

When Do Leaders Initiate Changes? The Roles of Coping Style and Organization Members' Stability-Emphasizing Values

Noga Sverdlik* 

Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Israel

Shaul Oreg

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

Yair Berson

Bar-Ilan University, Israel and New York University, USA

We explore the roles of leaders' coping style and organization members' emphasis on stability in predicting leaders' initiation of changes in their organizations. Specifically, we hypothesized that leaders' problem-focused style will be positively, and emotion-focused style negatively, related to the initiation of change. We further proposed that organization members' emphasis on stability will moderate the effect of leaders' problem-focused style. We tested our model using time-lagged data from 75 school principals and 495/409 (Time 1/ Time 2) teachers. Our results support the moderating role that the emphasis on stability has on the effect of problem-focused coping on leaders' initiation of changes and provide some support for the negative effect of emotion-focused coping. Our findings complement the psychological literature on recipients of change with psychological insights about the factors that make leaders become change agents.

INTRODUCTION

Effective leaders continuously strive to advance their organizations. They gather feedback about their organization's performance, and initiate changes

* Address for correspondence: Noga Sverdlik, Department of Education, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, PO Box 653, Beer-Sheva 84105 Israel. Email: sverdlik@bgu.ac.il

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designed to improve the organization and its functioning. Managers are continuously provided with information about their organization's performance, through quarterly and annual reports, feedback from review boards, internal or external evaluation surveys, as well as informal signals about the organization's performance. By its very nature, such feedback highlights the discrepancies between the organization's present and desired states. Managers apply various means for coping with the challenges indicated through the feedback, key among which is the initiation of change in the organization (e.g., Greve, 2003).

Indeed, the initiation of change is considered an important aspect of management (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) and leadership styles with a focus on change are heralded for their effectiveness (Bass, 2008). For example, transformational leadership, which is often discussed as the epitome of effective leadership, involves a focus on transforming (i.e., changing) the organization (Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003). This is not to say that changes are always necessary, yet over time most managers will encounter situations that require at least some change. Even when feedback about the organization's performance is generally positive, it still typically points to aspects that can be further improved and enhanced. It is therefore important to understand the circumstances under which changes are most likely to be initiated. We distinguish here between *managing* change, which has been studied extensively, and *initiating* change, which has received far less research attention. We focus in the present study on the latter—the initiation of change and the factors that predict it.

Whereas much attention has been given in the organizational field to the impact that change has on the organization and its members (Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph, & DePalma, 2006; Oreg, Michel, & By, 2013), less is known about the factors that determine when and why leaders will initiate changes to begin with. Similarly, research of leaders as change agents tends to focus on the processes through which change is managed and on leaders' effectiveness in implementing the change (e.g., Battilana & Casciaro, 2012; Lam & Schaubroeck, 2000), but much less on the likelihood that these leaders will initiate change. We thus distinguish our discussion of the initiation of change from the process through which change is implemented.¹

Moreover, by change initiation we refer to changes that a leader, of her or his own volition, chose to instigate in the organization. This is distinct from changes that are imposed on leaders by external entities and that

¹ We emphasize this distinction in particular given that the term "change initiation" has also been used in the sensemaking literature (e.g., Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) to describe the implementation of change in its early stages.

leaders are expected to launch in their organizations. Certainly, this does not preclude the fact that when choosing, voluntarily, to initiate a change, leaders may very well take into consideration and be influenced by many factors, including the expectations of external entities, their outlook on their organization, as well as their personal inclinations. We consider two of these factors in the present study by focusing both on leaders' predispositions and their followers' personal inclinations. As we elaborate below, we also consider the influence of external factors on the initiating change by focusing on leaders' initiation of change in response to external performance evaluations.

In practice, leaders vary significantly in the degree to which they initiate changes in their organizations (e.g., Martins, 2005). Such differences have to do with differences in leaders' overall approach to handling problems and challenges. Some leaders choose to cope with such challenges by readily devising improvements and changes aimed at overcoming the problems at hand. Others may be less likely to readily tackle the problem and will pay more attention to their emotional experiences of the challenge. These leaders may share their experiences with others, reframe the challenge to minimize its importance, or even disavow its existence. Given their key role in explaining people's way of coping with threats and challenges, we draw in the present study on theories of coping styles (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) to capture these distinct ways of dealing with their organizations' problems and challenges and examine their effects on leaders' initiation of changes.

As noted above, little research has considered the factors that determine leaders' initiation of change. Some attention to "change initiation" is given in the strategy literature, through research of strategic change, yet the focus in this research is only indirectly related to the explicit and deliberate initiation of change (Boeker, 1997; Crossland, Zyung, Hiller, & Hambrick, 2014). The occurrence of change in strategy research is typically operationalized by examining fluctuations in an organization's performance over time, rather than by explicitly capturing the initiation of changes by organization leaders. Yet the changes that drive such fluctuations may not have been initiated by the organization's leader. This line of investigation thus provides only limited insight about the deliberate initiation of change. In the present study we more directly focus on organization leaders' initiation of changes and consider the roles of leaders' and organizations' attributes in predicting such initiation of change. Specifically, we predict that leaders' general coping style and followers' values will jointly determine the initiation of changes. By doing so we complement the psychological insights that have accumulated about change recipients with a psychological examination of the factors that make leaders change agents.

The Initiation of Change in Organizations

Overall, there has been little consideration of the psychological factors that drive the initiation of change by organization leaders. As noted above, in strategy research the initiation of change is inferred from changes in the organization's performance. For example, early research in the field of strategy demonstrated relationships between CEO demographics and "strategic change" such as a positive relationship of CEO age, tenure, and level of education with the degree of change in a firm's strategy over time (Datta, Rajagopalan, & Zhang, 2003). More recently, a few studies linked aspects of top leaders' personality with strategic change in these leaders' firms. In one study, CEOs' extraversion and openness to experience were positively associated with "strategic change initiation" (Herrmann & Nadkarni, 2014). A small subset of studies (including the Herrmann & Nadkarni, 2014 study mentioned above) within a meta-analysis about CEO personality and strategic action focused on *strategic change*, which was very broadly defined and included a variety of outcomes, such as strategic variation and strategic risk (Wang, Holmes, Oh, & Zhu, 2016). Findings of these studies overall supported a positive relationship between CEOs' self-concept (e.g., positive affectivity and risk orientation) and the occurrence of performance shifts in firms.

Change in these studies, however, is assessed by measuring changes over time in firm outcomes, such as the composition of firms' geographic and product markets or budget allocations (e.g., R&D expenditures). Such indexes of change do not differentiate changes that were deliberately and voluntarily initiated by organization leaders from those that occurred without deliberate action or that were imposed by external entities (e.g., through government regulation). Extant change indexes therefore only distally and indirectly capture the actual initiation of change.

In addition, psychological predictions of such strategic change have been limited to the consideration of top leaders' personality traits, overlooking additional psychological predictors, including other personal attributes. The fact that changes are often initiated as a means of coping with organizational challenges points to theories of coping mechanisms (e.g., Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) as a promising direction of research on change initiation.

Moreover, psychological predictions of strategic change have also not addressed the role of situational/contextual factors that likely contribute to leaders' decision to initiate changes. A person-situation approach (Mischel, 1977), focusing specifically on leaders' way of coping with organizational challenges, may thus be useful for predicting leaders' initiation of changes. We therefore focus in this study on an important yet understudied leader

attribute, on the organizational context, and on their interaction for predicting the initiation of organizational change.

Coping Styles and the Initiation of Change

Coping is defined as “conscious, volitional attempts to regulate the environment or one’s reaction to the environment under stressful conditions” (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007, p. 80). The usefulness of coping theory lies, among other factors, in the fact that stressful conditions emerge on a regular basis, as a part of individuals’ encounters with life’s problems and challenges. According to the theory, coping has the two major functions, of regulating stressful emotions that emerge in the face of adversity or challenge (i.e., emotion-focused coping), and changing the factors within the environment that elicit the stressful emotions (i.e., problem-focused coping; Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). Alongside the overall process of coping, the theory also addresses individual differences in the function that individuals tend to address most readily while coping with the challenges they face (e.g., Rotondo & Kincaid, 2008; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001). These individual differences are called *coping styles*.

Coping styles are related to personality traits, but are nevertheless distinct and each of the concepts captures a different aspect of individuals’ typical behavior and responses (e.g., Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007; Nes & Segerstrom, 2006). Compared with traits and other dispositional factors (which are also relevant for explaining the initiation of change, e.g., proactive personality, Crant, 1996; regulatory focus, Higgins, 1998), coping styles pertain specifically to how individuals cope with problems and challenges (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). They are thus relevant for explaining the initiation of changes in response to the problems and challenges that are surfaced when leaders receive performance feedback.

Coping styles are often treated as a general style of coping with life’s challenges and problems (e.g., Amiot, Terry, Jimmieson, & Callan, 2006; Lapiere & Allen, 2006; Rotondo & Kincaid, 2008; Scheier et al., 2001). In line with the two core functions of coping, a key and recurring distinction is between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping styles (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The problem-focused style represents the tendency to focus on the resolution of the stressful or challenging situation by directly trying to remove, evade, or diminish the stressor (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). It involves information-seeking behavior (Wilson, 1997; van Zuuren & Wolfs, 1991) and is geared towards doing something to change the source of stress (Carver, Scheier, &

Weintraub, 1989). Contrarily, the emotion-focused coping style represents a tendency to accept the stressor and the fact that it is to be endured, thus focusing on minimizing the negative emotions that result from it (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). A related coping framework makes a similar distinction between control coping, which involves a proactive approach to coping with the challenging situation, and escape coping, in which the focus is on escaping or avoiding the challenge (Latack & Havlovic, 1992). Overall, whereas problem-focused and control coping aim at changing the situation and solving the problem at hand, emotion-focused and escape coping aim at dealing with or avoiding the emotional symptoms that accompany the problem.

Problem- and emotion-focused coping styles have been regularly employed in research, including research in the organizational context (e.g., Fugate, Kinicki, & Prussia, 2008; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). In studies of employees' reactions to organizational change, for example, problem-focused coping predicted favorable attitudes towards the change (for a review see Vakola, Armenakis, & Oreg, 2013). In other research, linking coping style with reactions to performance feedback, problem-focused coping was positively, and emotion-focused coping negatively, associated with individuals' sense of confidence following failure feedback (Tan & Pang, 2012). Correspondingly, some have proposed that problem-focused coping will be positively, and emotion-focused coping negatively, associated with the likelihood of trying to correct those aspects on which feedback is negative (Johnson & Connelly, 2014). Similarly, problem-focused coping was positively associated with being proactive and taking initiative at work (Frese, Fay, Hilburger, Leng, & Tag, 1997). A passive form of emotion-focused coping was only weakly (and negatively) related to such initiative-taking (Frese et al., 1997).

Overall, both the definition of problem-focused coping and these relationships in the organizational context suggest that when dealing with organizational problems and challenges, leaders who tend to adopt a problem-focused coping style will be inclined to more directly confront challenges and take active steps to overcome them. Such active steps typically involve undertaking a course of action that is different than the current one for dealing with the problem at hand. As we described in our introduction, feedback provided through performance evaluations is a key junction at which leaders explicitly encounter the problems and challenges they need to address. By nature, feedback draws leaders' attention to the discrepancy between the current and desired organizational states. We argue that following such feedback, individual differences in leaders' problem-focused coping styles will manifest in differences in the degree to which organizational changes are initiated. We thus hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Problem-focused coping will be positively associated with leaders' initiation of change.

Beyond this hypothesized effect of problem-focused coping on the initiation of change, the definition of this coping style also suggests that the effect on change initiation will not necessarily be uniform across contexts. As part of their proactive approach towards problem-solving, problem-focused coping individuals seek out and incorporate information from their environment (Wilson, 1997; van Zuuren & Wolfs, 1991). Thus, in the process of determining how to deal with organizational challenges, problem-focused leaders will take into account the organizational environment. In other words, they incorporate feedback from the organizational environment as part of the solutions they adopt.

To conceptualize the organizational environment, we focus on the composition of employees' personal values (Schwartz, 1992) within the organization. Specifically, we focus on the degree to which organization members' collective values emphasize stability and maintaining the status quo. By collective values we are referring to the aggregation of members' personal values, which pertain to those aspects in life that they consider important (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992). The aggregation of individuals' personal values is often viewed as a meaningful attribute of the collective to which these individuals belong. In a model depicting forms of organizational values (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013), the collective values to which we refer are termed *shared values* and are distinct from other forms, such as espoused values, which pertain to the values that the organization's top leaders communicate, or aspirational values, which involve the ideal to which organization members aspire (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013).

This form of values is frequently used in research of national culture, which is typically assessed by aggregating individuals' personal values to the country level (e.g., Hofstede, 2001; Schwartz, 2006) and is often used as representing the underlying organizational values (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013). Accordingly, in several studies shared values are used for characterizing organizations through the aggregation of organization members' personal traits and values (Giberson, Resick, & Dickson, 2005). Moreover, in line with Schneider's Attraction-Selection-Attrition model (Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995), members' personal attributes often exhibit relative homogeneity, and organizations can be differentiated from each other on the basis of their members' traits and values (Giberson et al., 2005).

The moderating effects of collective values, and of related concepts, such as climate, have been demonstrated in many studies (e.g., Charbonnier-Voirin, El Akremi, & Vandenberghe, 2010; Chatman & Spataro, 2005; Erdogan, Liden, & Kraimer, 2006; Garrick et al., 2014). In several of these,

the organizational environment moderated relationships of leadership with employee and organizational outcomes (e.g., Charbonnier-Voirin et al., 2010; Erdogan & Bauer, 2010; Erdogan et al., 2006; Hofmann, Morgeson, & Gerras, 2003). For example, the relationship between leader-member exchange and safety-related citizenship behaviors was stronger in organizations characterized by a safety climate (Hofmann et al., 2003). In another study, a culture emphasizing respect for people was associated with stronger relationships between leader-member exchange and interactional justice (Erdogan et al., 2006).

More closely related to our present interest in the behavioral manifestation of leaders' personal characteristics, the relationship between leaders' openness to experience and their transformational leadership behaviors was positive in organizational environments that emphasized "maximum performance" but not in those characterized by "typical performance" (Ployhart, Lim, & Chan, 2001). In another study, the aggregation of team members' individual values moderated the effect of transformational leadership on team potency (i.e., generalized beliefs about the team's capabilities; Schaubroeck, Lam, & Cha, 2007). Finally, the relationship between leaders' openness to experience and their charismatic leadership behaviors was positive in dynamic organizational environments, but became negative in environments characterized as being stable (De Hoogh, Den Hartog, & Koopman, 2005). In other words, the emphasis of these latter environments on stability moderated the behavioral manifestation (i.e., charismatic behavior) of leaders' personal orientation (i.e., openness to experience).

This latter organizational environment, involving an emphasis on stability, is also relevant for our current interest in leaders' initiation of change. Organizations whose members highlight stability are those in which organization members appreciate safety and predictability and overall emphasize factors that have to do with a conservation of the status quo (e.g., conservation values; Schwartz et al., 2012). Such stability-emphasizing environments have been conceptualized and studied in both research of organizational culture (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991) and climate (Berson & Oreg, 2016). By definition, such environments would circumvent forces that drive change in the organization. Thus, similar to the moderating effects described above, organizational environments that are characterized by members' emphasis on stability may counter problem-focused leaders' inclinations to initiate change in the organization. Given the information-seeking tendencies involved in problem-focused coping, the stronger a leader's problem-focused coping style, the more likely will the stability emphasizing environment be incorporated into the leaders' decisions. We therefore expect that the degree to which organization members' emphasize stability

will moderate the positive effect that leaders' problem-focused coping style has on leaders' the initiation of change.

Hypothesis 2: Organization members' aggregated emphasis on stability will moderate the relationship between leaders' problem-focused coping and the initiation of changes in the organization such that the relationship between problem-focused coping and the initiation of changes will be weaker as the emphasis on stability is higher.

In contrast to problem-focused coping, the focus of individuals with an escape (Latack & Havlovic, 1992), or emotion-focused (Carver et al., 1989) coping style is not on solving the problem at hand, but rather on avoiding or dealing with the negative emotions (e.g., stress, frustration) that accompany the problem. They accept the problem as a given, and instead of dealing with the objective external environment, they focus on the emotional distress that the problem elicits. This is not to suggest that emotion-focused coping cannot be an adaptive or effective means of coping, but merely that it involves acceptance of the problem and thus a lower likelihood of trying to change it.

Accordingly, emotion-focused coping has been negatively linked with adopting a proactive approach to dealing with a variety of life problems (e.g., Lawson, Lyne, Bundy, & Harvey, 2007; Rochford & Blocker, 1991). For example, in a study of individuals' coping with health-related problems, emotion-focused coping was negatively associated with individuals' likelihood of proactively self-managing their problems (Lawson et al., 2007). In other research, emotion-focused coping was negatively associated with environmental activism (Rochford & Blocker, 1991). We therefore expect that when faced with organizational challenges, leaders oriented towards an emotion-focused coping style will be less likely to initiate changes in the organization as a means of coping with these challenges:

Hypothesis 3: Emotion-focused coping will be negatively associated with leaders' initiation of change.

As noted above, a key reason for hypothesizing that the organizational environment will moderate the effects of problem-focused coping had to do with the fact that problem-focused coping involves the degree to which individuals incorporate information from their environment (Wilson, 1997; van Zuuren & Wolfs, 1991), and accordingly take into account their organizational environment. In contrast, emotion-focused coping does not involve such scanning and consideration of the environment. When emotion-focused individuals do scan their environment, it is for gaining social support to assuage their distress, rather than seeking information as a means of

addressing the problem at hand. We therefore do not hypothesize a moderation effect for the environment's emphasis on stability.

METHOD

The Organizational Context

The study was conducted in the Israeli public school system. As part of the standard performance evaluation procedures for schools in Israel, the Ministry of Education administers annual standardized tests to students, along with questionnaires to students and teachers in each school. The evaluations provide feedback about the atmosphere in and performance of each school, with an emphasis on students' well-being as a key outcome. Our study was conducted in the context of this evaluation process, focusing on the degree to which school leaders (i.e., principals) initiated changes following their school's performance evaluations.

Our focus on schools has several advantages. First, gaining access to schools allowed us to reach a relatively large number of organizations, including an opportunity to collect psychographic information from organization leaders (i.e., principals). Because our focus is on the initiation of changes by leaders *of* organizations (as opposed to leaders *in* organizations), the school context was particularly beneficial. Although changes in schools are often initiated externally, by the Ministry of Education, Israeli school principals still have a significant degree of autonomy, leaving much room for school-specific changes that principals initiate, such as changes in personnel, policies, and aspects of the curriculum. Second, the relative uniformity in schools' structure, technology and organizational practices makes the organizations we studied more comparable than would be multiple organizations in other industries. Finally, whereas some research on the initiation of changes has been conducted in business organizations, much less is known about this topic in public organizations, such as schools, despite the growing interest in understanding organizational processes in public organizations in general and schools in particular (Bamberger & Pratt, 2010; Ouchi, Riordan, Lingle, & Porter, 2005).

Participants and Procedure

We collected data from principals and teachers in 109 public schools of the Jewish sector in Israel, in two points in time. Of the 109 schools we accessed, complete data from both principals and teachers were obtained from 87 schools. In 12 of these schools the principal was replaced during the study period, leaving us with a final data set of 75 schools—52 of which were elementary and the remaining 23 were secondary. After obtaining principals' agreement to collect data in the school, teachers were recruited in the teacher's

lounge, during their break. In Time 1, 1–9 months before the Ministry of Education's school performance reports were published, principals provided data about their coping style and teachers reported their conservation (i.e., stability-oriented) values. In Time 2, 4–6 months following the publication of the performance reports we collected data again from teachers, who provided data about the principals' initiation of changes since the Ministry of Education's publication of schools' performance reports.

We obtained data from the 75 principals and from 495 teachers in Time 1 and 409 teachers in Time 2. The number of teachers per school ranged from 3 to 13 in Time 1 ($Mean = 6.60$, $SD = 1.90$) and from 1 to 10 in Time 2 ($Mean = 5.45$, $SD = 2.21$).² Among principals, 82.4% were women and the average age was 47.66 ($SD = 7.08$). Principal average tenure was 5.82 years ($SD = 5.02$). Among teachers, in Time 1, 91.1% were women, the average age was 42.18 ($SD = 9.14$), and the average tenure was 16.13 ($SD = 9.60$). In Time 2, 90.6% of the teachers were women, the average age was 42.35 ($SD = 9.02$), and the average tenure was 16.13 ($SD = 9.60$).

Measures

Principals' Coping Style. Our measure of principals' coping style was based on Carver's (1997) 28-item short COPE scale. The scale includes 14 dimensions that can be classified into the two overarching categories of problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (e.g., Ben-Zur & Yagil, 2005; Gilbar & Ben-Zur, 2002). In some research, a further distinction is made within the emotion-focused category between engaged emotion-focused coping (i.e., the expression of emotions and receipt of support), and disengaged emotion-focused coping (also known as avoidant coping, Varescon, Leignel, Gérard, Aubourg, & Detilleux, 2013). Given our need to restrict the length of our questionnaires, we selected the items that seemed most relevant and of highest face validity for our context. Specifically, we selected four items for assessing problem-focused coping and four items for each of the two aspects (i.e., engaged and disengaged) of emotion-focused coping (see online Appendix S1 for the complete list of these items). Response options ranged from 1 (entirely disagree) to 6 (entirely agree). Cronbach alpha scores for the problem-focused and emotion-focused subscales in the present study were 0.65, and 0.66, respectively. Although these reliability scores are a bit lower than the

² In 3 of the 75 schools we obtained only the response of one teacher about the degree to which changes were initiated in the school. Given, however, that in the remaining schools there was a high level of agreement among teachers about this variable (as indicated in the high r_{wg} values, reported below), each teacher's report on this variable seems to closely represent the overall view of this variable in the school. Using a single teacher's report in a small number of cases is therefore still informative, even if not optimal.

accepted 0.7 value, they are within the expected range for this abbreviated scale (Carver, 1997).

To verify that the abbreviated scale still captures the intended content we administered it along with the original 28-item COPE scale to an independent sample of 147 MTurk workers. Cronbach alpha scores for the abbreviated problem-focused and emotion-focused scales were 0.71 and 0.58, respectively. The alpha scores for the corresponding scales from the original COPE scales were 0.76 and 0.75. The zero-order correlation between the two problem-focused coping scales was $r = 0.96$ ($p < .01$) and between the two emotion-focused scales was $r = 0.77$ ($p < .01$), thus providing evidence for the validity of the scale we used.

Organization Members' Emphasis on Stability. We measured organization members' emphasis on stability through the aggregation of teachers' conservation values, which capture individuals' preference for the status quo. Teachers' values were assessed with the abbreviated values scale used in Berson and Oreg (2016), based on Schwartz et al.'s (2012) PVQ5X scale. This abbreviated scale was found to correlate highly with the original values scales (Berson & Oreg, 2016). Scale items are brief descriptions of the goals and aspirations of hypothetical individuals, in response to which respondents are asked to rate the degree to which they see themselves as similar to the individual described. Responses are provided on a scale ranging from 1 (not like me at all) to 6 (very much like me). Conservation values in this scale are measured with 10 items (e.g., "Having order and stability in society is important to her/him", "It is important to her/him to maintain traditional values or beliefs"). Because value scores should reflect the emphasis an individual places on a given value relative to other values, we followed the accepted guidelines to ipsatize value scores by subtracting from them respondents' mean rating of all value items (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz et al., 2012). The reliability coefficient alpha for conservation in the present study was 0.81. To assess members' aggregated emphasis on stability we aggregated teachers' conservation values to the school level. Given that teachers within the same school should not necessarily agree on their values, their aggregation is based on an additive model, which does not require justification through aggregation indexes (Prewett, Brown, Goswami, & Christiansen, 2018). We nevertheless calculated aggregation indexes to get a feel of the degree of homogeneity in the emphasis on stability within schools and of the degree to which schools vary from each other in this emphasis. The ICC1 was 0.12, the ICC2 was 0.44 and the median r_{wg} (James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1993) was 0.95, indicating a high degree of agreement.

Principals' Initiation of Changes. We composed five items to assess the degree to which principals had initiated changes following the publication of schools' performance evaluations. Each of the items began with the opening

“Following the performance evaluations, the principal initiated...”. The five items were “changes at school”, “changes to policies at school”, “organizational changes at school”, “changes to the school’s staff”, and “changes to the school’s curriculum”. Response options ranged from 1 (entirely disagree) to 6 (entirely agree). The reliability coefficient alpha for the scale was 0.88. We calculated aggregation indexes for teachers’ reports as a means of assessing the degree agreement in teachers’ perceptions. Such agreement could be considered as evidence for the degree to which teachers’ reports reflect principals’ actual initiation of changes. The ICC1 was 0.13, the ICC2 was 0.48, and the median r_{wg} (James et al., 1993) was 0.89. Although the ICC2 was somewhat low, such magnitudes can be expected for smaller groups ($n \approx 5$; Bliese, 1998; Klein & Kozlowski, 2000), and both the ICC1 and the median r_{wg} indicate a sufficient level of agreement and justify aggregation. (James, 1982; James et al., 1993).

Control Variables. Given the skewed distribution of gender among school principals and of type of school (i.e., elementary versus secondary) we included *principals’ gender* and *school type* as control variables in our analyses. Another important reason to control for school type is the difference in the governance and structures of elementary and secondary schools in Israel, which would also be related to the likelihood that principals will initiate changes.

In addition, the likelihood that managers will initiate changes in their organizations depends, among other things, on the degree to which managers identify problems in their schools that need to be remedied. Although some discrepancies between present and required performance are likely to exist even among high-performing schools, the degree of these discrepancies is nevertheless linked with the need to initiate changes. Rather than the objective state of the school, indicated by the performance evaluation, it is principals’ subjective perception of this state that should predict principals’ actions following the feedback. We therefore composed a scale, comprising five items, to assess *principals’ perceptions of the school’s state*. Sample items are “Students report a good atmosphere among their peers” and “Students feel well at school” (see online Appendix S2 for the list of all items). Response options for the scale ranged from 1 (doesn’t describe my school at all) to 6 (very much describes my school). Its internal reliability score was 0.82. To test the scale’s validity, we tested the relationship between scale scores and schoolchildren’s reports of their well-being at school, aggregated to the school level, which we obtained from the Ministry of Education’s performance evaluation reports. In support of the validity of the scale we developed, the relationship was positive and significant ($r = 0.39, p < .01$).³

³ As a test of the robustness of our findings, we also used the well-being scores obtained from the Ministry of Education as a control, instead of principals’ subjective assessment. The results remained intact.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics of and correlations among study variables are presented in Table 1. To test our hypotheses we ran a series of multiple regression analyses. We first ran an analysis in which we included only the control variables to predict our dependent variable (indicated as Model 1 in Table 2). To test Hypotheses 1 and 3 we then ran a second analysis in which we added the two coping styles (Model 2 in Table 2). Finally, we used template 1 of Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro for SPSS to test the moderated effect hypothesized in Hypothesis 2 (indicated in Model 3 in Table 2). As can be seen in Model 2 of Table 2, although the effect of problem-focused coping on the initiation of changes was positive, it was not statistically significant. Hypothesis 1 was thus not supported. With respect to Hypothesis 3, the effect of emotion-focused coping on the initiation of changes was, as hypothesized, negative and significant with a one-tailed test. In testing Hypothesis 2, as can be seen in Model 3 of Table 2, the interaction between problem-focused coping and schools' emphasis on stability was statistically significant, as hypothesized. To interpret the interaction effect, we plotted the relationship between principals' problem-focused coping and the initiation of changes across conditions of a low versus high emphasis on stability (see Figure 1). As can be seen in the figure, the relationship was positive and significant ($B = 0.52$, [s.e. = 0.20], $p = .011$) only when the emphasis on stability was low. The high-conservation slope was not significant. Our results therefore support Hypothesis 2.

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics of and Correlations among Study Variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
1. Principals' gender (1 = male; 2 = female)	1.82	.38	–					
2. School type (0 = elementary; 1 = secondary)	.31	.46	–.38**	–				
3. Principals' perception of positive school atmosphere	5.01	.61	.14	–.49**	–			
4. Problem-focused coping	4.74	.62	.07	–.26*	.26*	–		
5. Emotion-focused coping	3.10	.64	.26*	–.12	.05	.15	–	
6. Members' stability emphasis	.27	.20	–.33**	.21	–.08	–.08	–.11	–
7. Principals' initiation of changes	3.55	.62	.05	–.24*	–.06	.16	–.16	.07

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 2
Results of Regression Analyses Predicting Principals' Initiation of Changes

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coefficient	s.e.	Coefficient	s.e.	Coefficient	s.e.
<i>Controls</i>						
Principals' gender	-.11	.20	-.02	.20	.11	.21
School type (elementary/ secondary)	-.48*	.19	-.44*	.19	-.46*	.18
Positive school atmosphere	-.24 [†]	.13	-.27*	.13	-.30*	.13
<i>Coping styles</i>						
Problem-focused coping			.17	.12	.22 [†]	.12
Emotion-focused coping			-.20 [†]	.11	-.18 [†]	.12
<i>Moderation variables</i>						
Members' emphasis on stability					.35	.36
Problem-focused coping stability emphasis interaction					-1.50*	.73
Total R ²	.09		.15		.22	

[†] $p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

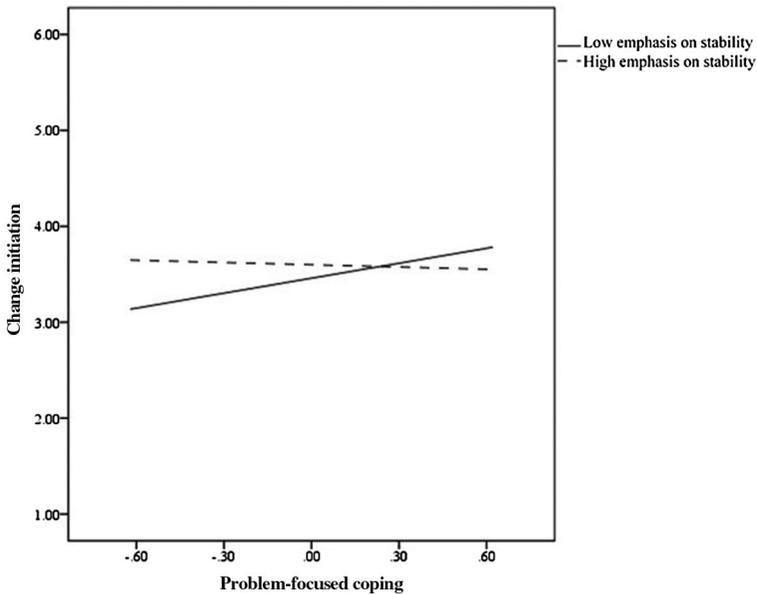


FIGURE 1. The relationship between problem-focused coping and change initiation across conditions of a low versus high emphasis on stability

DISCUSSION

Our aim in this study was to better understand what drives leaders' initiation of changes in their organizations. We complement research examining change recipients' behavior by turning our focus to change agents' behavior. Relative to the research on change recipients, very little consideration has been given to the psychological underpinnings of change agents' behavior. We adopted a psychological perspective, focusing on the roles of leaders' coping style and organization members' emphasis on stability. We thus integrate dispositional perspectives of leadership with approaches that emphasize the organizational context. We found some support for the negative effect of leaders' emotion-focused coping and for the interactive effect of leaders' problem-focused coping and the organization's emphasis on stability. Specifically, we found that the combination of a leader with a problem-focused style and an organizational environment that does not emphasize stability, increases the likelihood that the leader will initiate changes in the organization. The negative effect of emotion-focused coping on the initiation of change corresponds with the negative effects of passive and avoidant leadership approaches, such as *laissez-faire* leadership (Bass, 2008). To integrate these literatures, future research can directly and more broadly consider the relationship between leaders' coping styles and leadership behaviors.

Our hypothesis about the main effect of problem-focused coping, was not supported. The significant interaction with members' emphasis on stability demonstrates that to predict the initiation of changes, it is not enough to know leaders' problem-focused coping-style, and one should also consider the organizational environment within which leaders lead. When devising solutions to organizational challenges, problem-focused leaders will take into account their environment's emphasis on stability, which may attenuate their predisposition to initiate changes. In other words, problem-focused leaders may, to begin with, refrain from initiating changes in environments that they identify as stability-oriented.

Overall, our findings shed light on some of the psychological processes that underlie change agents' choices. Much of the research from leaders' perspective on organizational change has undertaken a macro, strategic, orientation, with little consideration of the micro, psychological, mechanisms that underlie change leaders' actions. Correspondingly, although there is ample psychologically oriented research on organizational change, its focus has been on change recipients rather than change leaders. By providing a psychological analysis of a key change agent behavior, our findings highlight one of the links between leadership and change that have been only infrequently studied (Oreg & Berson, 2019).

In addition, our findings further demonstrate the joint contribution of personal and contextual factors in explaining leaders' behavior (e.g., De Hoogh et al., 2005; Oreg & Berson, 2015; Ployhart et al., 2001). By focusing on leaders' coping styles we broaden the scope of personal characteristics through which leaders' behavior has been explained. Given their centrality for explaining individuals' coping with challenges, coping styles are particularly useful for predicting managerial behavior and are nevertheless extremely underutilized in leadership research. We therefore contribute to the literature by extending the coping literature to yet another realm.

Our findings also extend the coping literature in at least two other directions. First, we answer recurring calls to consider the contextual factors that may facilitate or stymie the effects of coping styles. The moderating effect of an emphasis on stability demonstrates the effect of one such contextual factor. Other contextual factors, such as other organization members' values (e.g., openness to change, self-transcendence) may interact with leaders' coping styles to yield other leader choices and actions. Second, our research joins and strengthens research based on a broader view of coping as a general style of dealing with challenges, rather than a narrower and more specific style of handling stress (e.g., Lapierre & Allen, 2006; Rotondo & Kincaid, 2008; Scheier et al., 2001). Moreover, like other dispositional constructs (e.g., regulatory focus, Higgins, 1998), coping styles have a situational component that pertains to the fluctuations in individuals' orientation over time and across contexts. Although our focus in the present study was on the chronic, dispositional component, fluctuations in individuals' coping style are likely to explain additional variance in leaders' choice to initiate changes following performance feedback. These can be explicitly addressed in future research.

Our findings also extend the literature on organizational change by focusing on the initiation of changes. Whereas psychological perspectives of organizational change tend to focus on recipients' responses to change (for reviews see Oreg, Vakola, & Armenakis, 2011; Rafferty, Jimmieson, & Armenakis, 2013), our focus in the present study was on the change agent. Our study therefore complements psychological explanations of reactions to change with psychological explanations of the process through which change is initiated to begin with. Just like psychological research of reactions to change provided a more complex depiction of change recipients' responses to change, our present investigation provides a more complex and realistic depiction of the process through which change agents initiate changes.

Alongside our study's contributions, its external validity is so far limited to the non-business setting. Although our conceptual framework should just as well hold for business organizations, it remains to be empirically tested whether our effects replicate in such settings. In addition, although our

assessment of leaders' initiation of change is based on the shared perceptions of organization members, through which we aimed at capturing the actual degree to which changes were initiated, it would be good to replicate our findings with other measures of the amount of change that leaders had initiated in the organization, such as in management meeting protocols. Another limitation of our study has to do with the representativeness of the teachers in our sample. Because teachers were sampled from among those available in the teachers' lounge, we cannot be sure about the degree to which they represent the overall teacher body, nor can we assess the participation rate. That said, we have no reason to suspect that the teachers in our sample differ in their stability values from the other teachers in the school.

It would also be of value to consider at greater depth the various factors that feed into leaders' choice to initiate change. Research could examine the degree to which the initiation change is a manifestation of external pressure, the leaders' orientation towards the organization (e.g., her/his organizational commitment), or personal proactivity. Similarly, our study of change initiation was conducted in the specific context of responses to external performance evaluations. The process of spontaneously initiating change, outside the context of formal evaluations, may be somewhat different and involve other or additional predictors that have to do more directly with leaders' proactivity (Crant, 1996), regulatory focus (Higgins, 1998) and dispositional orientation towards change (Oreg, 2003). Yet another direction for future investigation is to consider the role of the change content and expected outcomes in shaping its initiation. Although we believe that our conceptual framework is relevant for predicting the initiation of change across types of change, certainly additional factors may be relevant for explaining specific changes. For example, leaders' technological savvy would be relevant for predicting the initiation of technological change, whereas leaders' benevolence values may be relevant for predicting changes aimed at creating a more supportive organizational atmosphere.

Finally, although the data support our conceptual framework about the causal relationship between leaders' coping style and their initiation of change, their non-experimental nature prevents us from conclusively establishing causality. Nevertheless, the reverse causality, whereby leaders' initiation of change yields a problem-focused style seems less plausible, in particular given that our measure of coping style preceded the measure of change initiation by several months.

From a practical perspective, our findings about the role of coping style has implications for manager selection and placement. In organizations in which the initiation of change is a key requirement for effectively managing the organization, the selection of individuals who are high on problem-focused coping and low on emotion-focused coping, may be advantageous. With

respect to our finding about the moderating role of the emphasis of stability, this finding points to the boundaries within which leaders will initiate change. Ultimately, the initiation of change will depend on both leaders' personal coping style and the degree to which the organizational environment is open to changes. Future research may consider the means through which leaders could initiate changes even in environments that are relatively conservative. Our findings may also be relevant for leadership training and development programs in which an emphasis on problem-focused coping could be included in those organizations in which changes may need to be frequently initiated for dealing with internal and external challenges.

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