

The impact of implicit followership



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Gap on Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Quality: A Followership Approach

We are often enamoured with heroic leadership, attracted to individuals known for their character, who meet challenges and overcome adversity with their charisma (1-SAF article). But we often forget, “ without followers... Napoleon would have been just a man with grandiose ambitions” (Lee, 1991, p. 2).

While leadership has been viewed as a reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers rather than purely leader-centric, (Hollander, xxxx or 12-SAF article), the huge academic literature on leadership has focused mainly on the leaders’ characteristics, selection, development, and their contributions to organisational success (for review, see Avolio, Walumbwa & Weber, 2009). In the words of Lord, Brown and Freiberg, “ the follower remains an under-explored source of variance in understanding leadership processes”(p. 167, 11, -SAF article).

Followers are integral to the leadership process (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001). Yet, their influence is often either downplayed or neglected. The emphasis on leaders over followers has resulted in companies spending 80 percent of their time and research efforts focusing on the 20 percent within organizations, while spending barely 20 percent of their time and energy with the other 80 percent (Uken, in Riggio et al., 2008 book).

Consider the huge resources allocated for leadership development that stand in stark contrast to the absence of plans for followership training. The 2003 United States Training Industry Study revealed 85% of U. S. companies offer leadership training to their employees (Gavin, 2003). The financial costs of

leadership training alone is approximately US\$6, 000 to US\$7, 500 per participant annually (Delahoussaye, 2001). For large corporations, the amount can add up to millions of dollars (Brown, Eager, & Lawrence, 2005). In addition, most training budgets support only 20 percent (leaders) in the organization, overlooking the training needs of the other 80 percent (followers).

Moreover, many leaders in organizations have followership roles too. Managers “ at different points in their careers ... play both roles, though seldom equally well” (Kelley, 1988, p. 142). Organizations must recognise a good leader or a good follower requires both leadership and followership, and should aim to develop both in its employees.

Research objectives

This study aims to examine LMX quality from a followership approach. This study would be the first to examine the followership expectation gap in LMX quality. How do Implicit Followership Theories (IFTs) impacts the leader-member exchange (LMX) quality in a dyadic relationship? How does the followership expectation gap, or the gap between leader’s IFT and the actual followers’ behaviour, affect the leader-member exchange (LMX) quality?

The Followership Approach

Follower-centric approaches to leadership (Meindl, 1995, p. 330) considers how followers view their leaders and their leaders’ behaviours. Nonetheless, they are still primarily leader-centric (Shamir, Pillai, Bligh, & Uhl-Bien, 2007). On the other hand, followership approach or follower-based approach (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 223) considers how followers view their own behaviours

and roles when engaging with leaders (Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007). Followership explores how followers' behaviours are related to organizational outcomes, e. g. leadership, and the follower becomes the primary focus. Thus, with its focus on the less celebrated role of followers, the followership approach helps “ reverse the lens” (Shamir, 2007) in leadership research.

The traditional perspective of the “ passive” follower, characterised by the attributes of conformity and docility, has been increasingly replaced by the “ active” follower, who is courageous to shape the outcome of leadership in today's organizational context (SAF article). Good followership involves subordinates who can think independently, send supervisors honest and truthful messages, and implement difficult decisions (Lundin, Lancaster, & Gardner, 1990). In the contemporary context where team work, knowledge workers, and shared leadership is emphasized, good followership skills have never been more important. Indeed, having “ exemplary”, “ courageous”, and “ star” followers is regarded as a precondition for organizational success (Chaleff, 2003; Kelley, 1992).

Leader-Member Exchange

Unlike leadership theories that contend that leaders have a predominant leadership style and tend to treat all their followers in a similar fashion, the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975) states that leaders form unique exchange relationships of different quality with each of their followers.

Here, the dyadic relationship is seen as reciprocal. The role of the follower is informally negotiated between followers and their leaders over time (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Regarding the development of the relationship, leader-follower relationships are thought to be initiated through an initial "offer" from the leader, which then is potentially reciprocated by the follower (Graen, 2003). After this initial phase, in which the follower can "prove" him- or herself, the relationship continues with a reciprocation of contributions, that is, a reciprocation of positive actions that foster the relationship by fulfilling the other party's needs. Put differently, depending on the leader's perception of the follower's contribution, the leader will feel more or less indebted to reciprocate with an own contribution until he or she perceives an equilibrium of contributions. At this stage, the follower perceives the contribution of the leader and has to decide whether he or she needs to adjust his or her own contribution, etc. As long as either of the parties still perceives that an equilibrium of contributions is not reached, the relationship is still dynamic, that is, it can either deteriorate (when a party perceives the other to contribute less than him- or herself and thus also lowers his or her own contributions), or it can thrive (when a party perceives the other to contribute more than him- or herself and thus also increases his or her own contributions). Indeed, relationships are found to be more satisfying and thus stable when a party perceives the contributions to be almost equal or the other party to contribute more (Buunk, Doosje, Jans, & Hopstaken, 1993). Contrary, a lack of reciprocation by the other party will lead people to experience negative feelings, especially when they feel that they themselves

have contributed a lot to the relationship (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). Summarizing, the stability of a relationship depends on perceived reciprocation of one's own contributions by the other (Blau, 1964; Burgess & Huston, 1979) and the relationship can be considered stable when both parties perceive each other as contributing an approximately equal amount.

Leadership effectiveness is related to the quality of the dyadic relationship between the leader and follower (van Breukelen, Schyns, & LeBlanc, 2006). A high quality exchange relationship is characterized by mutual trust, respect, and liking (Dansereau et al., 1975). The quality of dyadic relationship has been found to be positively related to organizational outcomes (Ilies, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007). Specifically, followers in high quality LMX relationships work harder (Basu & Green, 1997), perform better (Vecchio & Norris, 1996), experience more satisfaction with the leader (Schriesheim & Gardiner, 1992), experience more job satisfaction (Scandura & Graen, 1984), and are less motivated to leave the team or organization (Vecchio & Norris, 1996).

Implicit Followership Theories

Leaders and followers alike rely on implicit theories to process social information and make social judgements (Lord and Maher, 1991). Implicit Follower Theories (IFTs) help to advance our understanding of leadership by placing the focus on followers and examining leaders' cognitions (Avolio et al., 2009).

IFTs are cognitive schemas which represent the traits and behaviors that characterize followers (Rosenberg & Jones, 1972). Just like Implicit

Leadership Theories (ILTs) are used to understand how leaders are viewed, IFTs can be used to understand how followers are perceived. IFTs are most accurately represented by Followership Prototype and Antiprototype (Sy, 2010). Followership Prototype is defined as industry, enthusiasm, and good citizen, while Followership Antiprototype is defined as conformity, insubordination, and incompetence.

It is noteworthy to mention Engle and Lord (1997) proposed leaders develop prototypes of effective followers, called Implicit Performance Theories, and then compare follower performance to this prototype (cf. Borman, 1987; Sanders, 1999; Wernimont, 1971). This comparison process leads to the labelling of followers as either effectively or ineffectively contributing to relationship.

However, IPTs are restricted to followers performance, whereas the cognitive schemata for IFTs include a diverse set of attributes that would reflect on the overall quality of the relationship (e. g., being honest, enthusiastic, or trustworthy). IFTs are broader than Implicit Performance Theories and therefore better capture the range of behaviours and characteristics that followers may be expected to contribute to the LMX relationship.

IFT and LMX

IFTs serve as benchmarks from which individuals interpret, understand, and respond to followers, and predispose individuals to judge and respond to followers in a particular way (Engle & Lord, 1997). Indeed, leaders have different follower-schemas that predispose them to interpret events differently, which results different behaviors toward the followers (Goodwin

et al., 2000). This is expected as implicit theories affect judgments and behaviors as they operate on the levels of conscious and unconscious information processing (van Gils et al., 2010).

Leaders who have more positive IFTs may behave differently towards followers than leaders who have more negative IFTs (McGregor, 1960). Differences in leaders' behaviors towards followers, as a function of their IFTs should impact leader-follower interpersonal outcomes such as liking for leaders and followers, relationship quality, etc.

Individuals engage in a matching process of comparing their IFTs with a follower and based on the degree of congruence, individuals form an impression of followers that subsequently shapes their behaviors towards followers.

Leaders with proactive constructions of followership may become very frustrated by followers who act consistent with passive constructions; leaders with passive constructions may view proactive followers as pushy, insubordinate and disrespectful

Passive followers may find it difficult to work with leaders who have a proactive construction of followership; proactive followers may find authoritarian leaders “ old school” and highly ineffective

IFT and Followership Expectation Gap

If the process of comparison between actual behaviour and implicit leadership theory exists for leaders, it thus seems only plausible to assume that there is an equivalent implicit theory for the follower. Indeed, Van Gil

posits, from the leader's perspective, a match between perceived follower behaviour and leader's IFTs will lead the leader to evaluate the LMX quality more favourably. From the follower's perspective, a match between own behaviour and IFT will lead to the perception of higher own contribution to the relationship.

The followership expectation gap is the difference between IFT and actual follower behavior. According to Saltz (2004),

When a follower's behavior match the leader's IFT, the leader is likely to be satisfied with the follower. This minimizes the leadership expectation gap.

It is expected that leaders are likely to develop commitment to the organization the leader represents. However, if the follower's characteristics contradict the leader's expectations, the leaders are likely to experience dissatisfaction and this will undermine commitment to the organization (Saltz, 2004).

Sy (2010) found leaders' Followership Prototype was positively related to follower outcomes, namely liking for leaders, relationship quality with leaders, trust in leaders, and job satisfaction, while leaders' Followership Antiprototype was negatively related to all follower outcomes.

Hypotheses

Leaders' Followership Prototype would be expected to be positively related to LMX quality. Conversely, leaders' Followership Antiprototype would be expected to be negatively related to LMX quality. In addition, the

followership expectation gap would be expected to be negatively related to the LMX quality.

Measures

Participants would consist of middle

Implicit Followership Theories would be assessed using Sy's IFT scale. The IFT scale consists of 18 items measures six dimensions of Followership Prototype and Antiprototype. Followership Prototype consists of Industry, Enthusiasm, and Good Citizen, while Followership Antiprototype consist of Conformity, Insubordination, and Incompetence. Each dimension consists of three items. Leaders would be asked to rate how characteristic each item was for a follower. Responses would be measured with a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "not at all characteristic" to "extremely characteristic". The scale has a Cronbach's $\hat{\alpha}$ of .70.

To measure the quality of relationship between leaders and their subordinates, the Liden and Maslyn's (1998) multi-dimensional model of leader-member exchange (LMX-MDM) scale was used. The LMX-MDM scale comprises of 12 items, and incorporates the dimensions of affect, loyalty, contribution and professional respect, with each dimension consisting of three items. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The Cronbach's $\hat{\alpha}$ for the scale was .90.

The actual followers' behaviour (AB) would be measured using the same scale for IFT. Leaders would be asked to rate the extent the items in the IFT scale truly describe the behaviour they see in their followers. Responses

would be measured with a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “ not at all true” to “ very true”.

Information on gender, age, work experience (in years), duration of leader-follower relationship (in years), job position and highest academic qualification would be obtained. To ensure response to the items measuring IFT does not affect the response to the items measuring the actual behaviour, the order of the questionnaires would be IFT, LMX then AB.

Followership expectation gap would be obtained by computing the squared difference between the IFT score and actual follower behaviour score. LMX quality would be obtained by adding up all the LMX dimensions. The association between leadership expectation gap and LMX quality would be examined using Simple Regression Analysis.

The effect of duration of leader-follower relationship would be controlled all analysis, as it is known to have a moderating effect on LMX (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Reflections

IFTs may advance our understanding of Leader Member Exchange (LMX) theory by illuminating how congruence in leaders’ and followers’ ILTs and IFTs may account for relationship quality, i. e., leaders and followers both have ILTs and IFTs that function as interpretation frameworks from which relationship quality is judged (van Gils et al., 2010).