



Leadership & Performance

What followers expect from leaders or how implicit leadership theories influence the way we think of leadership

CQ Dossier | Evidence-based Leadership

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Executive summary

This CQ Dossier describes the key components of implicit leadership theory. The dossier draws on research by Robert Lord and his colleagues to show how the assumptions that followers hold regarding what constitutes an effective leader can influence performance ratings. The paper also provides suggestions on employee training initiatives that can attenuate biases and assumptions concerning effective leadership.

Leadership is in the eye of the beholder

There are many definitions of leadership yet they all contain the same theme—leaders need followers for their mission to be successful. In fact, Hollander provides a definition of leadership that captures this sentiment, “leadership is a process of influence between a leader and those who are followers” (Hollander, 1978). It is also true that leadership is in the eye of the beholder. There are several theories of leadership that have focused on the necessary competencies and behaviors to be a successful leader. However, few have focused on what followers expect from their leaders. This CQ Dossier focuses on implicit leadership theory to demonstrate the importance of understanding follower cognitions and perceptions of leadership.

Individuals generate and hold schemas concerning what constitutes an effective leader

Psychological science has taught us that individuals form impressions of others before they have met them. Even more importantly, individuals tend to generate and hold schemas concerning what constitutes an effective leader. Lord and his colleagues define implicit leadership theory as “Cognitive structures or prototypes specifying the traits and abilities that characterize leaders.” (Lord, Foti & DeVader, 1984).

Research by Robert Lord and his colleagues confirms that when an individual matches our idea of what a leader looks like, we tend to categorize this person as a leader. Imagine that the prototype of effective leadership for a subordinate includes the

following: intelligent, high verbal skills, fair, and effective interpersonal skills. If the subordinate observes the manager as showing intelligence, high verbal skills and being fair, then these observations will match the prototype that the subordinate holds concerning effective leadership. In turn, this will lead the subordinate to evaluating the manager as being an effective leader.

Implicit schemas about effective leadership are unconscious and can be biased

However, research from human decision-making demonstrates that these judgements are sometimes fallacious (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Individuals who do not possess the characteristics that we associate with leadership might be overlooked for promotion or development into leadership positions. The research conducted by Lord and his colleagues demonstrate that the implicit theories of leadership that individuals possess are often associated with the notion of success. In one study, participants watched a videotape of group members interacting with their leader (Foti & Lord, 1987). The results of the study indicated that people had a faster response time and were more confident when they were judging behaviors that were part of the implicit leadership theory (ILT) compared to behaviors that were part of their ILT and were not performed by the leader.

An implicit theory is unconscious so individuals are probably unaware of their biases when they evaluate a leader. Those behaviors that were identified as part of the ILT were rated as more accurate than those that were not part of the ILT. Because of this potential bias, it is possible that followers will tend to evaluate their manager as effective when the behavior is part of their ILT; this can occur even if the behavior is ineffective. Lynn Offerman and her colleagues found this to be true in a study that examined follower perceptions of men and women leaders (Offerman et al., 1994). They found that masculinity was a stable implicit leadership theory across participants, sex, and stimuli. Essentially, when followers consider an effective leader it is typically in masculine terms. This bias can result in women receiving poorer evaluations than men despite the finding that a collaborative approach, which is typically adopted by female managers, is more effective for leadership. Men tend to be more autocratic and task-

oriented in their leadership style whereas women tend to be more relationship-oriented. Individuals also tend to filter information based on the ILT that they hold. When individuals observe a team and are given information concerning the performance of that group, they tend to remember more leadership behavior if they are told that the team was successful. Followers filter information based on the implicit leadership theory that they hold.

Research indicates that leaders' appraisals are impacted by implicit schemas

This area of research has implications for human resource practices because these prototypes can affect the ratings that managers receive based on the ILTs held by subordinates. As research has shown these prototypes are not without bias. Employee ratings are frequently linked to promotions decisions yet when subordinates evaluate their manager, there is typically variability of scores between raters even when they are observing the same manager (Junker & van Dick, 2014). One study found that up to 62% of the variability in leaders' appraisal of employee performance was due to implicit person theories (Scullen, Mount, & Goff, 2000). This means that the variability in performance ratings is mainly due to rater biases or implicit leadership theories rather than to actual leader behavior.

Employee training and development initiatives can mitigate this effect

One way in which to circumvent biases in ratings is through employee training and development initiatives (Junker & van Dick, 2014). Frame of reference training has been found to be effective in performance appraisal research in reducing biases and assumptions about employees (Uggerslev & Sulsky, 2008). A novel instructional technique involves an Implicit Leadership Theory drawing exercise that is part of team training. Team members are asked to think about their image of a leader, discuss this image in the team, and then to draw the image. Following the exercise results are shared with the team and the results are discussed. This technique challenges team

member assumptions concerning what an effective leader does and how biases can distort accurate assessment of leaders (Schyns et al., 2011). Another instructional method that shows potential is to present examples of outstanding female leaders or older employees. When individuals witness female exemplars this tends to strengthen the linkage between femininity and leadership (Junker & van Dick, 2014).

This CQ Dossier provides an overview of implicit leadership theory (ILT). The research on ILT shows that followers filter information concerning leader behavior based on their implicit leadership theory. Because ILT is an implicit theory, these assumptions about effective leadership are unconscious and can lead to biases regarding leader behavior. In particular, ILT suggests that followers can hold gender bias regarding effective leadership and can overlook the behaviors of effective female leaders. The research suggests that these biases can affect performance ratings. The paper also recommends several training initiatives such as the Implicit Leadership Drawing Exercise, which challenges assumptions concerning effective leadership.

Key take-aways

- The traits-based approach to leadership is an important tool for organizations to select leaders
- The Big Five Personality traits can be used as a model for selection and training
- The Skills-based approach to leadership focuses on core competences that are more malleable and proximal than traits
- A skills-based approach allows organizations to identify and develop those individuals that demonstrate competencies of problem-solving, social judgement, and social competence.

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