



Mindful leadership: mindfulness as a new antecedent of destructive and transformational leadership behavior

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Abstract

Purpose: While previous research has well-examined the stress reducing effects of mindfulness, much less is known, evidentially, about the impact that it might have on working behavior, particularly in the context of leadership. Against this background, the goal of our study was to examine whether mindfulness influences leadership behavior.

Design: To answer this question, we used a two-source survey study consisting of 60 teams, examining trait mindfulness of leaders via self-evaluation and their leadership behavior through the eyes of their subordinates. To analyze the given data, we conducted regression analyses.

Results: Our findings confirmed the hypothesized relationships. We found a negative relationship between leaders' mindfulness and destructive leadership, as well as a positive one between leaders' mindfulness and transformational leadership.

Implications: The results of our study underline the importance of mindfulness as a potential tool to optimize leadership quality. In order to prevent destructive and promote transformational leadership, organizations should help to develop leaders' mindfulness capacities.

Keywords Mindfulness · Destructive leadership · Transformational leadership

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Achtsame Führung: Der Grad der Achtsamkeit als Prädiktor für destruktive und transformationale Führung

Zusammenfassung

Zweck: Während eine Vielzahl von Studien die stressmindernden Effekte von Achtsamkeit belegen, wissen wir noch wenig darüber, welchen Einfluss sie darüber hinaus im Arbeitskontext, insbesondere im Führungskontext mit sich bringt. Vor diesem Hintergrund widmen wir uns der Frage, ob Achtsamkeit bestimmtes Führungsverhalten beeinflussen kann.

Design: Wir befragten 60 Teams, wobei der Grad der Achtsamkeit von den Führungskräften in der Selbst-Perspektive und deren Führungsverhalten durch die Mitarbeitenden in der Fremdperspektive bewertet wurde. Um die Daten zu analysieren verwendeten wir Regressionsanalysen.

Ergebnisse: Unsere Ergebnisse bestätigten die von uns vermuteten Zusammenhänge. Es zeigte sich, dass achtsamere Führungskräfte weniger destruktiv und mehr transformational-führend von ihren Mitarbeitenden wahrgenommen werden.

Implikationen: Die Ergebnisse unserer Studie untermauern die Bedeutsamkeit von Achtsamkeit als potenzielles Werkzeug um Führungsverhalten zu verbessern. Organisationen sollten den Grad der Achtsamkeit ihrer Führungskräfte erhöhen, um dessen destruktive Führungsverhaltensweisen zu verringern und transformationale Führung zu fördern.

Schlüsselwörter Achtsamkeit · Destruktive Führung · Transformationale Führung

1 Introduction

Mindfulness is understood as a psychological state of consciousness in which individuals pay attention to the present moment with an accepting and nonjudgmental attitude (Bishop et al. 2004; Brown et al. 2007). Research on this topic is blossoming in recent years. There is increasing empirical evidence underscoring the beneficial effect of mindfulness on several important aspects of human life (Baer 2003). While researchers have long been keen on understanding how mindfulness may be developed through interventions (Chiesa and Serretti 2009), a complementary trait perspective is viewing mindfulness as a natural state of mind that differs between individuals (Brown and Ryan 2003). This conceptualization of trait mindfulness has been shown to be fruitful especially regarding the application of mindfulness to the organizational context. Trait mindfulness is important for work because it is associated with employee well-being and performance (Brown and Ryan 2003; Hülsheger et al. 2013; Shao and Skarlicki 2009; Weinstein et al. 2009).

Another aspect that we know is an important driver of employee work-related well-being and performance is leadership. Decades of research in organizational psychology have yielded in a theoretically and empirically well-rounded understanding of effective and destructive leadership styles (Yukl 2010). At the forefront of effective leadership, transformational leadership captures behaviors such as communicating an inspiring vision, fostering team work, and providing individualized support that are designed to motivate followers to perform “beyond expectations” (Bass 1985). Several meta-analyses underscore the beneficial impact of transformational leadership on a plethora of employee outcomes (Judge and Piccolo 2004; Sturm et al. 2011).

Since the early 2000s, researchers are also increasingly interested in investigating the destructive side of leadership. Destructive leadership behaviors such as humiliating subordinates, displaying hostility and aggression, or taking credit for follower work have a detrimental effect on followers’ attitudes and behaviors at work (Schyns and Schilling 2013).

While mindfulness and leadership are both important for organizational life, research combining both fields is surprisingly scarce. As leadership research mainly focuses on outcomes of leadership, we still have a rather limited understanding regarding what makes a leader transformational or destructive (Bono and Judge 2004). Here, mindfulness may play an important role. There is preliminary indication that highly mindful leaders are more effective leaders compared to their lesser counterparts. Recent studies by Reb et al. (2014) and Pinck and Sonnentag (2017) revealed a positive relationship between leader mindfulness and follower outcomes. Still, what remains less clear is whether this may also be due to improved positive and decreased negative leadership driven by mindfulness. Accordingly, Reb et al. (2014) and Pinck and Sonnentag (2017) call for future research to link trait mindfulness with different traditional leadership concepts. This is where our study is positioned.

The aim of the present study is to test trait mindfulness’s predictive validity regarding the emergence of transformational and destructive leadership. In so doing, this study contributes to the literature in several important ways. We refine existing findings regarding the mindfulness of leaders by establishing a link with specific leadership styles covering both positive and negative forms of leadership. This is theoretically important as through this, we contribute to research on leadership disposition. Practically this is relevant as it would provide organizations and leaders with an incentive to invest in mindfulness.

2 Theory and hypotheses development

2.1 Leaders' mindfulness and destructive leadership

We define destructive leadership behavior in line with Tepper's definition of *Abusive Supervision* as the "subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained displays of hostile verbal or non-verbal behavior, excluding physical contact" (Tepper 2000, p. 178). There is strong empirical evidence regarding the detrimental effects of destructive leadership on individuals and organizations (Schyns and Schilling 2013). Leaders' stress has been recognized as the most predominant predictor for showing such destructive behaviors (Zhang and Bednall 2016). Looking at the main effect mindfulness exhibits, it might represent a resource of human capacity to lead less destructive, because there is meta-analytical evidence that mindfulness decreases stress in healthy subjects (Chiesa and Serretti 2009). Being more present in the here and now makes you wonder or worry less about the past or the future, which diminishes your level of stress. Glomb et al. (2011) approved this assumption by stating that mindfulness has the ability to promote resiliency in the work context. In regard to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) stress is defined as the psychological response to situations, circumstances or events that exceed ones' resources and therefore are perceived as threats. Brown et al. (2008) emphasize that mindfulness leads to less defensive reactions as a response to social threats. Hence, mindfulness could prevent leaders to react inappropriately towards their subordinates as a response to social threats or stressful situations.

According to ego-depletion theory, self-regulatory resources are required to suppress behavioral responses and defensive reactions in stressful situations (e.g. hostility) (Baumeister et al. 2016). Mindfulness has been associated with greater awareness, which promotes the ability to regulate one's feelings (Baer et al. 2004; Brown and Ryan 2003). The accepting and non-judgmental state of mind, within the present moment, hinders mindful individuals to react affectively to certain circumstances. Liang et al. (2016) examined this ability concerning the emergence of abusive supervision. They noted, if leaders associate certain negative emotions (e.g. anger, irritation or scorn) with subordinates, they are more likely to engage in hostile behavior towards them. Additionally, they proved trait mindfulness as a self-control mechanism reducing this relationship. Closely related to this idea, Jimenez et al. (2010) examined mindfulness as a possible affect regulatory mechanism, noting that higher mood regulation expectancies were related to higher levels of mindfulness. Hence, being open, nonjudgmental and aware of what is happening in the present moment can regulate negative emotions and moods of leaders

which could buffer the effect of acting abusive towards their subordinates. Furthermore, Heppner et al. (2008) provided empirical evidence for mindfulness reducing aggression and hostility in a dispositional and situational manner.

Glomb et al. (2011) as well as Brown et al. (2007) highlight another essential benefit of mindfulness in the workplace and in general: A better quality of relationships and an enhancement of social interactions. Common relationship-based approaches to leadership have often been associated with Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory (Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995). A high-quality LMX in work relationships is characterized by support, loyalty, trust, and commitment (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005; Uhl-Bien and Maslyn 2003) and an increase of job satisfaction (Gerstner and Day 1997; Martin et al. 2005; Schriesheim et al. 1999) or performance (Gerstner and Day 1997; Schriesheim et al. 1999). As Xu et al. (2012) found out, LMX fully mediates the negative effects of abusive supervision on employees' work behavior such as a task performance and specific organizational citizenship behavior towards the organization and individuals. In regard to the following striking behaviors of destructive leaders, disloyalty, non-supportiveness and disrespect, a low-quality LMX is expected as well as a weak capacity of being empathic as a leader (Mackey et al. 2017). Mahsud et al. (2010) established the link between leaders' empathy and a higher quality LMX implicating that leaders' empathy should be included in leadership development programs. Meta-analytical evidence that mindfulness increases empathy has been given by Chiesa and Serretti (2009). A higher level of empathy could help leaders to empathize with their subordinates, understand their needs and emotions, which could promote their quality of relationship through a better LMX and decrease leaders' acting in abusive ways.

In line with research stated above, we propose leaders' trait mindfulness as a well-rounded resource of human capacity to lead less destructive.

Hypothesis 1 Leaders' mindfulness is negatively related to destructive leadership.

2.2 Leaders' mindfulness and transformational leadership

Through an appropriate mix of leading as a role model, providing an appealing vision for the future, individual support, intellectual stimulation as well as fostering team goals and expecting an ambitious performance (Heinitz and Rowold 2007; Podsakoff et al. 1990), "transformational leaders offer a purpose that transcends short-term goals and focuses on higher order intrinsic needs" (Judge and Piccolo 2004, p. 755). In order to meet these intrinsic needs of subordinates and to address them in an appealing way, it seems

crucial to have emotional competencies at one's disposal. Furthermore, Ashkanasy and Tse (2000) describe a transformational leader as a manager of his own and subordinates' emotions, suggesting that emotional abilities are vital. Following this notion, Ashkanasy et al. (2002) highlight *emotional self-awareness, sensitivity towards subordinates' emotional needs* and *empathy* as the core competencies a transformational leader needs to have.

The definition of mindfulness itself implicates the term *awareness* (Brown and Ryan 2003). Indeed, the ability to see the self as it is in the present moment makes a key component of it. In addition to that, Walach et al. (2006) provided evidence for the strong relation between mindfulness and self-awareness. In line with Glomb et al. (2011), it is difficult for leaders to understand followers' work-related perspectives and emotional processes if they are unaware of their own. Rubin et al. (2005) provide evidence that leaders' emotion recognition ability, assessed through their ability to identify different emotions in multiple photographs of adult facial expression, positively predicted transformational leadership behavior. To involve the concept of mindfulness, Brown et al. (2007) state that "(...) mindfulness concerns a clear awareness of one's inner and outer worlds, including thoughts, emotions, sensations, actions, or surroundings (...)." To sum up, being attentive, as a first step, to what is occurring emotionally in one's outer world and being able to identify these emotions, as a next step, enables a leader to be sensitive towards subordinates' emotional needs which is a core competency of transformational leadership behavior.

Skinner and Spurgeon (2005) provided evidence for empathy (empathic concern, perspective taking & empathic matching in particular) being positively related to transformational leadership behavior. As noted earlier, mindfulness increases empathy (Chiesa and Serretti 2009). "In essence, nonjudgmental, present-moment awareness of one's own internal thoughts facilitates empathy for the internal states of others" (Glomb et al. 2011, p. 132) which means that the ability of being self-aware promotes the one of being empathic. Leaders high on trait mindfulness should be well equipped to empathize with followers and, thus, are likely to engage in transformational leadership behavior.

Underlining our previous reasoning, Pinck and Sonnentag (2017) provided first empirical evidence that leader's mindfulness is positively related to transformational leadership ($r=0.43$, $p<0.01$). However, as they captured transformational leadership via leader self-ratings their findings should be considered cautiously given the ongoing discourse about the validity of leader self-ratings of leadership (Atwater and Yammarino 1992).

Following the above line of reasoning, we expect leader trait mindfulness to be positively related to transformational leadership behavior.

Hypothesis 2 Leaders' mindfulness is positively related to transformational leadership.

3 Method

3.1 Procedure

Participants were recruited by research assistants collecting data through individual contacts and announcements. After explaining the intent of the research project and assuring confidentiality, a link was sent to the voluntary participants. A web-based survey enabled the participants to choose his/her role (leader vs. subordinate) right after opening the link, which led them to the appropriate questionnaire. Leaders rated their own level of mindfulness, while subordinates rated their leaders' leadership behavior: transformational and destructive leadership behavior. We matched the respective leader and subordinates to individual teams by using anonymous codes.

3.2 Sample

The sample consisted of 60 teams, each including one leader and two to five subordinates. In total, 244 respondents from different German organizations participated—184 respondents were subordinates and sixty were leaders (on average 3.07 subordinate ratings per leader). The leaders' mean age was 43 years ($SD=12.52$), whereas 38% were female. The subordinates (53% female) had a mean age of 32 years ($SD=11.38$), 60% worked fulltime and spent between 4 and 36h per week in direct contact with the leader ($M=21.15$; $SD=12.95$).

3.3 Measures

All measures were adapted versions of validated questionnaires.

Destructive and transformational leadership behavior Destructive as well as transformational leadership behavior was assessed with the use of Rowold and Poethke's (2017) measurement of leadership behavior, called *Fragebogen zur Integrativen Führung (FIF)*. The *FIF* has been validated considerably, showing convergent validity of transformational leadership behavior correlating with Podsakoff et al.'s (1990) Transformational Leadership Inventory (German validated version of Heinitz and Rowold 2007; Krüger et al. 2011) and convergent validity of destructive leadership behavior through a high correlation to Tepper's (2000) measure of abusive supervision. Additionally, the *FIF* showed good internal consistency in different samples before (Rowold and Poethke 2017). On the one hand, four

Table 1 Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities, and Correlations

Construct	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Leader age	43.35	12.52	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
2. Leader sex	1.62	0.49	–0.01	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
3. Leader mindfulness	4.22	0.91	0.01	–0.04	(0.88)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
4. Destructive leadership	1.66	0.57	0.06	–0.06	–0.26*	(0.88)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
5. Transformational leadership (TL)	3.51	0.66	–0.13	–0.09	0.26*	–0.41**	(0.95)	–	–	–	–	–	–
6. TL—Innovation	3.61	0.66	–0.17	–0.13	0.25*	–0.29*	0.91**	(0.79)	–	–	–	–	–
7. TL—Team spirit	3.57	0.80	–0.31*	–0.15	0.24	–0.59**	0.83**	0.71**	(0.91)	–	–	–	–
8. TL—Performance development	3.52	0.73	–0.02	0.09	0.14	–0.11	0.84**	0.76**	0.55**	(0.89)	–	–	–
9. TL—focus on individuality	3.41	0.74	0.06	–0.07	0.26*	–0.35*	0.81**	0.69**	0.62**	0.56**	(0.83)	–	–
10. TL—Vision	3.26	0.80	–0.14	–0.02	0.27*	–0.34**	0.94**	0.84**	0.76**	0.76**	0.71**	(0.87)	–
11. TL—Role modeling	3.66	0.81	–0.06	–0.05	0.19	–0.42*	0.90**	0.77**	0.69**	0.77**	0.63**	0.81**	(0.89)

N=60. Leader provided self-rating on mindfulness; followers rated destructive and transformational leadership. Cronbach's α are indicated on the diagonal

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

items indicated the destructive behavior of the leaders, “My supervisor takes his/her emotions (anger, frustration) out on me.” as an exemplary item. On the other hand, transformational leadership behavior was assessed by 24 items reflecting on the following six facets and exemplary items: Innovation (“My supervisor shows new ways to interpret tasks and goals.”); team spirit (“... appeals to the team spirit.”); performance development (“... explains, why best performance is required.”); focus of individuality (“... knows my individual interests and personal goals.”); vision (“... communicates his/her vision of long-term opportunities, tasks and goals in an enthusiastic.”); role modeling (“... sets an example of what he/she prioritizes his/herself.”). Subordinates agreed to these items on a 5-point Likert-scale from 1 (“do not agree at all”) to 5 (“do completely agree”). Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for the destructive leadership scale was 0.88 and 0.95 for the transformational leadership scale. As our research model of mindfulness and leadership operates at the echelon of the leader we aggregated all follower ratings to the leader-level.

Mindfulness Mindfulness was measured with the German version of the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown and Ryan 2003) by Michalak et al. (2008). All 15 items are negatively formulated indicating mindlessness. Leaders rated their frequency of not being attentive to, and aware of, present moments, events or experiences on a 6-point Likert-scale from 1 (“almost always”) to 6 (“almost never”). A sample item was “I rush through activities with-

out being really attentive to them.” Therefore, a high score reflects a high level of trait mindfulness. Cronbach's alpha was 0.88.

Data analysis We tested our hypotheses using stepwise regression analyses. We controlled for leader sex and age as there is evidence that they affect leadership and perceptions of leadership (Paustian-Underdahl et al. 2014; Zacher et al. 2011).

4 Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics, reliability scores, and correlations among study variables.

The results for the regression analyses are depicted in Table 2. In Hypothesis 1, we expected a negative relationship between leader mindfulness and destructive leadership. In full support of this, leaders' mindfulness negatively predicted destructive leadership above and beyond the control variables of leaders' age and sex ($\beta = -0.26$, $p < 0.05$).

In Hypothesis 2, we posited a positive relationship between leader mindfulness and transformational leadership. Again, we found the expected relationship between both variables ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.05$), lending full support also for Hypothesis 2.

In an additional step of our analyses, we also estimated the correlations between leader mindfulness and the six sub dimensions of transformational leadership. Mindful-

Table 2 Regression Analyses For Leader Mindfulness Predicting Destructive and Transformational Leadership

Parameter	Destructive leadership				Transformational leadership			
	Step 1		Step 2		Step 1		Step 2	
	Beta	(SE)	Beta	(SE)	Beta	(SE)	Beta	(SE)
Leader age	0.06	(0.01)	0.06	(0.01)	-0.13	(0.01)	-0.13	(0.01)
Leader sex	-0.06	(0.15)	-0.07	(0.15)	-0.10	(0.18)	-0.08	(0.17)
Leader mindfulness			-0.26*	(0.08)	-	-	0.26*	(0.09)
R ²	0.01		0.08		-		0.09	
ΔR^2	-		0.07		-		0.07	

N = 60. Coding of leader sex: 1 = female, 2 = male

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

ness was positively related to the dimensions of innovation ($r = 0.25$, $p < 0.05$), focus on individuality ($r = 0.26$, $p < 0.05$), and vision ($r = 0.27$, $p < 0.05$) while being unrelated to the dimensions of team spirit ($r = 0.24$, *ns*), performance development ($r = 0.14$, *ns*), and role modeling ($r = 0.19$, *ns*).

5 Discussion

The aim of the present study was to establish a link between leaders' trait mindfulness and specific leadership behaviors, namely destructive and transformational. Our analyses revealed the expected relationships among the study variables; trait mindfulness was negatively related to destructive leadership and positively related to transformational leadership. In other words, highly mindful leaders are better equipped to succeed in their leadership role compared to their less mindful counterparts. With this study we extend theory on mindfulness in the organizational setting. While Reb et al. (2014) found a positive relationship between leader mindfulness and follower well-being, we complement this line of research by showing that trait mindfulness changes the way followers view their leaders in terms of leadership behaviors.

Given that, our study is the first that explicitly links mindfulness to specific leadership styles. We additionally estimated bivariate correlations between leader mindfulness and transformational leadership's facets (Table 1) to gain a more nuanced understanding of what aspects of transformational leadership are (not) affected by a leader's open, nonjudgmental, present moment-focused state of mind. Mindfulness was only positively related to the facets of innovation, focus on individuality, and vision. This is interesting as this indicates that mindfulness in particular affects leadership dimensions that are directed towards followers as individuals (innovation and focus on individuality) (Kark and Shamir 2002) compared to behaviors that are addressed to the team as a whole (e.g. team spirit). This is in line with our rationale mainly drawing on increased empathy resulting from mindfulness. Furthermore,

the positive relationship between mindfulness and transformational leadership's facet of vision likely signals that mindfulness is relevant for establishing a positive vision for the future—the core of transformational leadership theory (Bass 1985)—that adequately fits characteristics of the team and its members.

5.1 Limitations and future research

There are some limitations that should be considered when interpreting our results. Our cross-sectional study does not allow for inferring causal relationships. Regarding our theoretical argumentation leader mindfulness appears more likely to predict leadership behaviors than vice versa. Still, the alternative perspective of leadership predicting mindfulness may be intriguing when considering state mindfulness as opposed to our perspective to trait mindfulness. For instance, a recent study by Lin et al. (2016) showed that leadership comes at a cost for leaders as it depletes their cognitive resources. Immediately after engaging in leadership behavior leaders are likely to be exhausted which diminishes their capacity to be nonjudgmental, attentive and aware of present moments. This perspective may pave the way for future research.

Through our study, we established the link between mindfulness of leaders and specific leadership styles, indicating that mindful leaders show less destructive and more transformational behavior. Still, what remains unknown is whether there are single or multiple facets of mindfulness that affect this leadership behavior, in particular. An interesting direction for future research is to take a closer look and investigate the facets of mindfulness concerning their influence on leadership behavior (Baer et al. 2006; Brown and Ryan 2003). Is it the higher non-judgmental state of mind, the increased acting with awareness, or the non-reactivity that influences the specific leadership behaviors the most?

Moreover, in our study, we strongly relied on constructs that come with mindfulness such as empathy and a high-quality LMX, as well as emotion regulation to undergird the argumentation of how mindfulness may affect leader-

ship behavior. Future research should examine the mediating roles of such constructs to shed light on the *black box* between mindfulness and leadership.

Finally, there may also be further leadership styles beyond destructive and transformational leadership to be influenced by leader mindfulness. Here, especially the constructs of authentic leadership (Chan et al. 2005) with a focus on self-awareness and ethical leadership with its nonjudgmental perspective appear promising for mindfulness research going forward (Brown et al. 2005).

5.2 Implications for organizational practice

Given the beneficial effects of mindfulness in a plethora of ways, organizations may be incentivized to implement mindfulness of employees across hierarchical levels. Based on our study's perspective, we believe that organizational leaders may be the driving force behind that purpose. There are multiple ways to tackle this issue. First, organizations should be motivated to assess trait mindfulness up front when recruiting new leaders. Furthermore, organizations should invest in increasing their leaders' state mindfulness to promote their leadership quality. As state mindfulness tends to be substantially correlated with trait mindfulness ($r=0.56$, Hülsheger et al. 2013; $r=0.61$, Hülsheger et al. 2014), it is feasible that through such interventions part of the beneficial effects of trait mindfulness revealed on our study may be realized. Specific mindfulness-based interventions should be implemented in leadership development programs. We suggest a combination of mindfulness-based stress reduction, as an effective method to reduce stress (Chiesa and Serretti 2009), and a cognitive-behavioral program to complement an ideal intervention for work-related stress (Van der Klink et al. 2001; Richardson and Rothstein 2008). Additionally, transfer to individual daily routines and challenging situations of the leaders within their leadership tasks should be included. Especially the highest-level supervisors, who act as role models for next level leaders and employees should undergo such program. This way, spillover effects of destructive leadership can be prevented and transformational leadership behavior can be promoted through social learning theory in the whole organization. In other words, leader mindfulness paves the way for individuals across the organization to be nonjudgmental, self-aware, and present in the moment.

6 Conclusion

The aim of the study was to investigate the role of leaders' mindfulness as a possible predictor for destructive and transformational leadership behavior. We tested the relationships with the help of regression analyses in a two-

source survey study, finding that leaders high in trait mindfulness lead less destructive and more transformational. Our findings underline the importance of mindfulness capacities in the leadership process. Organizations, therefore, are highly recommended to invest in mindfulness-based intervention programs.

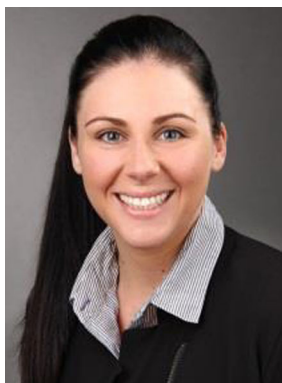
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