

Leadership Is in the Eye

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Practitioners and researchers alike are enchanted by constructs such as leader personality or leader behavior. Indeed, all too often, they tend to attribute leadership success solely to these factors. In doing so they miss the crucial role that followers play in the equation. To understand leadership effectiveness, contemporary leadership theories thus take a more follower-centric perspective. In the present article, the authors illustrate the follower-centric rationale by explaining why people construct cognitive images of the leadership world and how they use these implicit knowledge structures to interpret and react to the leadership attempts they encounter.



Cognitive Construction, Recognition, of the Beholder and Interpretation of Leadership



A drill sergeant at Parris Island, a U.S. Marine boot and training camp in South Carolina, delivers a severe reprimand to a recruit. Photo: Thomas Hoepker.

Leadership research has made many attempts to explain what good leadership is and what it is not. In the last decades, these endeavors were primarily focused upon particular leader personalities or behaviors (Yukl 2005). However, now and again, researchers began to question whether leader personality and behavior should be seen as direct determinants of leadership effectiveness (Hollander 1964; Lord / de Vader / Alliger 1986). They argued that previous leadership research missed the point that subordinates are mediators in the process. In other words, whether subordinates perform or not, depends on the way they perceive the leadership they encounter and, consequently,

whether they regard the perceived leader to be qualified for the leadership position and the associated claim for influence (Kenney / Schwartz-Kenney / Blascovich 1996).

Today, these repeated concerns are bringing about a widely recognizable paradigm shift in leadership research. The previous personality- or behavior-oriented leader-centered perspective is shifting more and more towards a follower-centric perspective which tries to analyze followers' cognitions in order to understand leadership effectiveness (Lord / Brown 2003; Schyns / Meindl 2005; Shamir / Pillai / Bligh / Uhl-Bien 2006; van Quaquebeke 2008). The field's mission statement is neatly summarized by Robert Lord and Cynthia Emrich's (2000, 551) conclusion: "If leadership resides, at least in part, in the minds of followers, then it is imperative to discover what followers are thinking."

Implicit Leadership Theories

Because most people have been brought up and socialized in groups in which leadership is a natural phenomenon, people, from a very early age on, start forming implicit assumptions concerning leadership, i.e. abstracted cognitive schemata about what constitutes good leadership (Kenney et al. 1996; Lord / Maher 1991).

Most readers will be able to provide a fairly sophisticated answer to the question of what they consider to be good leadership. Moreover, if queried in one (sub-)population, these answers will be mostly similar. When looking at the respective cognitive processes, it is not all that surprising. Subjectively held, implicit leadership theories overlap because they are based on mutually experienced leaders and are often interwoven with the thinking of others on the subject (such as co-workers and the media, cf. Lord / Maher 1991).

In the context of leadership, it is important to understand that these knowledge structures serve as an interpretational background which subordinates use as a basis for their evaluations of actual leaders, for instance, when judging a leader's qualification for the job. Implicit leadership theories can thus be regarded as a means by which people make sense of and respond to the organizational world around them (cf. Weick 1995). Moreover, these implicit knowledge structures are especially active in people's cognitive processing when they are under stress, i.e. when they have to make quick judgments which do not allow for more elaborate processing.

When adopting this perspective, a leader's quality and ultimately his or her effectiveness with his or her followers are determined, to a large extent, by followers' perceptions and interpretations. This is why respective research frequently posits that "leadership is in the eye of the beholder" (Nye 2002). Indeed, the follower-centric approach to leadership emphasizes the information processing aspect in leadership dyads (Lord / Maher 1991). In it, leadership is not seen as being directly related to a "true reality" (i.e. result of a leader's actual personality and behavior), but rather to the reality as a perceiver constructs it. In that sense, one might even say that the logic of implicit leadership theories is very similar to a constructivist perspective (von Foerster 1985; von Glasersfeld 1996). It does not argue what good or bad leadership is or even what reality is, but acknowledges that this is ultimately decided by perceivers themselves.

In order to understand how leadership works, one thus needs to understand how people construct their

knowledge structures on leadership and subsequently use them as cognitive backgrounds to process incoming perceptual information. In this respect, Robert Lord and Karen Maher (1991) argue for a differentiation into two cognitive processes: 1) recognition-based information processing and 2) inference-based information processing. Both serve the purpose of making sense of leadership and enabling people to respond adequately to the leadership they encounter.

Recognition-Based Information Processing

Interestingly, by the first grade, children can differentiate leaders from non-leaders and can articulate the factors which make them different. At this age they have already formed a cognitive schema for what they expect in a leader, i.e. they have formed a leader prototype.

The same "recognition" process that occurs in childhood persists in adulthood. Here, however, it starts to have organizational relevance because it is tied to organizational performance, i.e. a formal leader can hardly be effective if no one regards him or her as the leader. From an organizational point of view, it is thus imperative to understand what kind of leader prototypes employees have in mind and use as a 'benchmark' when determining whether they should follow certain leaders and others not.

Along these lines, much research in recent years has been primarily focused on the investigation of the structure and content of leader prototypes (Chhokar / Brodbeck / House 2007; Kenney et al. 1996; Offermann / Kennedy / Wirtz 1994). All in all, these works show that prototypes can be seen as socially shared representations of what leaders are (to be) like. Differences in representation however can occur between leadership domains, such as between sports, politics, and business (Lord / Foti / de Vader 1984), and they vary slightly between different cultures (intercultural measurements can be found in Chhokar et al.

To a large extent, a leader's effectiveness is determined by followers' perceptions and interpretations. Photo: Christoph Eschenbach conducts the Austrian Wiener Philharmoniker in Aalborg, northern Denmark (October 2008).

2007; measurements for Germany in van Quaquebeke / Brodbeck 2008).

Extended research on recognition-based information processing, so-called leader categorization research, is based upon the above described studies on leader prototypes in that it investigates organizational consequences depending on whether attributes of an actual leader do /

ceive discrepancies between an actual leader and their leader prototype (Scott / Brown 2006).

Apart from the recognition process itself, the leader categorization rationale further argues that the more an actual leader can be cognitively confirmed (i.e. categorized) as a leader, the more open subordinates will be towards his or her leadership.

Ultimately, the logic of leader prototype fit or misfit is thus used to explain why highly prototypical leaders are more likely to have better relationships with their followers, are able to strengthen followers' organizational commitment, boost followers' satisfaction at work, and increase followers' general contentment (Epitropaki / Martin 2005; van Quaquebeke / Brodbeck 2008). On the other hand, it also illustrates why women still find it difficult to advance their careers at a similar pace as males and often encounter legitimacy problems when finally reaching a position of leadership (Eagly / Karau 2002). All in all, the logic of recognition-based information processing posits that, if people observe what they believe to be a representative of the leader category,

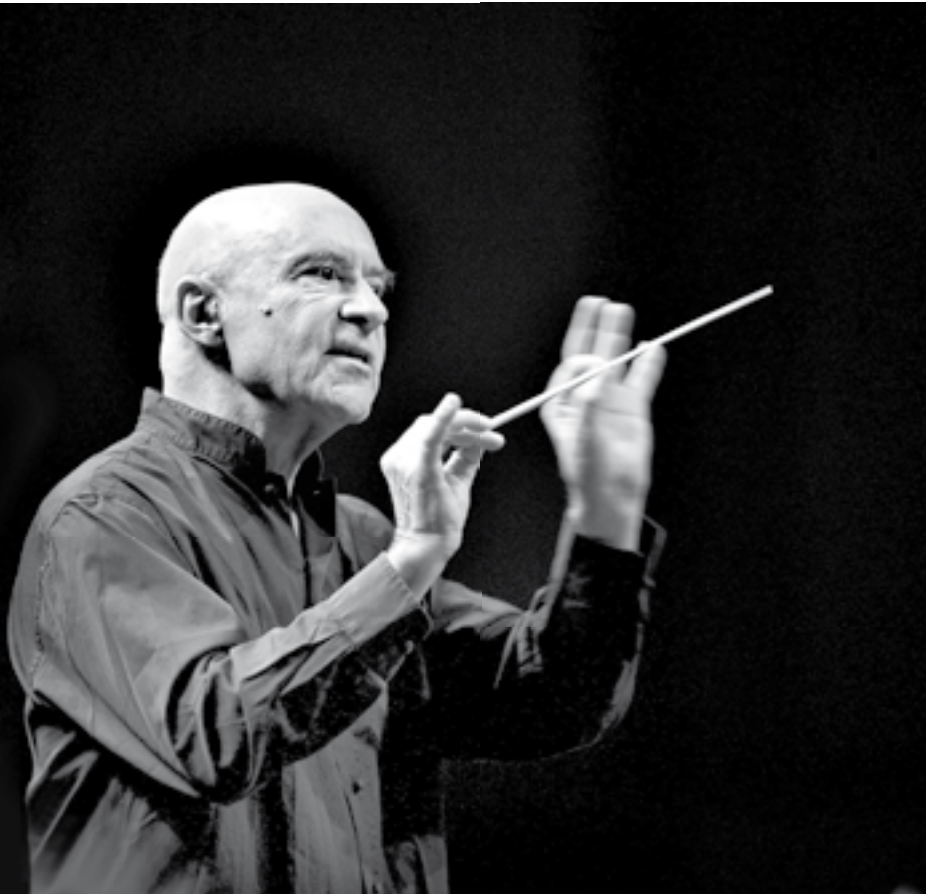
do not match those of his or her subordinates' leader prototype. More specifically, in the leader-categorization process, the prototypical image of a leader is said to be used as a benchmark for actual leaders to determine their 'fit' with the leader category. In other words, the leader categorization rationale is straightforward in its logic: The more subordinates perceive their actual leaders to fit the leader prototype, the better they are able to cognitively categorize them as leaders. Reaction time experiments support this reasoning in that they show that information processing times increase when leadership cues are semantically more peripheral with respect to participants' leader prototype and decrease when cues are more prototypical (Lord et al. 1984). Similarly, people find it harder to apply their leader schema and are less able to process their actual leaders' behavior as leadership behavior when they per-

they will react more favorably (i.e. perform better and question the leader's legitimacy less) compared to when they observe a leader who they do not find to represent their implicit leader prototype (van Quaquebeke 2008).

Inference-Based Information Processing

Inference-based information processing is a cognitive process that does not draw on cognitive categorization but rather on an attribution network, i.e. assumptions that link events to past behavior.

Consider, for instance, how you would describe the coach of a sports team that just won the championship, the supervisor of a work team that devised a successful product, or the commander of a



military team that won a NATO exercise maneuver. Conversely, consider how you would describe the coach of a sports team that was thrown out of a tournament at an early stage, the supervisor of a work team whose product nearly ruined the company, or the commander of a military team that was captured during a NATO exercise maneuver. What you will find is that you are inclined to infer leader behaviors without knowing if they actually occurred, but that are consistent with your implicit leadership theories (Meindl 1995).

Jim Meindl and his colleagues have coined this phenomenon the "romance of leadership" because they found that outstanding team performance, but also extreme failures, are attributed to team leaders even when that link is questionable (cf. Nye 2002). Correspondingly, subordinates also frequently engage in post hoc assumptions when, for instance, attributing more charismatic attributes to leaders after group success than after failure (Schyns / Felfe / Blank 2007).

People are particularly adept at looking for other information (particularly when leader recognition is not apparent) to infer leadership (Lord / Maher 1991). Such inference-based cognitive processing originates in people's belief that the essential role of any leader is to help the group accomplish its goals. Leaders who facilitate goal accomplishment are, therefore, looked upon as good leaders. Leaders who impede or are ineffective in achieving goals are looked upon as not qualified for the job (Nye 2005). In short: When group goals are not met, the leader is to blame; when group goals are met, the leader is to be celebrated. Judith Nye (2005) notes that the link between successful groups and effective leaders seems to be so deeply ingrained in people's cognitive structures as if they were two sides of the same coin. Even subordinates themselves – individuals who should know the inside story of the group's success or failure – appear to make the same biased connection. Moreover, once the leader has been attributed to be the root of a group's success or

failure, people access their implicit leadership theories to fill in the gaps, e.g., group success means the leader must have been qualified, that means he or she has leadership attributes like the effective leader prototype (cf. Schyns et al. 2007).

Practical Implications of a Follower-Centric Approach

From a practical perspective, one might question why a follower-centric approach to leadership should be investigated. Are not leaders appointed to be in charge,



Of course, people are not blind to the various situational factors that can facilitate or inhibit group success. If people become aware of possible factors for group success or failure unrelated to leadership, they are less inclined to assume that the leader has full responsibility. However, it is generally found in psychological studies that people rather like to assume that actually and symbolically dominant people are more responsible for certain outcomes than situational factors ("fundamental attribution error"). Any situational evidence thus has to be overwhelming for people to completely discount the causal role of the group leader.

and are not subordinates paid to follow them? While such an argumentation might be upheld, it overlooks the true potentials of follower-centric research: the potential to identify the most effective leaders and, perhaps even more importantly, the potential to use a bottom up-approach in defining ideal leadership within a company.

From a system theory perspective (Luhmann 1984; Willke 2000), one could argue that a group is fairly intelligent (i.e. collectively intelligent) in determining what kinds of leaders it needs for the different challenges it has to face during the evolution of its system (Van Vugt 2006; Williams / Leavitt 1947). Indeed,



Follower-centric research can illustrate conditions under which subordinates will follow their leader – a crucial precondition for leadership effectiveness. Photo: Manolo Cadenas, trainer of Barcelona handball club.

it is somewhat odd to think that certain individuals in human resource departments, in a board of directors, or in a personnel consultancy are any smarter in determining the best leader for a group than the group itself. Yet, somehow, this is what happens today. Leaders are formally appointed by whatever entity while their (future) subordinates more or less (passively) have to accept the decision. Indeed, when acknowledging that this is a rather odd and definitely not a system-immanent way of reaching a leadership position, it is not surprising that many of these leaders fail – especially in a time of crisis when leaders need follower-ship most.

Instead of relying on a business case, let us draw on a seemingly strange, but very appropriate example to illustrate our rationale. Some years ago, the Scottish BBC broadcasted a reality show called “Castaway 2000”. This show was a scientific and more elaborate version of the later popular Big Brother shows. BBC put 36 people, who were selected as a typical cross-section of British society, on a remote island off the British coast. Similar to the Big Brother series, participants not only needed to cope with their everyday lives for the duration of one year, but were also confronted with tasks that BBC told the group to fulfill.

What happened on that island in the coming months was highly interesting to monitor. At first, the islanders accommodated themselves to the new situation in a very similar way as in their regular lives. The manager, lawyer, and medical doctor more or less openly claimed leadership of the group. The others, still unsure how to behave in this new situation, went along. After all, that was what they were accustomed to in their regular lives. After a while though, people began to realize that the formal structures which usually exist to put and hold certain people in power were nonexistent on that island. In realizing this, people came to question the leadership structures in their group.

A phase of great turmoil and loss of orientation was the consequence. At the same time, one man quietly earned more and more islanders' respect. He earned it not by exhibiting a particular type of leadership behavior, but rather by representing a more complex leader image, i.e. being supportive when needed, being decisive when needed, seeking participation when needed, and holding charismatic speeches at other times. This man was a 26-year-old photo intern from London. He was the one whom (most) people came to respect (cf. van Quaquebeke / Henrich / Eckloff 2007) and whom they gladly followed when guidance was needed. He was not ‘born’ as a leader, he was not trained to be a leader, and he certainly had no posi-

tional powers to rely upon; he simply showed qualities the people on that island sought and expected in a leader.

Although for some, leadership phenomena on a remote island in a TV show might not seem relevant for the ‘real’ world, they neatly exemplify the true nature of leadership, revealing that leadership (legitimacy) is a function that has to be understood primarily from the followers' point of view.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) can add another perspective to the picture. Their researchers concluded that when a space shuttle engine starts to lose fuel or when cabin oxygen runs low 2000 miles away from earth, the crew is not necessarily going to listen to the one with the most stars on the epaulette. Instead, they will listen to the one they respect and whom they trust to be able to save their lives. NASA authors (Connors / Harrison / Akins 1985, 263) put it diplomatically: “Although on-board managers can be invested with reward and coercive power, these forms of social power may (...) be undermined as Earth becomes remote.”

Arguably, the insecurity felt in a crisis, such as when a space shuttle engine is leaking fuel, is extreme, but, in essence, it is not that much different from feelings of insecurity and uncertainty in business. Everyday business life involves numerous crises which can induce similar feelings in employees: an acquisition of one's company by another, rumors that a competitor is entering the market with a service or product that closely resembles that of one's own company yet at half the cost, or turmoil in other nations which, when incorrect executive decisions are made, can easily affect one's company's survival. In fact, imagine any of the major challenges organizations are faced with today, and imagine being a subordinate in one of these organizations. Who would you want to be led by? Who would you like to follow in such situations? These are the questions the follower-centric approach to leadership tries to answer.

The answer so far is that it is crucial that leaders match their subordinates' leader prototype. Only when subordinates perceive a match between the two, will they be truly open for leadership. Leaders who do not represent their subordinates' leader prototype will find it difficult to be perceived as a leader and, consequently, to have their subordinates' agreement to lead them. To enhance leader effectiveness and minimize unnecessary friction with followers, it thus seems valuable to give leaders a feel for this specific dynamic and an understanding of the leader prototypes a certain country, a certain company, a certain division, or even certain individuals might hold and apply as a benchmark (cf. Lord / Mather 1991; van Quaquebeke 2008).

Accordingly, initial efforts have been made, as part of the Global Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness Program (GLOBE), to prepare leaders in development programs for the challenges they will face in intercultural contexts (Chhokar et al. 2007). Likewise, first leader prototype instruments have been developed to be deployed in research in German-speaking countries (van Quaquebeke / Brodbeck 2008). Also, first attempts are underway to use the follower-centric perspective in 360-degree feedback tools. These will enable managers not only to assess how well they fit their subordinates' leader prototype, but also help them to observe if and how employees' leader prototypes might change over time. By following such approaches, researchers try to support organizations on such issues as effective leadership of diverse teams (i.e. is there a common understanding of the leader prototype?) or effective staffing of leaders across cultures, industries, or departments (i.e. Who is best equipped to match a prototype of another culture, industry, or department?).

Limitations of the Follower-Centric Approach

As valuable as all of the above implications are, researchers in this field often omit very crucial boundary conditions (perhaps because the field is still rather new and one does not want to risk diminishing important implications when addressing potential pitfalls of the very same research). Let us explain two concerns we have for the follower-centric approach when its insights are used one-to-one in managerial practice.

Firstly, while following the rationale of leader-categorization will increase leaders' effectiveness among their employees, i.e., subordinates will be easier led and will be more satisfied with their leaders when these match their leader prototype, this perspective is incomplete. It neglects the fact that those leaders, who

subordinates are willing to follow, should ideally also be leaders who make good leadership decisions. So far however, research has not investigated whether leader prototypicality is also related to good decision making. Indeed, it is possible that leaders, who are endorsed by their subordinates due to their prototype fit, are unable to make critical decisions on organizational issues that could potentially reduce their group support (cf. research on elected and appointed leaders, Hollander 1964). As long as research on this aspect is still missing, follower-centric research can 'only' be said to illustrate conditions under which subordinates will follow their leader. Certainly that is well worth knowing, and it is a crucial precondition for leadership effectiveness, but it does not address whether leadership effectiveness will also translate into organizational effectiveness.

Secondly and important for all managerial implications related to the follower-centric approach, it should be recognized that organizations may and should sometimes intentionally decide to recruit and develop leaders and employees who do not represent the prevalent organizational leader prototype. Following such a strategy makes sense if, for instance, a new kind of leader type is desired, such as when established leader competencies are accepted in the company, but do not suffice to face coming business challenges. Companies may also decide to recruit and promote leaders against a prevalent organizational leader prototype to indicate their support for societal changes and their understanding that often (somewhat biased) categorization processes and not the lack of leadership competencies tend to exclude certain groups from leadership ranks (for example, women in leadership positions, as outlined in our introduction). While recruiting or training leaders who do not correspond with an organizational leader prototype will very likely compromise short term leadership effectiveness, it is our firm belief that organizations can, in the long term, be more successful by changing their leader prototypes instead of retaining established, but potentially destructive leader prototypes.

Conclusions

In summary, the follower-centric approach to leadership, in particular via cognitive explanations such as implicit leadership theories, is an ambitious endeavor to account for the complex processes that occur between leaders and subordinates in group

and organizational situations. It incorporates cognitive information processing mechanisms in an effort to understand how people identify, evaluate, and respond to leaders (recognition-based) as well as how people use outcome information or additional situational cues to identify leaders and infer upon their quality (inference-based).

Importantly, the follower-centric approach to leadership allows an undogmatic discussion of effective leadership because it does not argue about what is good and what is bad leadership, but states that that issue is ultimately decided upon in the eyes of the followers. In that respect, it nicely extends recent discussions which argue that certain, currently highly esteemed leadership traits such as transformational or charismatic leadership will not surface all the time (Pillai / Meindl 1998; Shamir / Howell 1999). Instead, specific leadership types require 'their' circumstances to be effective as only then they are desired / respected by subordinates. Future research will continue to tap into subordinates' cognitive processes in an ongoing effort to determine why people respond in the way they do to the leaders they encounter.

Zusammenfassung

Leadership aus Sicht der Geführten
Um Führungseffektivität zu erklären, wenden sich moderne Führungstheorien zunehmend den Kognitionen der Angestellten zu. Insbesondere werden hierbei generelle Erwartungen und Annahmen zu Führungskräften und Führungsprozessen untersucht. Die Autoren geben einen Überblick über diese noch recht junge Forschungsrichtung, erklären kognitive Verarbeitungsmechanismen, diskutieren, wie sich der damit verbundene Paradigmenwechsel in konstruktivistische und systemtheoretische Sichtweisen einordnen lässt, und sie skizzieren die Chancen, aber auch die möglichen Risiken, die diese Perspektive für die organisationale Praxis birgt.

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