
Culture's Consequences for Leadership: The Role of Context in Affecting Leadership Perceptions and Performance

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As acknowledged by Lord and Dinh (2014) in their focal article, across a plethora of organizational literatures and topics of interest, there often seems to be a common theme: context matters. Although this is not a very surprising statement and may seem obvious, the surprising reality is that within a number of topics in our field, context is either superficially taken into consideration or not examined at all. This oversight has the potential to skew our understanding of important concepts. Indeed, Joshi and Roh (2009) revealed in their meta-analysis exploring team diversity that context served as a significant moderator of performance, illustrating the criticality of understanding how contextual factors may predict outcomes above and beyond individual inputs.

Despite the fact that leadership literature has accounted for context at a relatively high level within contingency and situational approaches to leadership (Northouse, 2012), such theories tend to overlook more fine-grained details and provide little insight as to *how* leaders and followers respond to a change in the status quo in practice. However, there are rich literatures in the area of culture that may offer a unique perspective. Therefore, we applaud Lord

and Dinh's efforts to show that leadership perception or interventions may differ in various contexts. In an attempt to further expand onto how a dynamic context can affect leaders and their followers, this commentary turns to culture research and the idea that situations exist that can override traditional descriptive norms, affecting how leaders must respond and how they will be accepted by followers. For the purposes of this commentary, descriptive norms are conceptualized as perceptions as to how one's cultural group acts (Gelfand, Lun, Lyons, & Shteynberg, 2011). Taking a descriptive norms approach may aid in filling in some of the gaps that are missing within current research by providing insight as to how contextual changes might influence perceptions of leadership or result in unexpected reactions from the followers, as well as offer several points for future research in this area.

The Dynamic Nature of Context

As research often only captures a picture of an organization at one point in time, we often only have a view of leadership in a static context. However, much as Lord and Dinh elaborate, it is imprudent to think of a system of social interactions as anything other than dynamic. From a cultural research perspective, it is found that specific contexts can cause certain sets

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of cultural values to take precedence over others (Osland & Bird, 2000). For instance, consider New York City after the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Soon after the attacks, the entire city transformed from one of the most individualistic cities in the United States to being extremely collectivistic. Numerous individuals helped one another and were looking out for the best interest of the community, even if it meant supporting political leaders whose views they may not have previously supported (Landau et al., 2004).

Why might such changes in context result in shifts in both individual behaviors as well as a change in subsequent responses to leadership? One perspective that may have a contributing factor is the idea that certain types of situations may evoke shifts in cultural norms at the individual, unit, organizational, and national levels. Specifically, Gelfand et al. (2011) offer three situations that alter one's descriptive norms: amplifiers, suppressors, and reversers (see Table 1 for definitions of each). This is comparable to the sentiment expressed within the focal article that contextual cues have the ability to alter an individual's self-identity. However, these accelerators, suppressors, and reversers can impact more than just individuals by shifting cultural values and beliefs. Namely, they can change the social dynamics that drive leader–follower interactions, forcing leaders to anticipate how changes in the context may affect how their followers respond to a given event and subsequent events over time. Furthermore, leaders themselves may serve as contextual drivers to change the descriptive norms of a situation, causing followers to further change their reactions.

Context and Leadership

Although these concepts have been explored in the realm of culture, how might this idea of situational suppressors, reversers, and accelerators directly relate to leadership? This is a question that has been largely unexplored at all levels of analysis. However, some inferences can be drawn

Table 1. *Definitions of Amplifiers, Suppressors, and Reversers*

Term	Definition
Amplifier	Any contextual factor that enhances one's typical cultural expression and, in turn, might exacerbate cultural differences
Suppressor	Any contextual factor that removes cultural expression entirely and, in some cases, is replaced with new behavioral norms
Reverser	Any contextual factor that causes one to exhibit behaviors opposite to their typical cultural expression

based upon previous research. For our purposes we will focus on the team level of analysis in an effort to emphasize the dynamic social systems that exist between leaders and followers.

First, it is important to consider that both a leader and his or her followers might react differently to the same situation. For example, consider a leader that is in charge of a team operating within an organization whose culture is one of control. If this organization begins to have issues with their top management being untrustworthy, such a context has the ability to act as an amplifier for the leader of the team while acting as a reverser for everyone else on the team. Specifically, due to the unstable and novel nature of the situation, the leader might fall back on what he/she knows and feel that structure is more necessary than before to regain order. On the other hand, his or her followers might feel that there is no reason for them to operate within a strict structure if they have reason to believe that their higher level leaders are unethical. Such a distinction in response could be further augmented if the members of the team exhibited low power distance whereas the leader was high in power distance. This difference has the ability to cause issues that resonate from the single team to the entire organization. Ultimately, this

ties directly into the first principle of the focal article: that leadership is not one-way but bidirectional and all sides should be considered in research.

In addition, there are both experimental studies and real-life examples that show that an individual is more likely to amplify their typical cultural expression in situations requiring automatic processing (Triandis, 1989). In these contexts, due to time pressures or high cognitive load, individuals will have little time to think about all of the various ways they might act. Therefore, they typically fall back on their cultural customs as a substitute for thought in an effort to save time. When we apply leadership to this concept, this could mean that the followers, in these circumstances, might be more likely to turn to the leader as the figurehead for their organization's culture. This could be particularly salient for teams in high-stress environments such as nursing or space exploration where consequences for failure are extreme and a large amount of specialized responsibility is placed on each individual.

Reversers, on the other hand, have the ability to become more salient in virtual or distributed teams. Specifically, as virtuality increases, ambiguity increases and there is a decrease in social presence (Kirkman & Mathieu, 2005). When an individual is using a communication tool such as email or instant messaging where there is a perceived decrease in accountability due to the fact that they cannot be directly seen, individuals who typically save face in conversations with others often ignore their cultural tendencies and become aggressive towards others with whom they disagree (Rosette, Brett, Barsness & Lytle, 2006). Therefore, in these contexts, a highly virtual tool might decrease the likelihood that an individual is seen as a leader by his or her followers. In the end, each of these examples serves as support for the focal article's idea that leaders need to have a firm grasp on the social structure and dynamics of their team.

Ultimately, the more that we identify situations that amplify, suppress, or reverse

the descriptive norms of a team, the more we will understand what causes these changes. Specifically, referring to the connectionist model employed by Lord and Dinh, by examining these situations, we might be able to determine what behavioral and/or cultural nodes are activated within a team to cause these changes. This, in turn, can provide a better understanding as to how a team might react to novel situations based on what nodes are activated by the context, all of which takes us one step closer to increasing performance by understanding how the future can become the present. Therefore, based upon the aforementioned discussion, we posit that amplifiers, suppressors, and reversers can be directly related to each of the principles of the focal article (see Table 2).

Studying Context and Leadership in the Future

Having a better understanding of how different contexts can affect descriptive norms and subsequent perceived leadership and/or its effectiveness can be beneficial from both research and practice perspectives. For researchers, identifying when, how, and why descriptive norms may be dynamically suppressed, accelerated, or reversed by different events may provide a good foundation for developing leadership interventions. Furthermore, in an applied setting, knowledge of how a leader and followers react to different contexts could prove to be especially useful in organizations wherein dynamic cultural shifts may occur on a regular basis, such as with expatriates being sent overseas to manage international teams. Foresight regarding these situations would prepare leaders so that they can anticipate responses to events that might seem contrary to the culture's descriptive norms. There are however a few questions that need to be addressed before these things can come to fruition, as outlined below.

First, can the descriptive norms approach be empirically supported outside of culture

Table 2. *Amplifiers, Suppressors, and Reversers Applied to Lord and Dinh's Four Principles*

Application of amplifiers, suppressors, and reversers	
Principle 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders can serve as the catalyst that causes a change in the descriptive norms of the team. • The perspective of all parties should be taken into consideration because the same situation might result in different changes to the descriptive norms for the leader and followers.
Principle 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in descriptive norms can result in mental model changes. • Amplifiers, suppressors, and reversers might appear due to a specific activation of behavioral nodes.
Principle 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With the knowledge of how a leader is able to elicit effective changes in descriptive norms among followers, leadership performance can be increased.
Principle 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowing how followers will act in situations that cause changes to the descriptive norms, one can better understand how the future becomes the present.

research? If so, which model of culture is most appropriate to examine in a leadership context? To this point, this concept has been solely examined within the realm of culture and negotiation (Gelfand et al., 2011). Therefore, it is important that support is found for extrapolating this idea to the topic of leadership. This should be done leveraging both quantitative and qualitative means so that findings can be combined to provide a richer understanding, especially across multiple levels of analysis and across time. Furthermore, a number of different models of culture exist that vary based upon their number of quantitative dimensions, organizational focus, and empirical support. For instance, based upon the suggested leadership focus, would it be best to use the GLOBE project model suggested by House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004)? If so, that would limit the theory to organizations only and lose sight of leadership in larger contexts.

Second, how do we accurately look forward and predict reactions that might alter descriptive norms? The focal article specifically explains that, when examining leader effectiveness, looking backward has the ability to leave out a number of contextual variables within the leader's environment. Although the approach described can be used to look forward and describe future effectiveness or perceptions, we cannot ensure that every group of individuals

will always act in the same fashion. Therefore, it would be necessary to generate best practices to guide leaders how they can accurately build upon past experiences to be more effective in the future.

Finally, does the sensemaking process of a leader differ from that of his or her followers? If so, how do situations that alter descriptive norms factor into a leader's sensemaking processes? It is very likely that although it is important for members of a team to look out for specific factors that may arise while performing their task, a leader might have additional factors to take into consideration. For instance, if a leader knows that some aspect of the organizational context is going to change, it is likely that he or she will prepare their team for these changes. Therefore, it might be beneficial for leaders to know how their team, as a whole, would react to changes in context that arise during their tenure.

In summary, this commentary aims to elaborate upon the importance of taking context into consideration by drawing in concepts from culture research and speculating their importance within the realm of leadership. All of the aforementioned examples of situations that alter one's descriptive norms are presented to buttress the argument of Lord and Dinh that context is a constantly changing and extremely important factor to consider for researchers. It is our hope that this raises awareness to

the novel ideas brought forth by culture research and results in a better understanding as to how unexpected changes in context can affect a leader and his or her followers.

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