
Location, Language, Location: Toward a Better Understanding of Leader-Performance Relations

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Lord and Dinh (2014) raise a number of important points that need to be considered in development of leadership research and practice. There are three main issues that we wish to address to support and develop their statements.

The Importance of Context

The controversy over which is more important, situation or leader personality, is an ancient one (Bass, 1990). For historians like Carlyle, there was a fundamental belief that great leaders would emerge, no matter the situation, whereas situationalists like Hegel (1971) advanced the view that great leaders emerged as a result of good timing and circumstance. In attempting to understand what makes a leader great, recent research on transformational leadership has adopted a dispositional approach to leadership through identifying those personality traits that are characteristic of transformational leaders (Bono & Judge, 2004; Judge & Bono, 2000); charisma is a central component of transformational leadership. Empirical research identifying situations that precede and give rise to charismatic leadership has started to increase (De Cremer, 2002; Pillai, Grewal, Stites-Doe, & Meindl,

1997). However, there is still a need to understand how the situation attenuates and strengthens the relationship between leader behavior and organizational outcomes. Some recent research on virtual charismatic trainers suggests that context is important. Mitchell, Brown, Mann, and Towler (2014) examined the interactive effects of a charismatic (vs. noncharismatic) pedagogical training agent, feedback comparison groups, and performance-approach goal orientation on trainee performance. Findings revealed that high performance-approach trainees, who received training from a charismatic agent and did not receive a feedback comparison, not only outperformed low performance-approach trainees in the same conditions but also were the best performers in general. Although it is true that this study was examined within a training environment rather than a typical leadership situation, the study has several implications for leadership research. First, the situation was unique in that participants were in a virtual environment and interacted with an agent. The findings suggest that individuals can develop a social relationship with an agent or avatar that influences how they feel and how they perform. Second, the findings suggest that, depending on follower characteristics, charismatic influence can have differential effects on follower performance. This is consistent with previous research that demonstrates that follower characteristics impact the effects of leadership on work

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outcomes (Dvir & Shamir, 2003; Ehrhart & Klein, 2001). Third, the study findings reinforce the need for contingency models of leadership, which help link various leadership styles to specific contextual demands that lead to better performance outcomes (Avolio, 2007). Fourth, it is sound practice to adopt a person-interactionist approach to leadership research. The theory of trait activation goes as far back as Henry Murray (1938), who asserted that traits can be activated when situations “press” on individuals to behave in certain ways. Recent research in organizational behavior reinforces this approach (e.g., trait activation theory; Tett & Burnett, 2003). Context does matter, and it should be considered and integrated into leadership theory and design (Johns, 2006).

The Importance of Language

In moving forward with leadership research, we also encourage researchers to consider the importance of leader language and the influence of language on followers. There is considerable agreement within the organizational science arena that powerful language plays an important role in shaping and forming perceptions of effective leadership (Conger, 1991; Shamir, Arthur, & House, 1994). For many researchers, this linkage between language and leadership is a neglected area of empirical investigation (Conger, 1991). A notable characteristic of charismatic leaders is their effectiveness in communication. Central to the relationship between language and leadership is that charismatic leaders effectively use linguistic techniques to persuade followers to engage in activities that are consistent with the leader’s vision. To quote Drake and Moberg (1986), p. 570: “Influence attempts are successful or unsuccessful as a function of the inducements provided in both the content and form of language used.” Generally, charismatic leaders use effective linguistic devices to instill their followers with a vision (Shamir et al., 1994), and through powerful language evoke a positive emotional response from their followers

(Conger, 1991). There is some research in the leadership literature to support the importance of language. The research suggests that leaders can be effective through their charismatic communication style, the visionary content of their lecture material, the extent to which they intellectually stimulate trainees, and the individual attention they provide (Frese, Beigel, & Schoenborn, 2003; Towler, 2003). This research has focused on how positive language can influence followers. However, in day-to-day situations, leaders are also likely to use negative language that can hinder and wound social relationships. Even the most heroic leader can’t be perfect, particularly in stressful situations. We encourage research that considers how these types of interactions influence the overall relationship that leaders have with their followers.

Location, Location, Location

Due to the increase in globalization and geographically dispersed workforces, many of the interactions between leaders and followers in the coming years will take place online, in both synchronous and asynchronous settings. Virtual project teams (e.g., Bell & Kozlowski, 2002) will play a major role in helping leaders and followers who are not colocated accomplish interdependent tasks. To highlight the importance of virtual leadership in future business practices, Bernard and Ruth Bass asserted that (Bass & Bass, 2002, p. 1159) “Virtual teams and e-leadership will be the rule rather than the exception in large organizations.” Although there is preliminary evidence that suggests that certain leadership behaviors are more strongly linked to team performance in virtual settings than face-to-face settings (Purvanova & Bono, 2009), there is still much to be learned about leader effectiveness in virtual settings. Moving forward, if we desire to gain a better understanding of how leaders are effective through technology-mediated communication, we must consider individual differences in both follower and leader reactions

to communication media. For instance, followers who use electronic communication on a routine basis may be more perceptive to transformational leadership behaviors exhibited by leaders than followers who use electronic communication on a less frequent basis. Such differences in use of electronic media can have significant implications for leader effectiveness and team effectiveness. We invite further exploration of potentially meaningful individual characteristics in future research on leadership in virtual contexts.

Workforces have also become more culturally diverse as a result of increased globalization. As cross-cultural researchers pursue an answer to whether the qualities of effective leadership are conditional or universal, some have noted that one of the primary challenges in advancing cross-cultural leadership theory and research is that followers between cultures and within the same culture may perceive leaders actions and behaviors differently (Lord & Brown, 2004). Such challenges add layers of complexity to Lord and Dinh's four principles that provide insight into the leadership process. Beginning with the notion that leadership is a socially constructed, bidirectional process in which leaders and followers are coproducers of leadership, we encourage future research to consider how the influence process may vary across cultures. Findings from the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) project, a cross-cultural study of leadership in 60 different countries, revealed that certain cultural beliefs about effective leadership (e.g., individualistic leadership) varied across cultures (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). In cultures in which people prefer autonomous, independent leaders who act alone without engaging the group and handle self-governing decisions, leadership may be characterized by a lack of social exchanges between followers and leaders, and followers' roles in coproducing leadership may be limited.

Secondly, given that an information processing perspective can help us better

understand how leadership is socially constructed, we must take into account the aforementioned findings from the GLOBE project, and we must be willing to investigate phenomena beyond traditional implicit leadership theories (e.g., habits, stereotypes, gender biases). Consistent with Avolio's (2007) recommendations for integration of culture as a contextual factor in models of leadership, we encourage researchers to consider the cultural implicit theories of followers and leaders as well as enacted behaviors and the interpretation of leader actions in order to gain a better understanding of what constitutes effective leadership.

Third, we agree that in order to better understand the leadership-performance relationship, researchers should adopt a reverse engineering approach beginning with theories of follower, group, and organizational performance; however, considering that leaders impact organizational performance through the efforts of multiple individuals, it is important to incorporate cultural characteristics of followers and groups into such theories. Empirical evidence suggests that characteristics of transnational teams (e.g., cultural differences) decrease the salience of team identity, which results in effort-withholding behaviors (Shapiro, Furst, Spreitzer, & Von Glinow, 2002). Such findings have important implications for understanding how leaders impact performance through others.

Finally, considering the notion that individuals often look backward in order to learn how to handle difficult aspects of social relations (e.g., trust violations), it is important that people take into account the broader cultural context in which the relationship between leaders and followers exists. Past research has argued that divergent behavior rules for conflict management can be attributed to differences in self-construal between individualists and collectivists (Hofstede, 1984; Triandis, 1995). Thus, culture appears to play a major role in how individuals manage unfavorable aspects of social relations, explain past events, and simplify information processing in the present.

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