely to gain the reputation, and be informally ascribed, as informal leaders. We then argue that the need for power of individuals should give impetus to their identification as leaders by their peers. Hence, we formulate the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 1:** Need for power (political will) is positively related to informal leadership.

Political Skill and Performance. Political skill is "the ability to effectively understand others at work and to use such knowledge to influence others in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives" (Ferris et al., 2005, p. 127). Politically skilled employees are capable of understanding the social context and the motives of others in the workplace. Because of their effortless execution of these influence attempts and ability to mask self-serving intent, the targets of their influence behaviors generally see them as genuine and sincere in their actions. Ultimately, politically skilled individuals are able to construct broad and strong networks because of the favorable attitudes and reciprocities they build within the social structure (Ferris et al., 2005; Ferris et al., 2007).

Employee effectiveness is a central tenant of the conceptualization of political skill in that highly skilled employees are expected to have greater success within organizations (Brouer, Douglas, Treadway, & Ferris, 2012; Ferris et al., 2005). Indeed, in the initial tests of the political skill construct and theory, increased political skill of managers was found to be associated with higher ratings of their job performance (Ferris et al., 2005). Furthermore, the metatheoretical framework Ferris et al. (2007) presented suggests that political skill has implications for the self, surrounding others, and the group or organization. Nonetheless, the political behavior that characterizes politically skilled employees may be limited by a lack of social capital or, as in the current context, informal leadership status.

Employees who are informal leaders tend to take a more active role in the organization and due to their salience and visibility, are able to operate with a wider range of acceptable behaviors (Hollander, 1964)—including political influence behavior. In other words, informal leadership status allows politically skilled employees to be more or less effective. More specifically, for individuals high in political skill, performance will be high for those who have been identified as informal leaders because the networking ability, capacity to read accurately and act on social situations, facilitate the work of others, and execute all of these behaviors in a sincere, genuine, and affable manner should be perceived and interpreted by superiors as effective performance from these informal leaders. That is, they will be perceived as demonstrating situationally appropriate behavior and executing it effectively.

Similarly, for individuals who are low in political skill, there should be no relationship expected between informal leadership and performance. In other words, whether individuals are identified as informal leaders, due to their political will, the informal leadership status of lesser politically skilled employees' remains unrelated to performance as they lack the necessary political abilities to leverage their informal leader behaviors in ways that contributes to being evaluated more favorably.

However, we expect that for individuals high in political skill, who have not been identified as informal leaders, their performance will be evaluated lower because they will be perceived to be engaging in situation-inappropriate behaviors. Individuals high in political skill are adaptable, but they still will try to utilize their networking ability, and opportunity recognition and capitalization behaviors, which fit in an informal leadership context, but not as well in a regular job context—as highlighted by their deflated performance. Indeed, politically skilled employees who are not recognized as informal leaders are expending "idiosyncrasy credits" that they simply do not possess by trying to influence others.

By exercising political behavior without either formal or informal recognition, politically skilled employees experience a misfit in reputation and ability. This misfit results in a decreased ability to effectively manage the political arena of the organization and personal performance as well as their lesser skilled or informally endorsed counterparts. To that point, we specifically used the organization's criteria to capture individual job performance. This provides the most context-relevant assessment of criteria of which employees are aware and determine their success in the organization. Thus, the following hypothesis is formulated:

> **Hypothesis 2:** Political skill moderates the mediated relationship between need for power (via informal leadership status) and individual performance.

Specifically, for individuals high in political skill, greater recognition as an informal leader is associated with higher individual performance. For individuals who are low in political skill, greater informal leadership status is unrelated to variations in individual performance. Last, high levels of political skill without informal leadership status is related to lower individual performance.

Method

Sample and Procedure

The sample was composed of employees from a mental health facility. The nature of the study required data to be collected both from the subordinates and the supervisors. The initial survey was targeted to a total of 88 professional employees that contained both self-report and social network measures. Respondents were provided with an informed consent document that explained to them the nature of the study, and that performance data would be obtained from their supervisors 3 months after they completed their surveys. Of the 88 employees evaluated at Time 1, some employees had left the organization; therefore, 76 employee evaluations were possible. The final response rate for Time 1 was 85.5% or 65 employees and of those, 40 provided complete leader networks to be used in the analyses.

The respondents (25.0% men and 53.4% women, 21.6% did not report their gender; mean age of 31.72 years) of a residential mental health facility in Northwestern United States completed surveys for this study. The employees were aides who lived in the residential facilities with the mental health patients. In this organization, of the sample that reported their ethnicity, 56.8% of the sample was Caucasian, 10.2% Hispanic, 1.1% Asian, and 7.9% other. The performance appraisals returned accounted for 65 of the original 76 employees (71.1%). Of these final 65, 6 were supervisors and 59 were subordinates.

Measures

Political Will (Power Motivation/Need for Dominance) (α =.78). Power motivation (McClelland, 1975) was assessed with a five-item measure (Steers & Braunstein, 1976) from the *Manifest Needs Questionnaire* (range 1.20-7.00). Sample items were evaluated using a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) and included "I seek an active role in the leadership of my group" and "I find myself organizing and directing the activities of others." Valle and Perrewé (2000) captured power motivation using the need for dominance scale, and found it to be positively correlated with internal locus of control and proactive personality measures. These findings are consistent with previous leadership research (e.g., Crant & Bateman, 2000; Howell & Avolio, 1993; Kinicki & Vecchio, 1994).

Political Skill (α = .86). The Ferris et al. (2005) 18-item *Political Skill Inventory* was used to measure employee self-evaluations of political skill. Sample items include "I spend a lot of time and effort at work networking with others" and "I always seem to instinctively know the right things to say and do to influence others." Subordinates rated their agreement with the items using a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; range 3.53-6.67). Previous research has shown that self-reports of employee political skill are correlated significantly with peer (Liu, 2006) and supervisor (Blickle et al., 2011; Semadar, 2004) assessments.

Informal Leadership. In-degree centrality is an index of "aggregate prominence" (Knoke & Burt, 1983) and representation within a particular network. The results reported are based on the reports of the 65 employees who completed the network measure at Time 1 to provide a more comprehensive report from a larger portion of the organization. In order to calculate this index, each employee (including supervisors) was asked to respond to a single question applied to a roster of all employees (e.g., Neubert & Taggar, 2004; Venkataramani, Richter, & Clarke, 2014; Zhang et al., 2012). Specifically, respondents nominated their coworkers as a leader and were asked to "put a check next to the names of people you consider to be leaders in your organization. These individuals may or may not be officially designated by your organization as leaders." This could range from no nominations to a nomination from every other coworker. This information was then used to calculate individual's network centrality using UCINET 6 (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002). In this sample, informal leadership status ranged from 0 to 51.7 based on the Time 1 reports from 65 participants. In this context, high centrality demonstrates that individuals are readily identified as leaders in their organization by their coworkers.[1]

Performance. We used the organizations own internal measure of performance and was gathered by the human resources department 3 months after the first survey. We were given the raw data from the organization similar to other work investigating job performance (i.e., Zhang et al., 2012). This performance measure has been used within the company to regulate and provide performance feedback; thus, it provides context-specific information about individual performance. The company calculates the overall performance score based on different dimensions including employees' relationship with their coworkers and supervisors, their interaction with other staff and clients, professionalism, and punctuality. Each employee was rated from 1 (*low*) to 4 (*high*) on each dimension, and the composite score, generated by the company, was then used to determine overall performance (M = 30.88, SD = 1.74).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Intercorrelations, and Reliability Estimates.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	31.73	13.13	—						
2. Manager[a]	0.10	0.30	.12						
3. Gender[b]	0.28	0.45	−.02	−.21					
4. Race[c]	0.80	0.44	.10	.17	−.25				
5. Need for power	3.84	1.13	.07	.17	−.13	.22	(.72)		
6. Political skill	4.94	0.74	−.18	.31	−.14	.06	.26	(.86)	
7. Informal leadership status	8.87	12.96	.17	.87	−.26	.23	.35	.26	
8. Performance	30.88	1.74	.35	.22	−.28	.18	.11	.06	.31

Note. N = 40. All correlations larger than .30 are significant at p < .05. The reliabilities are reported in the parentheses.
[a]1 = manager, 0 = nonmanager. [b]1 = male, 0 = female. [c]1 = Caucasian, 0 = not Caucasian.

Control Variables. Of the number of demographic variables collected, age, gender, race, and management position were controlled for in these analyses, as age (Sturman, 2003; Waldman & Avolio, 1986), gender (Eagly & Karau, 2002), and race (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997; Maume, 1999) have been shown to have an effect on leadership and/or performance. In pretests, demographic factors such as gender and race were controlled for, but only age and management position were found to have an impact on informal leadership. This is not inconsistent with other research finding that age and performance are likely to be positively related as job performance could possible improve with age (Waldman & Avolio, 1986). By including management position, we are able to parcel out the informal leadership variance attributed solely to formal position and better capture the recognition of the individual as a leader.

Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliability coefficients for the variables used in this study. Since the data were not nested in teams and rather captures an entire organizational network, regression was chosen to test the proposed model. To test the mediated moderation model, Preacher and Hayes (2008; Model 14) SPSS macro, with resampling or bootstrapping methods to guard against violations of the assumption of normality (Shrout & Bolger, 2002) and Type I errors (Mooney, Duval, & Duval, 1993; Tepper, Henle, Lambert, Giacalone, & Duffy, 2008) was used. The Preacher and Hayes (2008) method also tests the indirect and direct effects of the moderator (i.e., political skill) through the proposed model allowing for the evaluation of alternative models.

The results from the bootstrapping analysis are located in Table 2, and they indicate a significant mediated moderation analysis. Need for power is positively related to informal leadership ($\beta = 2.31$, $SE = 0.90$, $p < .02$). The model summary from the control variables and need for power predicting informal leadership was significant, $R^2 = .90$, $F(5, 34) = 28.30$, $p < .00$. Informal leadership was negatively related ($\beta = −0.40$, $SE = 0.20$, $p < .05$) to performance, but political skill ($\beta = −0.33$, *ns*) was not related to performance. Finally, the interaction of informal leadership and political skill is positively related to performance ($\beta = 0.09$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .05$). The complete model summary (as presented in Table 2) was found to be significant, $R^2 = .60$, $F(8, 31) = 2.18$, $p = .06$.

The direct effect of need for power on performance was not significant ($\beta = −0.17$, *ns*). The direct effect of informal leadership on performance was significant at high levels, or 1 *SD* above the mean, of political skill (0.26, 95% CI [0.03, 1.12]). This means that employees who were high in political skill and recognized as informal leaders also attained high performance ratings. The relationship between informal leadership and performance was not significant for employees who were low in political skill (−0.05, 95% CI [−0.87, 0.18]), or who possessed average levels of political skill (0.10, 95% CI [−0.01, 0.60]). The graph in Figure 2 plots the mediated effects of informal leadership at ±1 *SD* around the mean of individual levels of political skill on performance. Therefore, all hypotheses were supported.

Discussion

Contributions to Theory and Research

Scholars have called for research to expand our understanding of the role of informal leaders (Graen & Graen, 2006). Confusion in the concept originates from the tendency of scholars to interchange the terms "informal" and "emergent" to describe employees who are identified as leaders by their coworkers (i.e., Pescosolido, 2002). Outside of the team context, in conjunction with formal structured interactions, patterns organically emerge with particular individuals at the center of the action—these are the informal leaders (Freeman, 1980). The very nature of this process suggests an overlap between the concept of informal and emergent leadership. Often, scholars evenly exchange the terms informal and

Table 2. Results of Preacher and Hayes Mediated Moderation Analysis (*N* = 40).

Predictor	β	SE	t	p
Control variables on DV				
Age	0.05*	0.02	2.57	.01
Manager	−3.23	2.00	−1.61	.12
Gender	−0.83	0.59	−1.41	.17
Race	0.32	0.25	0.48	.64
IV to mediator				
Need for power	2.31*	0.90	2.56	.02
Mediator to DV				
Informal leadership status	−0.40*	0.20	−2.03	.05
Political skill	−0.32	0.43	−0.74	.47
Interaction	0.09*	0.04	2.35	.03

			CI	
	Boot direct effect	Boot SE	Lower limit	Upper limit
Direct effect of need for power on performance				
	−0.17	0.26	−0.71	0.36

			CI	
	Boot indirect effect	Boot SE	Lower limit	Upper limit
Indirect effect of need for power on performance at levels of political skill				
−1 SD	−0.05	0.21	−0.87	0.18
Mean	0.10	0.13	−0.02	0.60
+1 SD	0.26	0.26	0.03	1.12

Note. DV = dependent variable; IV = independent variable; CI = confidence interval; SE = standard error. The reported regression coefficients are unstandardized computed with 10,000 Bootstrap samples. Index of moderated mediation = 0.21, 95% CI [0.01, 1.21].
*p < .05. **p < .01.
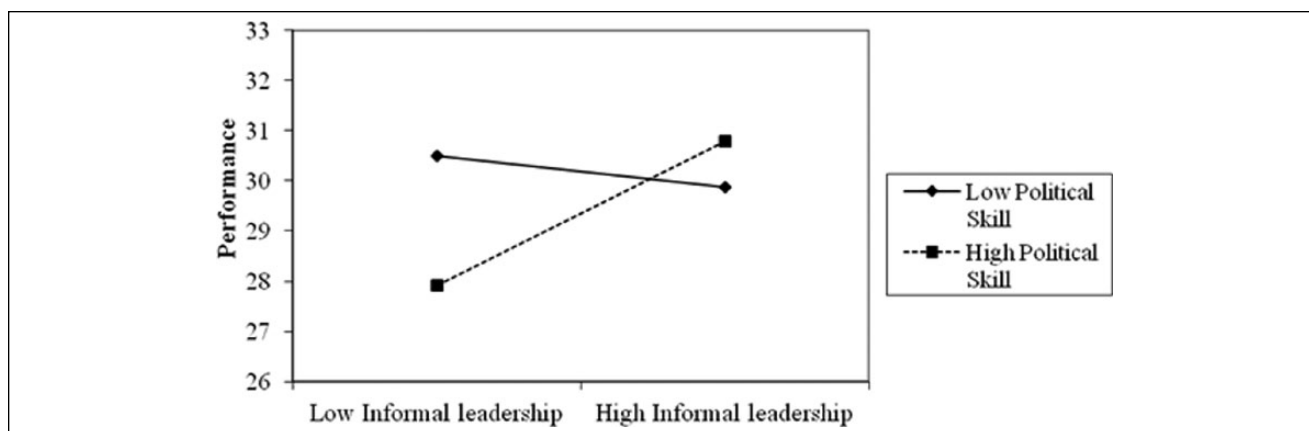
Figure 2. Interaction between the indirect (mediated) effect of need for power (political will) and political skill on performance.

emergent with regard to the discretionary networks that evolve outside of the formal or prescribed network (Ibarra, 1993). In other words, the informal content of the relationships in the organization can involve both a task focus in addition to the social element and it functions outside of the team context.

Furthermore, the present study explored a political explanation, involving both political will and skill, for an employee's rise to, and leveraging of, informal leadership positions in organizations. That is, an integrative social net-work—political conceptualization of informal leadership

was proposed and tested, and the results provided support for the model and hypotheses. The results demonstrated that employees high in political will (i.e., high in power motivation) are more likely to be recognized as informal leaders, and the performance of informal leaders is found to be contingent on their political skill. As such, the present study extends the social networks, leadership, and politics literatures by providing an empirical evaluation of individual differences as they relate to informal leadership emergence and subsequent performance.

The results indicated that politically willed individuals (i.e., higher power motivation individuals) were more likely to be recognized as informal leaders (i.e., than those lower in power motivation), yet recognition by coworkers as an informal leader was not related to higher performance ratings. This suggests that informal leaders' performance was dependent on their ability to manage the demands of their positions through their elevated levels of political skill. The findings presented here suggest that employees high in political skill who lack the status of informal leader actually suffer in their individual performance. In other words, the informal leadership status insulates politically skilled employees from the negative effects of engaging in political behaviors without the expected status.

The present results contribute several points of depth to the political interpretation of leadership. The first of these is its integration of both motivational and political approaches to understanding informal leadership. Whereas previous research has linked leader political skill to subordinates' perceptions of organizational support, team performance, and ratings of managerial job performance within the formal structure of organizations (see Ferris et al., 2012, for a review), scholars have ignored the informal context of organizations. This oversight is striking given that the political perspective acknowledges that leaders are successful to the degree they are able to traverse both the formal and informal structures (Pfeffer, 2010).

The interplay of political motivation and skill has been at the foundation of political views of organizations (e.g., Mintzberg, 1983), yet few studies have fully articulated and tested the framework or systematically applied it to the leadership context. As such, our research not only empirically justifies the direct inclusion of political considerations in leadership research but also identifies the sequencing of motivation and skill through which leadership performance and effectiveness is achieved. Specifically, individuals' motivation to achieve influence over others is an important precursor to them risking social capital to achieve a goal. This furthers the positioning of political skill as a personal resource that can be viewed as functional or dysfunctional for organizations and individuals to the degree individuals' motivations align with those of the organizations (e.g., Ferris et al., 2007; Ferris et al., 2012), or with the expectations created by the context.

Our conceptualization of informal leadership offers a complementary theoretical viewpoint to the structural and dispositional approaches applied in previous research. Despite a recognition that informal leaders operate outside the formal structure of organizations, no previous work has attempted to offer or test a model that explicitly evaluates personal characteristics that would allow employees to thrive in the informal organization. As such, the present study represents a context-specific test of political motivations or political will and ability in the informal structure of the organization.

In doing so, this model further establishes the relationship between political skill and political will (motivation), suggesting that political will serves as a driver of employees' willingness to risk social capital to achieve particular goals. Whereas the Treadway et al. (2005) work focused on the role of political skill as a resource in reducing emotional strain as a consequence of engaging in political behavior, the present study concurs with the role of political skill as a resource, but one that allows informal leaders to leverage their status to achieve personal gain (i.e., performance). These findings substantiate that the motivation to engage in a behavior and the skill to leverage that behavior are distinct entities, but both are important for job performance. Furthermore, they provide empirical support for the theoretical positioning of political skill as a personal resource (Ferris et al., 2007; Ferris et al., 2012).

Strengths and Limitations

The present study has several strengths that are worthy of note, most notably the use of the social networks methodology to study informal leadership as an organization-wide phenomenon. By collecting and aggregating employee perceptions of their coworkers as leaders, this study provides an inclusive perspective on informal leadership. Coupling the social network approach with the consideration of individual differences as predictors of perceptions of informal leaders is consistent with similar research conducted previously in the social networks literature (Mehra, Dixon, Brass, & Robertson, 2006; Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 2001). By using both self-report and social network methodology, common method variance demonstrated limited or no impact on the results presented in this study.

Other strengths include the collection of data at two different points in time and from multiple sources. The time lag effectively diminishes the likelihood of bias due to prior knowledge of the questionnaire. In addition, the use of the social networks methods requires the collection of data from every employee. The response rate for this study was very high and increases the likelihood of capturing the aggregate perceptions. Finally, Preacher and Hayes's (2008) analysis of mediated moderation relationships offers a more robust test of the model and hypotheses than the Baron and

Kenny (1986) approach. Together, the strengths of the current study improve the interpretability and generalizability of the results.

This study is not without limitations, however. There is potential for ambiguity as it relates to the theoretical conceptualization of informal leadership as it may be confounded with other concepts such as emergent leadership and shared leadership. The present study chose consensus measure using a social network methodology to assess informal leadership. Given the need for participants to rate every other organizational member, the sample size may indeed reflect participant fatigue. It is important to note that previous research using this methodology has limited the network to that of the team and not the entire organization (i.e., Neubert & Taggar, 2004; Zhang et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the generalizability of these results to the informal leadership literature may be affected by the context (Anderson, Spataro, & Flynn, 2008; Lord & Dinh, 2014) as well as the unique operationalization used here which includes the formal leaders. While the surveyed organization provided specialized services in a specific context, generalizability may be called into question. However, the results found in the current study parallel findings in other studies which support the validity of the current results. Nonetheless, there is support for the use of the social network approach to capture socially constructed positions of leadership (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2005), and as such, this method seems appropriate in this context.

Directions for Future Research

If the present research demonstrates that political will or motivation is critical to becoming an informal leader, it may be useful to expand the number and type of motivational variables that are considered in framing political will as an indicator of individuals' motivation. Mintzberg's (1983) discussion of both the definition and mechanics of political will were insightful, yet few studies have attempted to operationalize his thoughts. The present study demonstrates that political will can be seen as reflecting concerns for both internal needs satisfaction and observable goal attainment. A more refined view of political will is needed to advance our understanding of how motivation affects political processes in organizations (see Treadway, 2012, for theoretical development in this area). This treatment should encompass not only internal and external motivation but also more strongly integrate context as a motivation and as a barrier to action.

Contextual considerations are of particular concern for leadership researchers (Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002), yet informal leadership scholars have provided little discussion of these issues. In the intrapreneurship context, "champions" are considered informal leaders in that they actively promote innovation within their firms (Achilladelis, Jervis, & Robertson, 1971; Howell & Higgins, 1990). These informal leaders champion the causes of their organizations, thereby encouraging movement and support among their coworkers by utilizing their ability to articulate a vision and inspiring others to follow it.

Conclusion

The instance of informal leadership fuels the inquiry into who are perceived to be leaders and what determines their effectiveness. Brass (2001) suggested that leader effectiveness is based less on leadership traits, and more on the "ability to accomplish work through others" (p. 132). This study proposed that the political will or power motivation of individual employees propels them into the role of informal leaders. Their subsequent individual job performance was then contingent on the match between political skill and the informal leadership context. These arguments have been made through an integrative intersubjective–political conceptualization that highlights leader characteristics, informal leadership status, and their individual performance. In sum, the empirical support we found for the proposed conceptualization provides a basis for understanding the identification, role, and success of informal leaders in organizations. We hope these results stimulate further research interest in this area of work.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Note

1. For the purposes of this study, the scores were not symmetrized; that is, when person i nominates person j as a leader in his or her network, it is not necessary for Person j to nominate person i in order to calculate person i's centrality score. Conceptually, this approach also makes sense in that formal and informal leaders need not recognize other employees as leaders to be considered leaders themselves. Finally, there is usually a discrepancy between individuals' ratings of leaders in organizations in that high-status leaders are unlikely to reciprocate nomination of lower status individuals as leaders (Krackhardt, 1987).

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