Although impression management scholars have identified a number of tactics for influencing supervisor evaluations, most of those tactics represent supervisor-targeted behaviors. This study examines the degree to which employees form supportive relationships with peers for impression management purposes. In so doing, we explore this intriguing question: Will employees gain more from forming supportive relationships with “stars” (i.e., top performers who are “on the fast track” in the organization) or “projects” (i.e., “works in progress” who need help and refinement to perform well)? We examined this question in 2 field studies. Study 1 included 4 sources and 2 time periods; Study 2 included 2 sources and 3 time periods. The results showed that supportive relationships with both stars and projects seemed to represent impression management opportunities, insofar as they predicted supervisor positive affect and perceptions of employee promotability. Impression management motives only predicted supportive relationships with stars, however, not projects. Relationships with projects were driven by prosocial motives not concerns about managing images. We discuss the practical and theoretical implications of our results for the managing of impressions and peer relationships.

How one is perceived by others is a prevalent concern for most individuals (Gardner & Martinko, 1988; Leary, 1995; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). This contention is particularly true in organizational life given that the
“others” include supervisors who control job assignments, rewards, and promotions. It is therefore not surprising that employees attempt to control supervisor perceptions. Research on impression management is devoted to understanding the tactics employees use to shape those perceptions (for reviews, see Bolino, Kaemar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008; DuBrin, 2011; Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riordan, 1995). For the most part, scholars have focused on tactics that occur within the employee–supervisor relationship, such as giving compliments, pointing out their own achievements, or ensuring that bosses see how hard they are working (Bolino et al., 2008; Ferris et al., 2002; Higgins, Judge, & Ferris, 2003; Rosenfeld et al., 1995).

Although those tactics are certainly an important piece of the impression management puzzle, supervisor perceptions may also be shaped by actions and events occurring in other work relationships. For example, research suggests that being perceived as having a prominent friend within the organization can increase supervisor perceptions of employee performance (Kilduff & Krackhardt, 1994). As another example, studies have shown that being connected to well-regarded others can have positive effects on how employees are viewed (Andrews & Kaemar, 2001; Cialdini, 1989; Richardson & Cialdini, 1981). Such results hint at the impression management implications of employee relationships with peers. Of course, it must be noted that employees have relationships with a number of different peers—peers who vary in how valued they are and how well-regarded they seem to be. Impression management scholars have argued that “what we do is often less important than whom we do it with” (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980, p. 194). If so, to what degree do employees view relationships with different kinds of peers as impression management opportunities?

Our research builds and tests theory about the impression management implications of employee relationships with peers. Although relationships are multifaceted, we build our theory around the concept of supportive relationships, which we define as relationships where support and assistance are provided to others. Unlike other types of relationships that may develop through more formal organizational channels (e.g., team-based interdependencies), supportive relationships are discretionary on the part of employees. They therefore represent a potential impression management tactic (Bolino, 1999). Moreover, these types of relationships may be especially relevant to employees’ images, as scholars have noted that providing support to a coworker can bring praise and recognition to employees (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997; Allen & Rush, 1998; Baumeister, 1982; Bolino, 1999; Bolino, Varela, Bande, & Turnley, 2006).

In particular, our theorizing argues that supportive relationships with peers can positively influence two different supervisor evaluations. One of those evaluations is positive affect, which reflects supervisors’
enthusiasm, excitement, and positive sentiments toward employees (Frijda, 1994; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). The other is perceived promotability, which captures supervisor evaluations of employee advancement potential (Harris, Kacmar, & Carlson, 2006; Thacker & Wayne, 1995). Ultimately, these two evaluations are the bottom-line gauge of the effectiveness of employee impression management (Bozeman & Kaemar, 1997; Ferris & Judge, 1991; Gardner & Martinko, 1988). If employees are well liked and viewed as promotable, then it is likely that they have managed impressions effectively.

Our research examines supportive relationships with two distinct types of peers. One type is a star, defined here as a top performer who seems to be “on the fast track” in the organization and is expected to make a clear contribution to the firm. Star employees make significant contributions to the performance of the organization yet are often stretched to their capacity in order to capitalize on their talents (Oldroyd & Morris, 2012). The other type is a project, defined here as someone who seems to be a “work in progress” who needs help and refinement to become a top performer. Our use of that term is consistent with talent evaluations in the world of sports, where projects are described as individuals with “high ceilings, only their elevators are still on the ground floor or lower levels” (Wasserman, 2014). Our use is also consistent with one of the broader meanings of the project term—an undertaking requiring concerted effort (The American Heritage Dictionary). Relative to stars, supportive relationships with projects represent a more uncertain risk–reward equation. Supporting projects may reveal a true “diamond in the rough” but may also represent an inefficient use of limited time and effort.

Our theorizing highlights a potential irony in the use of supportive relationships with peers as an impression management tool. On the one hand, employees should be more likely to view the support of stars as an effective impression management tactic, given the benefits of connecting with well-regarded others (Allen, 2004; Cialdini, 1989). On the other hand, there are reasons to expect the support of projects to be just as predictive of positive affect on the part of the supervisor. To the degree that this is so, supporting projects may be as valuable a road to perceived promotability as supporting stars. Indeed, finding similar outcomes for supporting stars and projects would have important implications for peers and supervisors. If employees who support projects avoid “missing out” on impression management opportunities, the peers who need support the most will be more likely to receive it. This more extensive network of support should benefit supervisors, who may need help in developing and supporting projects. We examined these issues in two field studies with different recruitment approaches, different methods for identifying stars and projects, and different operationalizations of supportive relationships.
Impression Management Motives and Supportive Relationships

Most employees are aware of the impact that their supervisors’ perceptions have on outcomes such as job assignments, rewards, and promotions (Feldman & Klich, 1991; Gardner & Martinko, 1988; Rosenfeld et al., 1995). It is that awareness that leads to an interest in making a favorable impression on supervisors (Bolino, 1999; Bolino et al., 2008; Kim, Van Dyne, Kamdar, & Johnson, 2013; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Rioux & Penner, 2001; Roberts, 2005). This interest is represented by employee impression management motives—desires to adapt behavior to project a good image (Leary, 1995; Yun, Takeuchi, & Liu, 2007). Leary and Kowalski (1990) suggested that such desires represent the first of a two-step impression management process. The second step is for employees to construct their desired image through impression-forming behaviors.

Although those impression-forming behaviors can center on tactics like self-promotion or ingratiation (Bolino et al., 2008; Ferris et al., 2002; Higgins et al., 2003; Rosenfeld et al., 1995), scholars have argued that employees believe offering encouragement, feedback, and support to their coworkers can be beneficial to their image (Allen et al., 1997; Newby & Heide, 1992; Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002) and that such behaviors can result in rewards from supervisors (e.g., Allen, Lentz, & Day, 2006). Indeed, employees could be drawn to supportive relationships with peers as an impression management approach because it is more subtle than tactics like self-promotion or ingratiation—both of which can risk negative labels such as “egotist” or “bootlicker” (DuBrin, 2011; Gardner & Martinko, 1998; Ham & Vonk, 2011; Jones, 1990; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Leary, 1995). In our first study, we operationalize supportive relationships as psychosocial support—the provision of respect, encouragement, confirmation, and feedback (Kram, 1985; Kram & Isabella, 1985).

A key question in our study is whether employee impression management motives will predict both supportive relationships with stars and supportive relationships with projects, or whether they will instead only predict the former. According to impression management theory, employees should assume that supervisors will think highly of them for establishing relationships with well-regarded others (Cialdini, 1989, 2001; Leary, 1995; Schlenker, 1980). In support of such theorizing, research has shown that employees are more inclined to help others who are influential in the organization (Bowler & Brass, 2006). Other work suggests that perceptions of popularity and skill increase for those who are connected to high-status others (Dijkstra, Cillessen, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2010; Kilduff & Krackhardt, 1994). Indeed, impression management theory suggests that building supportive relationships with stars can provide employees with the opportunity to “bask in the reflected glory” of
well-regarded others (Cialdini & de Nicholas, 1989; Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Crandall, Silvia, N’Gbala, Tsang, & Dawson, 2007).

In contrast, the instrumentality of supportive relationships with projects may be less clear to employees. Although projects have the potential to perform well in the organization, they do not possess the same level of talent and skill as their star counterparts. As such, employees may view projects as not offering the same opportunity to bask in the reflected glory of a well-regarded other (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). Indeed, impression management scholars have suggested that employees might downplay or avoid relationships with certain peers to avoid having supervisors associate them with less-regarded others (Andrews & Kacmar, 2001; Cialdini, 1989; Kulik, Bainbridge, & Cregan, 2008; Leary, 1995). Moreover, it is not clear that supportive relationships with projects would “pay off” down the line, in terms of high-quality reciprocative exchanges of resources between colleagues. Research suggests that such exchanges can have an important impact on job attitudes (Sherony & Green, 2002).

**Hypothesis 1**: Impression management motives are positively related to supportive relationships with stars.

**Supportive Relationships and Supervisor Evaluations**

Regardless of whether (and why) employees may engage in supportive relationships with stars and projects, the next question becomes how those relationships can shape supervisor evaluations of them. In general, impression management behaviors have been shown to affect how supervisors feel toward—and think about—the employees who perform them (Bolino et al., 2008; Gardner & Martinko, 1988; Rosenfeld et al., 1995). Do those findings extend to a context where the behaviors are peer directed, rather than supervisor directed? Our study examines that question by examining two different evaluations: positive affect and perceived promotability.

**Positive Affect**

Perhaps the central outcome of employee impression management efforts is positive affect on the part of supervisors (Bolino et al., 2006; Cialdini, 1989; Crandall et al., 2007; Ferris & Judge, 1991; Ferris, Judge, Rowland, & Fitzgibbons, 1994; Kacmar & Carlson, 1999; Wayne & Ferris, 1990; Wayne & Liden, 1995). Impression management theory argues that positive affect can be fostered when supervisors perceive that they benefit from the tactics employed (Bolino et al., 2008; Cialdini, 1989; Ferris & Judge, 1991). That same logic is consistent with appraisal models of
affect. For example, Lazarus’s (1991) model argues that positive affect occurs when events are perceived to be beneficial to one’s goals and one’s identity. The question becomes, then, whether positive affect should result from both support of stars and support of projects.

To examine this question, it is useful to consider the kinds of goals and identity elements that are considered in theory and research on affect. Novacek and Lazarus (1990) identified power/achievement and stress avoidance as two broad, widely held goals. Lazarus (1991) later highlighted several aspects of the power/achievement goal: wanting to obtain awards and recognition, aspiring to be well-off financially, and wanting to compete successfully. From the perspective of supervisors, power/achievement goals can be achieved by producing, developing, and supporting top talent (Hunt & Michael, 1983; Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Noe, 2002). Employees who are known to nurture supportive relationships with stars therefore facilitate supervisors’ goal achievement by expanding the base of support for that top talent (Hunt & Michael, 1983). With respect to identity, Lazarus (1991) argued that positive affect would be fostered when events improve self- or social esteem, or when they reaffirm moral values, ideals, and meanings. We propose that the reflected glory obtained by employees who support stars is itself relevant to the self- and social-esteem of supervisors. Supervisors may feel more pride and enthusiasm when interacting with employees who support stars precisely because that reflected glory imbues those employees with more status.

**Hypothesis 2:** Supportive relationships with stars is positively related to positive affect on the part of supervisors.

Employees’ supportive relationships with projects may also be seen as goal relevant by supervisors, with the operative goal being stress avoidance rather than power/achievement. Lazarus (1991) highlighted several aspects of the stress avoidance goal: desiring an easy life, wanting to avoid blame or criticism, trying to avoid conflict, and wanting to avoid stress. Supervisors are responsible for the performance of the workgroup (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994; Noe, 2002), and projects—whose future performance is uncertain—could be a source of stress for supervisors. Witnessing subordinates’ struggles can act as a stressor in its own right. However, projects’ struggles can also engender role conflict as supervisors balance assisting projects with investing time and attention in more proximal drivers of unit performance. Employees could ease some of that strain by providing support to projects, thereby facilitating the achievement of supervisors’ stress avoidance goals. With respect to identity, employees who support projects may appeal to supervisors’ moral values and ideals, with positive affect being triggered by seeing someone support a person in need. Indeed, research on impression management suggests that
supervisors tend to like employees who help those in need (Bolino et al., 2006; Eastman, 1994).

**Hypothesis 3:** Supportive relationships with projects is positively related to positive affect on the part of supervisors.

**Perceived Promotability**

From an instrumental perspective, an increase in positive affect on the part of supervisors is beneficial to employees if it impacts career-related outcomes. One such outcome is supervisor evaluations of employees’ perceived promotability. Although research has previously linked the provision of support to the number of employee promotions received (e.g., Allen, 2007; Allen et al., 2006; Bozionelos, 2004; Hunt & Michael, 1983), the intervening mechanism explaining why support might result in perceived promotability has not been explored. We theorize that a supervisor’s positive affect may serve as that mediator.

One of the more venerable findings in the impression management literature is that supervisors who hold positive affect toward employees more positively evaluate their potential (e.g., Ferris & Judge, 1991; Ferris et al., 1994; Wayne & Ferris, 1990; Wayne & Liden, 1995). For example, research has demonstrated that supervisors who like employees as a result of their impression efforts ultimately rate those employees higher on promotability (Shaughnessy, Treadway, Breland, Williams, & Brouer, 2011). Scholars have suggested that positive affect can influence promotability by altering how supervisors process information about subordinates (Cardy & Dobbins, 1986; DeNisi & Williams, 1988; Ferris et al., 1994; Robbins & DeNisi, 1994). Specifically, positive affect impacts the storage and recall of information (Isen, Shalker, Clark, & Karp, 1978; Thacker & Wayne, 1995), leading supervisors to focus more on positively valenced information and less on negatively valenced information. Positive affect may also mask employee deficiencies, creating a halo bias that extends to perceived promotability (Balzer & Sulsky, 1992; Ferris & Judge, 1991; Tsui & Barry, 1986).

**Hypothesis 4:** Supportive relationships with stars has a positive indirect effect on perceived promotability through positive affect on the part of supervisors.

**Hypothesis 5:** Supportive relationships with projects has a positive indirect effect on perceived promotability through positive affect on the part of supervisors.
Study 1: Method

Sample and Procedure

We recruited participants via classified advertisements posted on the Internet in 18 metropolitan areas across the United States. The advertisements indicated that the study was open to full-time employees who had a supervisor. In order to be eligible, employees must have worked with at least one peer who “will clearly be a top performer in the organization” and one peer who “needs some help and refinement to be a top performer in the organization.” We took three steps to ensure that these eligibility requirements were met when employees selected their two peers. First, we emphasized the eligibility requirements in the advertisements. Second, employees were directed to a web page detailing the study requirements and listing definitional descriptions of stars and projects, though those specific labels were never utilized. Finally, at the beginning of the survey, employees completed a “selection check” in which they indicated the extent to which the peers they had identified conformed to the definitional descriptions of stars and projects provided on the web page.

Given that our conceptualizations of stars and projects had not been previously established in the literature, we created and validated scales that could be used in our selection checks. We developed these scales using measure creation and validation procedures recommended by Hinkin and Tracey (1999; also see Hinkin, 1998). Adhering to the conceptual definitions of stars and projects outlined earlier, we created 10 items designed to reflect both peers. We then recruited an independent sample of undergraduate students (N = 139) from a large southeastern university to quantitatively assess the extent to which these items matched the conceptual definitions of stars and projects. Undergraduates are an appropriate sample for Hinkin and Tracey’s (1999) validation method because participants only require sufficient intellectual ability to rate the convergence between items and definitions (Hinkin & Tracey, 1999; Schriesheim, Powers, Scandura, Gardiner, & Lankau, 1993). Indeed, recent studies have been published in top psychology and management journals using the technique with undergraduates (Colquitt, Baer, Long, & Halvorsen-Ganepola, 2014; Rodell, 2013). The students were randomly assigned to one of two online survey conditions. Seventy-five students received a survey that provided the star definition, followed by the 10 star items and the 10 project items. Sixty-four students received a survey that provided the project definition, followed by the 10 project items and the 10 star items. To minimize item context effects, the order in which the items were presented to the students was randomized.
Students were asked to rate the extent to which each item provided a good match to the definition provided using this scale: 1 = extremely bad match to the definition to 7 = extremely good match to the definition. The items with the highest means on the intended definition—and the best ability to draw distinctions with the unintended definition—were retained for use in the selection check measures. Those criteria netted five items for the star selection check and five items for the project selection check. The five star items were: “Has ‘what it takes’ to go far in my organization,” “Will clearly make a contribution to my organization,” “Will climb the ladder quickly,” “Is on the ‘fast track’,” and “Seems like a ‘winner’.” The mean definitional correspondence for these five items was 5.52 out of 7. The five project items were: “Could succeed with some assistance,” “Could be described as a ‘work in progress’,” “Has underdeveloped capabilities but shows promise,” “Shows glimpses of talent,” and “May not be the best yet but has demonstrated an ability to learn.” The mean definitional correspondence for these five items was 5.20 out of 7. Those levels of definitional correspondence compare favorably to past uses of this technique and illustrate adequate content validity for our selection checks (Colquitt et al., 2014; Hinkin & Tracey, 1999; Rodell, 2013).

A total of 1,077 employees clicked on our advertisements. Once they did so, they were shown the study description and eligibility requirements and were asked to provide the contact information for their supervisor, a star peer, and a project peer. A total of 432 employees self-selected into the study by providing that contact information. At that point, they began the Time 1 survey, which included the selection check items described above. Employees were asked, regarding their chosen star, “In my opinion, [peer name] is someone who . . . .” with the star selection check items using the following scale: 1 = not at all to 5 = to a very large extent. Employees followed the same procedure to rate their chosen project on the project selection check. The survey also included the measure of impression management motives for establishing relationships with the stars and projects. The survey was completed by 391 employees for a completion rate of 88%, with employees receiving $5 for their participation. In all cases, payments were sent as cash through regular mail directly to the relevant participants. The employees were 42% male and, on average, were 31.3 years old (SD = 9.23), had worked for their supervisor for 3.6 years (SD = 3.64), and had been with their organization for 4.6 years (SD = 4.41). The ethnicity of the employees was 48% Caucasian, 18% African American, 16% Hispanic, 11% Asian American, and 2% Native American, with the remainder indicating other ethnicities. The employees came from at least 12 different industries, including manufacturing, healthcare, government, education, transportation, and retail.
Upon receiving a completed survey from the employees, we sent the star and project peers an email inviting them to participate in the study. Importantly, that invitation came from us rather than allowing the employees themselves to contact the two peers. We felt this structure would lend more legitimacy to the study while also allowing us to verify the independent identities of the stars and projects. The peer surveys included the measure of supportive relationships. One-hundred and seventy-seven stars agreed to participate in the study, resulting in a response rate of 45%. The mean for those 177 peers on the star selection check completed by employees was 4.43 out of 5, providing strong evidence that the employees picked peers who matched the star definition. Stars were 48% male and had an average age of 33.7 years ($SD = 10.17$). The ethnicity of the stars was 50% Caucasian, 16% African American, 14% Hispanic, and 13% Asian American, with the remainder indicating other ethnicities. On average, stars had been with their organization for 3.0 years ($SD = 3.23$). One-hundred and sixty-six projects agreed to participate in the study, resulting in a response rate of 42%. The mean for those 166 peers on the project selection check was 4.09 out of 5, again providing evidence that employees picked peers who matched the project definition. The projects were 55% male and had an average age of 33.7 years ($SD = 10.03$). The ethnicity of the projects was 50% Caucasian, 17% African American, 16% Hispanic, and 10% Asian American, with the remainder indicating other ethnicities. On average, projects had been with their organization for 2.7 years ($SD = 2.59$). The star and project peers were paid $5 for participating.

Six weeks after the completion of the employee survey, supervisors were invited to participate in the survey. As with the star and project surveys, this communication came directly from us to increase legitimacy and verify the identity of the supervisors. The supervisor survey included measures of positive affect and perceived promotability of the employee. Of the 391 supervisors who received the invitation to participate, 133 responded, for a response rate of 34%. Supervisors were paid $5 for their participation. Supervisors had an average age of 41.1 years ($SD = 10.03$) and were 52% male. On average, supervisors had worked for their organization for 8.1 years ($SD = 5.91$) and had 17 subordinates ($SD = 24.99$). Supervisors were 61% Caucasian, 15% African American, 12% Hispanic, and 8% Asian American, with the remainder indicating other ethnicities.

Complete data for the “quartets,” which includes the employee survey, a star survey, a project survey, and a supervisor survey, were available for 125 employees. Attrition across times and sources was combatted with weekly reminder emails, including soliciting help from other members of a given “quartet” when a given source was late in completing their portion.
Unless otherwise noted below, all surveys used a five-point scale where 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

**Employee Measures**

*Impression management motives.* Impression management motives for supportive peer relationships were measured with the Yun et al. (2007) six-item self-enhancement motives scale. Employees indicated the extent to which they agreed that working with the peer provided the opportunities indicated by the items. The employee responded to both star- and project-referenced versions of the scale. The introduction to each measure was modified to read, “Working with [peer name] is an opportunity to . . . .” The items included “Change my behavior to create a good impression to others,” “Create the impression that I am a ‘good’ person to others,” “Modify my behavior to present a good image to others,” “Be sensitive to the impression that others have of me,” “Present myself to others as being friendlier and more polite,” and “Demonstrate how important it is to me to give a good impression to others.” The coefficient alpha was .88 for the star-referenced scale and .91 for the project-referenced scale.

**Peer Measures**

*Supportive relationships.* Stars and projects both assessed the support they received from the employee using the 10 psychosocial support items from Dreher and Ash’s (1990) mentoring scale. All items began with the introduction, “[Employee name] has . . . .” The items included “Encouraged me to talk openly about anxiety and fears that detract from work,” “Conveyed feelings of respect for me as an individual,” “Shared personal experiences as an alternative perspective to my problems,” “Conveyed empathy for the concerns and feelings I discussed with him/her,” “Discussed my questions or concerns regarding feelings of competence, commitment to advancement, relationships with peers or supervisors, or work/family conflicts,” “Shared history of his/her career with me,” “Served as a role model,” “Encouraged me to prepare for advancement,” “Displayed attitudes and values similar to my own,” and “Encouraged me to try new ways of behaving on the job.” The coefficient alpha for supportive relationships was .94 for both the star and project peers.

**Supervisor Measures**

*Positive affect.* Positive affect toward the employee was measured using the 10 positive affect adjectives from the positive and negative affect
schedule–expanded form (PANAS-X; Watson & Clark, 1994). Supervisors were asked to “Indicate to what extent you typically feel this way when thinking about or interacting with [employee name].” A five-point scale (1 = not at all to 5 = to a very large extent) was used. The items included enthusiastic, excited, inspired, proud, strong, determined, interested, active, alert, and attentive. The coefficient alpha for this scale was .92.

**Perceived promotability.** Perceptions of the employee’s overall promotability were measured with a seven-item scale from Harris et al. (2006). The items included “Is someone I would select as a successor to my position,” “Is someone I believe has high potential,” “Is the type of individual our company seeks to promote,” “Is someone that will have a successful career,” “Is someone I would approach if I needed advice,” “Is someone that seems to ‘fit in’ well around here,” and “Is someone whose opinions have an impact on my decisions.” This scale had a coefficient alpha of .91.

**Control Variables**

We collected employee ratings of the Big Five personality dimensions—for use as potential control or moderating variables—using Donnellan, Oswald, Baird, and Lucas’s (2006) four-item mini-IPIP (International Personality Item Pool) scales. We examined the moderating effects of conscientiousness ($\alpha = .67$) and openness to experience ($\alpha = .75$) to explore the possibility that the responders to our advertisements were unusually motivated or unusually curious. We examined emotional stability ($\alpha = .85$) as a control given that it predicts “backing up behavior” (Porter et al., 2003)—a construct somewhat similar to supportive relationships with projects. During data collection, we supplemented the emotional stability scale with four items from the IPIP due to concerns that the four-item measure might exhibit low reliability. In the end, including these personality dimensions did not alter the results of our hypothesis testing. Our analyses therefore proceeded without them, consistent with recent recommendations (Carlson & Wu, 2012). Demographic controls—including tenure with the organization, tenure with the supervisor, race, gender, and age—also did not alter our hypothesis testing, so they were not included in our analyses.

**Confirmatory Factor Analysis**

A confirmatory factor analysis with impression management motives for star, impression management motives for project, supportive
TABLE 1

Study 1: Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities, and Correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Impression management motives for star</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Impression management motives for project</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Supportive relationship with star</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Supportive relationship with project</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Positive affect</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Perceived promotability</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = 125. Coefficient alphas are on the diagonal. *p < .05.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics, coefficient alphas, and zero-order correlations for our variables are shown in Table 1.

Tests of Hypotheses

We tested our hypotheses using structural equation modeling in LISREL 8.80 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1989). Latent variables were modeled with item-level indicators. Direct effects from the supportive relationship variables to perceived promotability were also included because those paths are necessary for the calculation of indirect effects (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). The resulting model provided an adequate fit to the data: $\chi^2 (1,065) = 1,981.75, p < .01$; comparative fit index (CFI) = .94; incremental fit index (IFI) = .94; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .076; standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .065. We compared our Study 1 measurement model to a five-factor model in which the perceived promotability and positive affect items loaded on a single factor. That comparison revealed a $\chi^2$ difference of 102.11 ($df = 5, p < .001$) in favor of our hypothesized measurement model. Thus, we retained our hypothesized model.
CFI = .94; IFI = .94; RMSEA = .076; SRMR = .14.\(^1\) Figure 1 shows the standardized path coefficients from the LISREL output.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that impression management motives for stars would be positively related to supportive relationships with stars. As shown in Figure 1, the relationship between impression management motives for stars and supportive relationships with stars was significant (b = .27). Hypothesis 1 was therefore supported. Figure 1 also reveals a non-significant linkage between impression management motives for projects and supportive relationships with projects.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 predicted that supportive relationships with stars and projects would be positively related to positive affect on the part of supervisors. As shown in Figure 1, the relationship between supportive relationships with stars and positive affect was significant (b = .27), providing support for Hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 3 was also supported, as evidenced by the significant, positive relationship between supportive relationships with projects and positive affect (b = .34).

Hypotheses 4 and 5 predicted that supportive relationships with stars and projects would have indirect effects on perceived promotability through positive affect. We tested these mediation hypotheses using a product of coefficients approach (MacKinnon et al., 2002). This approach demonstrates mediation by showing that the product of the predictor→mediator and mediator→outcome relationships is statistically significant when direct effects are also modeled. Because the product of two path coefficients is rarely normally distributed, more accurate and powerful tests of the significance of the mediated effect can be obtained using a distribution-of-the-product approach, which corrects for the non-normality of the product (MacKinnon, Fritz, Williams, & Lockwood, 2007; Tofighi & MacKinnon, 2011). We conducted these distribution-of-the-product analyses using the RMediation package within R software (Tofighi & MacKinnon, 2011). The effect decomposition for these mediated effects is shown in Table 2, which reveals that both supportive relationships for stars (.18) and projects (.23) had significant indirect effects on perceived promotability through positive affect, supporting both predictions. The magnitude of the indirect effects can be recovered using the tracing rule (Kline, 2011) with the Figure 2 coefficients (.27 \(\times\) .67 = .18 for stars; .34 \(\times\) .67 = .23 for projects).

Taken together, our results suggest that both supportive relationships with stars and supportive relationships with projects offer what might be

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\(^1\)We examined an alternative model where perceived promotability and positive affect were modeled as dual terminal outcomes, as opposed to positive affect predicting perceived promotability. A comparison of the two models revealed a \(\chi^2\) difference of 54.20 (df = 1, \(p < .01\)) in favor of our hypothesized model. Thus, we retained our hypothesized structure.
Figure 1: Structural Equation Modeling Results for Study 1.

\[ n = 125. \ *p < .05. \]
called “impression management opportunities.” That is, both supportive relationships had their own indirect effects on perceived promotability through positive affect. Employees who engaged in both kinds of relationships gained, from a perspective of perceived likeability and perceived potential. Importantly, those impression management opportunities only seemed salient to employees in the case of stars. Impression management motives did predict supportive relationships for stars but not for projects. Finding similar outcomes for supportive relationships with stars and projects suggests that when it comes to “scoring points with the boss,” employees who could be supporting projects may be missing out on a valuable image-enhancing option.

Of course, Study 1 possessed some limitations. Although our recruitment approach resulted in a heterogeneous sample with some external validity advantages (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002), it did not allow us to calculate a response rate because we could not track the number of individuals who saw the advertisement without clicking on it. Our approach also asked employees themselves to identify stars and projects, leaving open the question of whether our results would generalize to other nomination approaches. Similarly, we operationalized supportive relationships using psychosocial support (Dreher & Ash, 1990) when a number of other constructs could serve as appropriate indicators. Finally, it may be that our positive affect mediator is contaminated with other relevant supervisor evaluations, such as perceived performance or perceived citizenship. Unpacking that possibility would make for a more compelling test of the mediating role of positive affect. Study 2 addressed all of these limitations while exploring a question that was not answered in Study 1: “Why would employees engage in supportive relationships with projects?”

### TABLE 2

*Study 1: Effect Decomposition Results for Effects of Supportive Relationships With Stars and Projects on Perceived Promotability*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Supportive relationship with star</th>
<th>Supportive relationship with project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect through</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive affect</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.23*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct effect</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total effect</td>
<td>.34*</td>
<td>.22*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. n = 125. *p < .05.
Study 2

If supportive relationships with projects do represent a missed “impression management opportunity” because of their effects on positive affect and perceived promotability, are some employees gaining those benefits for reasons other than impression management? Exploring this issue requires a consideration of motives for behavior that do not center on controlling supervisor evaluations. In a study of citizenship behavior, Rioux and Penner (2001) showed that discretionary behaviors could be driven by prosocial behaviors, in addition to impression management behaviors. For example, employees might maintain a positive work attitude to be helpful to others and/or to impress their bosses.

Grant (2008) defined prosocial motives as a desire to protect and promote the welfare of other people. His research illustrated that employees who want to make a prosocial difference engage in behaviors similar to the supportive relationships examined in Study 1. For example, Grant and Mayer (2009) showed that prosocial motives and impression management motives both explained helping behaviors among peers. The authors concluded that “employees who are both good soldiers and good actors are more likely to emerge as good citizens in promoting the status quo” (p. 900). In this study, we go one step further by suggesting that employees who hold prosocial motives will consider the type of peer when forming supportive relationships. Such employees should recognize that the welfare of projects is particularly in need of protection and promotion. Indeed, Grant and Gino (2010) showed that employees with prosocial motives focused their attention on others when they felt their efforts could make a difference.

*Hypothesis 6a:* Impression management motives are positively related to supportive relationships with stars.

*Hypothesis 6b:* Prosocial motives are positively related to supportive relationships with projects.

We also hypothesize that our predictions in Hypotheses 2 through 5 in Study 1 will replicate with the Study 2 sample. As in Study 1, finding similar outcomes for supportive relationships with stars and projects would lend support to our proposal that relationships with both types of peers have impression management benefits.

**Method**

We recruited participants through two different pools. One was a sample of executive and professional MBA programs for a large southeastern
university. The other was a subject pool of a large southeastern university that included working undergraduates as well as other working adults not affiliated with the university who had indicated a willingness to participate in university research projects. We contacted all 2,165 individuals in these two pools to participate in this study. Those communications indicated that eligible participants must be working at least 20 hours per week, work in an environment with coworkers, and be willing to fill out two online surveys. Eligible individuals were asked to provide their contact information as well as the contact information for their supervisor. Of the 2,165 individuals who were contacted, 759 completed this employee registration survey, for a response rate of 35%.

We then contacted the 759 supervisors via email to invite them to participate in the study. Unlike the procedure in Study 1, the supervisors were asked to read the definitional descriptions of stars and projects and to identify one employee who fit the star description and one employee who fit the project description. We also instructed the supervisors that these identified employees should have regular interactions with the focal employee. After providing the names of the star and project, the supervisors were asked to complete the selection check described in Study 1. Three-hundred and seventy-one supervisors completed this supervisor registration survey, for a response rate of 49%. The employees of these supervisors were then emailed the Time 1 survey, which included measures of impression management motives for stars, impression management motives for projects, prosocial motives for stars, prosocial motives for projects, and demographic and control variables. Three-hundred and thirty-two employees completed the Time 1 survey, for a response rate of 89%. Four weeks later, these employees were emailed the Time 2 survey, which included measures of supportive relationships with stars and supportive relationships with projects. The Time 2 survey was completed by 311 employees, for a response rate of 94%. Four weeks after the Time 2 survey, the supervisors of those 311 employees were emailed the Time 3 survey, which included measures of positive affect and perceived promotability, as well as demographic and control variables. Two-hundred and forty-two supervisors completed the Time 3 survey, for a response rate of 78%.

Complete data, which included a completed Time 1 and Time 2 survey from the employee and a registration and Time 3 survey from the supervisor, were available for 207 employee–supervisor dyads. At Time 1, we included scales that assessed the extent to which the employee had the opportunity to observe the star and project peers that were selected by the supervisor. Employees whose mean rating was below two on the five-point scale for their opportunity to observe either the star or project were removed from the analyses. This criteria led to the removal of three dyads from our analyses, resulting in a final sample size of 204 dyads—an
effective response rate of 10%. Employees had an average age of 31.7 years ($SD = 10.07$) and were 50% male. They had worked for their organizations for an average of 4.5 years ($SD = 4.88$) and for their supervisors for an average of 2.7 years ($SD = 2.83$). Employees identified their ethnicity as 61% Caucasian, 14% African American, 12% Asian/Pacific Islander, 7% Hispanic, and 6% other. Seventy-one employees (35%) were themselves in managerial roles, whereas 133 (65%) were not. Supervisors had an average age of 39.6 years ($SD = 10.99$) and were 54% male. They had worked for their organizations for an average of 7.9 years ($SD = 6.77$). Supervisors identified their ethnicity as 65% Caucasian, 12% Asian/Pacific Islander, 11% African American, 6% Hispanic, and 6% other. The mean on the supervisors’ selection check for the stars was 4.40 out of 5. The mean on the selection check for the projects was 3.88 out of 5. All participants were paid $10 for participating in the study, with payments sent as cash through regular mail. Unless otherwise indicated, all scales below used a five-point response scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

**Employee Measures**

**Impression management motives.** Impression management motives for supportive peer relationships were measured with Rioux and Penner’s (2001) 10-item impression management scale. As in Study 1, the employee responded to both star- and project-referenced versions of the scale. The introduction to each measure was modified to read, “Working with [peer name] is an opportunity to . . . .” The items included “Look better than my other coworkers,” “Indicate that I want a raise,” “Impress my other coworkers,” “Avoid looking bad in front of others,” “Look like I am busy,” “Avoid appearing irresponsible,” “Avoid looking lazy,” “Stay out of trouble,” “Avoid a reprimand from my boss,” and “Show that rewards are important to me.” The coefficient alpha was .95 for both the star-referenced scale and the project-referenced scale.

**Prosocial motives.** Employees’ prosocial motives for supportive peer relationships were measured with Rioux and Penner’s (2001) 10-item prosocial values scale. The items included “Help those in need,” “Show that I am concerned about others’ feelings,” “Be helpful,” “Be courteous to others,” “Help my coworkers in any way I can,” “Interact with my coworkers,” “Have fun with my coworkers,” “Get to know my coworkers better,” “Be friendly with others,” and “Put myself in others’ shoes.” The coefficient alpha was .92 for the star-referenced scale and .93 for the project-referenced scale.

**Supportive relationships.** Employees assessed the support they provided to the stars and projects using the seven-item helping scale from Van Dyne and LePine (1998). The items included “Volunteered to do things
for them,” “Helped them with their work responsibilities,” “Helped them learn about the work,” “Gotten involved to benefit them,” “Attended functions that help them,” “Assisted them with their work for the benefit of the group,” and “Helped orient new employees for them.” The coefficient alpha was .87 for the supportive relationship with star scale and .85 for the supportive relationship with project scale.

Supervisor Measures

Positive affect. Following Study 1, positive affect toward the employee was measured using the PANAS-X (Watson & Clark, 1994). The five-point scale ranged from 1 = not at all to 5 = to a very large extent. The coefficient alpha for this scale was .96.

Perceived promotability. As in Study 1, the supervisor’s perception of the employee’s overall promotability was measured with Harris et al.’s (2006) seven-item scale. This scale had a coefficient alpha of .91.

Control Variables

We examined the potential importance of many of the same controls from Study 1, including demographic variables and emotional stability ($\alpha = .85$) using the four-item mini-IPIP scale (Donnellan et al., 2006), again supplemented with four items from the IPIP. None had significant effects on our hypothesis testing, so they were omitted from our analyses (Carlson & Wu, 2012). The following controls were included, however, to address limitations of Study 1.

Opportunity to observe. Given that supervisors nominated the stars and projects in Study 2, it became important to ensure that employees had sufficient knowledge of those peers—and to control for any variation in such knowledge. We therefore assessed employee ratings of the opportunity to observe stars and projects using Rodell’s (2013) three-item scale, which was adapted from Judge and Ferris (1993). The items referred the employee to either the star or project and included “I regularly have the opportunity to observe his/her job performance,” “Most of the time, I am able to monitor his/her job performance,” and “Generally, it is easy for me to see his/her job performance.” The coefficient alpha was .86 for the star-referenced scale and .87 for the project-referenced scale.

Perceived performance. We controlled for supervisor perceptions of employee performance to remove any contaminating influence that they had on the positive affect felt by the supervisor for the employee. Perceived performance was assessed using a five-item measure adapted from MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Fetter (1991). The items referred the supervisor to the employee and included, “Is very good at his/her daily job
activities,” “Is an excellent worker compared to his/her peers,” “Is outstanding at his/her job, all things considered,” “Is one of the best at what he/she does,” and “Is a good performer in general.” The coefficient alpha for this scale was .93.

**Perceived citizenship.** Similarly, we controlled for supervisor perceptions of employee citizenship to remove any contaminating influence that they had on the positive affect felt by the supervisor for the employee. Perceived citizenship was assessed using Lee and Allen’s (2002) eight-item measure. The items referred the supervisor to the employee and included “Attends functions that are not required but that help the organizational image,” “Shows pride when representing the organization in public,” “Defends the organization when other employees criticize it,” “Keeps up with developments in the organization,” “Offers ideas to improve the functioning of the organization,” “Takes action to protect the organization from potential problems,” “Expresses loyalty toward the organization,” and “Demonstrates concern about the image of the organization.” The coefficient alpha for this scale was .90.

**Confirmatory Factor Analysis**

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis in which impression management motives for stars and projects, prosocial motives for stars and projects, supportive relationships with stars and projects, positive affect, perceived promotability, perceived performance, perceived citizenship, opportunity to observe star, and opportunity to observe project were modeled as latent factors with item-level indicators. Our proposed 12-factor model provided a good fit to the data: $\chi^2 (3,849) = 7,566.65, p < .01$; CFI = .94; IFI = .94; RMSEA = .067; SRMR = .059. We compared our measurement model to an 11-factor model where the perceived promotability and positive affect items loaded on a single factor. That comparison revealed a $\chi^2$ difference of 466.63 ($df = 11, p < .001$) in favor of our measurement model. We also compared our measurement model to a 10-factor model where the items for perceived performance, positive affect, and perceived citizenship loaded on a single factor. That comparison revealed a $\chi^2$ difference of 910.04 ($df = 21, p < .001$) in favor of our measurement model. Finally, we compared our measurement model to a nine-factor model where the items for perceived performance, positive affect, perceived citizenship, and perceived promotability loaded on a single factor. That comparison revealed a $\chi^2$ difference of 1,139.55 ($df = 30, p < .001$) in favor of our measurement model. Taken together, these results provide support for the structure of our hypothesized measurement model.
Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics, coefficient alphas, and zero-order correlations for the variables in Study 2 are shown in Table 3.

Tests of Hypotheses

We tested the model shown in Figure 2 using structural equation modeling in LISREL 8.80. To prevent the number of estimated parameters from exceeding our sample size (for a discussion of this issue, see Kline, 2011), we created three parcels as indicators for each of the following constructs: impression management motives for star and project, prosocial motives for star and project, supportive relationships with star and project, positive affect, perceived citizenship, and perceived promotability. We used all items in the scales, rather than parcels, as indicators for opportunity to observe star, opportunity to observe project, and perceived performance, in order to avoid having only one or two parcels per construct, which can lead to an underidentified model (Kline, 2011). As in Study 1, we included direct effects from supportive relationships with stars and projects to perceived promotability because those paths are necessary when testing hypotheses of indirect effects (MacKinnon et al., 2002). We allowed the disturbance terms for positive affect, perceived performance, and perceived citizenship to covary to represent unmeasured common causes. The resulting model provided an adequate fit to the data: \( \chi^2 (634) = 1,258.90, p < .01; \) CFI = .96; IFI = .96; RMSEA = .067; SRMR = .071.\(^2\) The standardized output from LISREL is shown in Figure 2.

Hypothesis 6a predicted that impression management motives for stars would be positively related to supportive relationships with stars. As shown in Figure 2, the relationship between impression management motives for stars and supportive relationships with stars was significant \((b = .20)\). Hypothesis 6a was therefore supported. Figure 2 also reveals a nonsignificant linkage between impression management motives for projects and supportive relationships with projects. Hypothesis 6b predicted that prosocial motives for projects would be positively related to

\(^2\)We examined an alternative model where perceived promotability and positive affect were modeled as dual terminal outcomes, as opposed to positive affect predicting perceived promotability. A comparison of the two models revealed a \( \chi^2 \) difference of 9.97 \((df = 1, p < .01)\) in favor of our hypothesized model. We also examined a model in which perceived performance, citizenship, and promotability were all modeled as terminal outcomes. A comparison of the two models revealed a \( \chi^2 \) difference of 113.18 \((df = 3, p < .01)\) in favor of our hypothesized model. Thus, we retained our hypothesized model.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
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<td>.79*</td>
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<td>4. Prosocial motives for project</td>
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<td>5. Supportive relationship with star</td>
<td>3.85</td>
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<td>.28*</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.33*</td>
<td>.22*</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.16*</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.46*</td>
<td>.52*</td>
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<td>7. Positive affect</td>
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<td>.16*</td>
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<td>.21*</td>
<td>.23*</td>
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<td>.96</td>
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<td>9. Perceived performance</td>
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<td>.65*</td>
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<td>11. Opportunity to observe star</td>
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<td>.21*</td>
<td>.41*</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Opportunity to observe project</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.15*</td>
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<td>.15*</td>
<td>.55*</td>
<td>.87</td>
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*Note. n = 204. Coefficient alphas are on the diagonal. *p < .05.*
Figure 2: Structural Equation Modeling Results for Study 2.

\[ n = 204, ^* p < .05. \]
TABLE 4

Study 2: Effect Decomposition Results for Effects of Supportive Relationships With Stars and Projects on Perceived Promotability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Supportive relationship with star</th>
<th>Supportive relationship with project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect through</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive affect</td>
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<td>.04∗</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived performance</td>
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<td>Perceived citizenship</td>
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<td>Direct effect</td>
<td>.11∗</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total effect</td>
<td>.23∗</td>
<td>.16∗</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = 204. ∗p < .05.

supportive relationships with projects. The relationship between prosocial motives for projects and supportive relationships with projects was significant (b = .41), supporting Hypothesis 6b. Figure 2 also reveals a nonsignificant linkage between prosocial motives for stars and supportive relationships with stars.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 predicted that supportive relationships with stars and projects would be positively related to positive affect on the part of supervisors. Both hypotheses were tested while controlling for perceived performance and perceived citizenship. As shown in Figure 2, both hypotheses were supported, as supportive relationships with stars (b = .18) and supportive relationships with projects (b = .18) were significantly related to positive affect.

Hypotheses 4 and 5 predicted that supportive relationships with stars and projects would have indirect effects on perceived promotability through positive affect. These indirect effects and their significance levels were calculated using the distribution-of-the-product method (MacKinnon et al., 2007) described in Study 1, with perceived performance and perceived citizenship controlled. The results are shown in Table 4. In support of Hypotheses 4 and 5, the results revealed that, when controlling for perceived performance and perceived citizenship, supportive relationships with stars (.04) and projects (.04) both had significant indirect effects on perceived promotability through positive affect.

General Discussion

When deciding how to manage their images in the workplace, employees have a number of options—most of which represent
behaviors targeted at supervisors (Bolino et al., 2008; Gardner & Martinko, 1988; Roberts, 2005; Rosenfeld et al., 1995). Our study focused instead on the impression management implications of supportive relationships with peers. Although scholars have previously noted the positive image implications for employees who build supportive relationships at work (Allen et al., 1997; Cialdini, 1989; Kilduff & Krackhardt, 1994), many aspects of this phenomenon have remained unaddressed. In particular, it remains unclear whether supportive relationships with both star and project peers are viewed as impression management opportunities. It also remains unclear how supervisors react to relationships with those two types of peers, in terms of evaluations like positive affect and perceived promotability.

Taken together, the results of both studies showed that supportive relationships with stars and supportive relationships with projects both had significant effects on perceived promotability—a fundamental outcome in impression management contexts (Ferris & Judge, 1991; Harris et al., 2006; Thacker & Wayne, 1995). We had reasoned that supportive employees would be viewed as more promotable because supervisors would feel positive affect toward those employees. Such affect is, after all, a proximal concern when employees manage impressions in the workplace (Bolino et al., 2006; Cialdini, 1989; Ferris et al., 1994; Kacmar & Carlson, 1999; Wayne & Ferris, 1990; Wayne & Liden, 1995). Our theorizing was supported for both relationships with stars and relationships with projects. It may be that both relationships help supervisors protect relevant goals and identity elements, triggering positive affect (Lazarus, 1991; Novacek & Lazarus, 1990). For example, employees who support stars may contribute to supervisor achievement goals while also appealing to supervisor esteem. For their part, employees who support projects may contribute to supervisor stress avoidance goals while also appealing to supervisor moral values and ideals.

Although both supportive relationships with stars and supportive relationships with projects were shown to “move the needle” on supervisor impressions, employees only acted based on impression management motives in the case of stars. Those motives predicted supportive relationships with stars in both studies. In contrast, impression management motives did not predict supportive relationships with projects in either study. The results for stars are understandable given the intuitive benefits that come from being connected to a well-regarded peer (Cialdini, 1989, 2001; Dijkstra et al., 2010; Kilduff & Krackhardt, 1994; Leary, 1995; Schlenker, 1980). The results for projects, however, point to a missed impression management opportunity for many employees. The indirect effect of supportive relationships with projects on perceived promotability was
similar to the effect for stars, yet those project relationships were not driven by impression management motives.

Indeed, our Study 2 results showed just how ripe that missed opportunity could be when it comes to supporting projects. Specifically, our results showed that supportive relationships with projects—and not supportive relationships with stars—predicted supervisor perceptions of employee performance. It may be that supervisors place a premium on the task relevance of support (Allen, 2007), sensing that employees may be sharpening their skills, or growing in their capacity to perform their jobs by helping those who are less proficient (Allen et al., 1997; Kram, 1985; Newby & Heide, 1992; Noe et al., 2002; Wagner & Sternberg, 1985). In contrast, supervisors may not see any potential for employees to improve their skills by helping those who essentially do not need help. Both types of supportive relationships contributed to supervisor perceptions of employee citizenship, which makes sense given the promotive and discretionary nature of our supportive relationship operationalizations (Bolino, 1999; Bolino et al., 2006; Grant & Mayer, 2009; Rioux & Penner, 2001).

Of course, if employees were not supporting projects out of concerns for impression management, then why were they supporting them? Our Study 2 results suggest that supporting projects stands as an opportunity for exercising prosocial motives. Prosocial motives were a significant predictor of supportive relationships with projects but not stars. In a study of motives for helping behavior, Grant and Mayer (2009) had shown that being a “good citizen” (i.e., helping) was driven by both being a “good actor” (i.e., impression management motives) and by being a “good soldier” (i.e., prosocial motives). Our results suggest that employees play the role of good actor with stars while assuming the part of good soldier around projects. That latter result underscores Grant and Gino’s (2010) finding that prosocial motives become most salient when employees believe that they can truly make a difference.

Collectively, our results make important contributions to the literature on impression management. They illustrate the value in continuing to move beyond supervisor-targeted actions by expanding the focus to peer-referenced behaviors (Allen et al., 1997; Kilduff & Krackhardt, 1994; Ragins & Scandura, 1999). Indeed, it may be that employees view such actions as less risky than tactics like self-promotion or ingratiation, which can sometimes have negative reputational implications. In addition, our results reinforce the wisdom in Cialdini and Richardson’s (1980) notion that what is done may be less important than with whom it is done. Once the impression management net is cast beyond supervisors, scholars should resist the temptation to lump peers together. Finally, our results
revealed important differences in relationships with stars and projects, and accounting for such nuances would seem critical in future work.

In addition, our findings contribute to the literature on helping. Our results suggest that different motives drive employees’ willingness to help certain types of coworkers. This is important for researchers attempting to isolate the predictors of various helping behaviors (Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006). Moreover, our results support theorizing that suggests workplace helping behaviors are not purely altruistic (Bolino, 1999). Indeed, employees may also recognize that helping can have an influence on how they are perceived by supervisors and important others.

Suggestions for Future Research

In addition to these contributions, our results point to some valuable directions for future research. For example, it is important for researchers to continue to identify different motives for predicting supportive relationships with peers. As in the present research, there are certainly other “good actor” and “good citizen” motives that could drive employees towards forming workplace relationships with their peers (Bolino, 1999; Kim et al., 2013; Rioux & Penner, 2001). Relatedly, researchers should also consider other operationalizations of supportive relationships, or other types of interpersonal connections between employees, as outcomes of impression management motives. For example, it could be that social networks have a similar ability to influence supervisor reactions as do supportive relationships. Results from these studies would be instrumental in identifying employees who are likely to receive help or not and for aiding organizations with developing unbiased feedback processes for supervisors.

Our study focused on how supervisors would be influenced by supportive relationships, creating a need for future studies to consider how other parties might also be influenced. For example, would projects react negatively if they knew that the help they received was for image-enhancement purposes? Or, would they be grateful for the assistance, regardless of the employees’ intent? Also, how would observers—or coworkers not directly involved in supportive relationships—react? Would they react positively because they indirectly benefit from their peers’ development or because they are not burdened with the responsibility of supporting others? Or, as impression management scholars have noted, would they be suspicious of their colleagues whom they perceive as leveraging these relationships solely to win the boss’s favor (Vonk, 2002)?

Other suggestions center on additional nuances residing within the “peer” referent. We were drawn to the star versus project distinction
because most work units likely include examples of both and because relationships with both types of peers could reveal impression management benefits. That said, most work units include other kinds of peers—some of which could be intriguing for their impression management benefits (or costs). One example could be poor performing peers who lack the developmental potential of projects but who remain employed for idiosyncratic or bureaucratic reasons. How might supervisors view supportive relationships with these kinds of peers? As another example, some work units include peers who engage in minor or major deviant behaviors directed at coworkers, the organization, or the supervisor (e.g., Bennett & Robinson, 2000). Do supervisors appreciate employees giving such peers “second chances,” or do such connections create reputational detriments for those employees?

Limitations

This research has some limitations that should be noted. One limitation is that our measures of positive affect and perceived promotability were collected at the same time and from the same source. The path coefficients in that portion of the models may therefore be inflated by common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). However, it should be noted that the other portions of our models possess some combination of temporal separation, source separation, or both. Both design elements represent procedural remedies for common method bias (Doty & Glick, 1998). Moreover, many of our hypotheses depended on indirect effects that were not time or source bound. Another limitation was our small sample size in Study 1. Our design involved collecting data over two time periods and across four sources, which is challenging from an attrition perspective. This issue was exacerbated in our study by the need to identify two specific types of peers: stars and projects. Relatedly, the recruitment approach used in Study 1 prevented the calculation of a response rate—an issue that was addressed in the design of Study 2. We also note that in Study 1, our value for SRMR was not ideal, indicating potential model misspecification. However, our other fit indices indicated good fit, and this issue did not arise in Study 2.

Practical Implications

Despite those limitations, our research offers some important practical implications for employees, supervisors, and human resource personnel. For employees, our results point to important outcomes that can be gained from providing support to others. These outcomes include positive affect and perceptions that the employee is promotable. Perhaps more importantly, these gains can come from peers who are at different perceived
levels of competence and ability. Employees who might otherwise be tempted to shy away from working with projects (Andrews & Kacmar, 2001; Cialdini, 1989; Kulik et al., 2008) can be encouraged that it is not only the high-ability peers that offer an image enhancing “return on investment” at the workplace (Feldman & Klich, 1991). Moreover, our results suggest that for employees, providing support might be a viable path to being recognized as a good citizen or a competent performer at one’s job (Rosenfeld et al., 1995, Wexler, 1986).

For supervisors, our results suggest a compelling story to tell employees when promoting the benefits of a supportive workplace culture (Tews, Michel, & Ellingson, 2013). That story can highlight how employees, in addition to organizations, might benefit when support is provided to different types of peers. The employees’ benefits can come in the form of positive supervisor perceptions. However, our results also suggest that supervisors should recognize the impact that their perceptions have on how they evaluate their employees (Bazerman & Moore, 2009). That recognition could prompt more extensive record keeping or the collection of additional opinions to offset the impact of affect.

Finally, our results could be important to human resource personnel. Most human resource personnel are well aware of the influence that impression management can have on the interviewing process and hiring decisions (Bolino et al., 2008; Rosenfeld et al., 1995). However, less recognized by these personnel is how impression management can impact posthiring decisions and outcomes, such as supervisor evaluations and promotions. By recognizing that employees might use support as an image management strategy, human resource personnel can work to ensure that support is used with good overall intentions and not merely as a means to look good. Moreover, human resource personnel can help train supervisors to be wary of employees who are using support with dubious intentions (Halbesleben, Bowler, Bolino, & Turnley, 2010).

REFERENCES


