



Editorial

Retraction of leadership articles: Causes and prevention

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ABSTRACT

Occasionally, published articles must be retracted to protect the integrity of the scientific record. Recently, *The Leadership Quarterly* retracted several articles. In this editorial, we describe why these retractions were warranted and the process leading to them. The key considerations giving rise to retractions, that is, accuracy in describing method and accuracy in describing results, are noted. The actions that authors must take to ensure their articles are not subject to retraction are also discussed.

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Authors who publish in *The Leadership Quarterly* believe that leadership and leader performance are not a matter of opinion but rather a matter of fact. As such, we believe that leadership research is a scientific discipline. Indeed, it is a scientific discipline that has tremendous impact on real people working in real institutions. For example, our research determines how firms seek to develop leadership talent (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014), influences who is selected for leadership positions (Hedlund et al., 2003), and impacts the feedback that we give to leaders about their behavior (Yukl & Lepsinger, 1995).

The many varied practical implications of leadership research have an important, albeit often overlooked consequence: The appropriateness and effectiveness of these interventions ultimately depend on the integrity of the research record (Steneck, 2007). If misleading findings, whether due to simple errors, sloppiness, incompetence, or deliberate distortion, are published and entered into the record of leadership research, then the consequences for both institutions and the people who work in them are potentially devastating. Our research may not kill people, but its policy implications, if not accurate, can certainly make the lives of many very miserable. And, it may at times undermine the survival of otherwise worthy institutions. The direct cost of financing compromised research, whether from public or private sources, as well as other indirect costs (e.g., harm done to the reputations of authors, co-authors, Ph.D. students and their institutions, as well as to the journal and the discipline) would be difficult to quantify, but is surely immense. Additionally, compromised findings and the negative publicity they attract sully science and may make practitioners and the public at large less likely to trust scientists, to adopt research findings, or to sponsor research.

As a result, a key responsibility of both the editor and the publisher of *The Leadership Quarterly* is to protect the integrity of the scientific record with regard to our understanding of leadership and leadership performance. Recognition of the significance of this key accountability, an accountability of any scientific journal, has led to the retraction of several articles published by *The Leadership Quarterly*. We will not, in this editorial, discuss the specific reasons for retraction of these articles. The reasons for retraction are described in some detail in the specific retraction notices published in *The Leadership Quarterly*. Instead, in this editorial, we hope

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to prevent future retractions by describing the rationale for the retractions in *The Leadership Quarterly* and suggest actions which should be taken by authors to ensure that their articles are not retracted. Prior to turning to these topics, we provide some discussion of what is meant by the term “retraction” and the process underlying the decision of whether a retraction is warranted.

Retraction – what is it?

Retraction decisions are made by the publisher of the article. Of course, publishers may not, and typically do not, have sufficient expertise to make informed decisions in this regard. As a result, publishers typically delegate decision authority with regard to retractions to the editor of the journal. The editor of the journal operates as an agent of the publisher and is responsible for making a final decision. Much as when they accept an article, the editor assumes ultimate authority for such decisions, and it is the editor who is responsible for deciding on retractions.

How do editors make retraction decisions?

Editors are encouraged to consider some key documents in making retraction decisions, in addition to any guidelines provided by the publisher (e.g., Elsevier’s “Publishing responsibilities of authors” and “Reporting standards”). A key document is the guidance provided by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) with regard to retractions. Further to this, editors are encouraged to consider the ethical publication guidelines applying to the field at hand. In the case of *The Leadership Quarterly* the guidelines are those of the American Psychological Association. In point of fact, the COPE process and the standards of the American Psychological Association are consistent and indicate that retraction is indicated when (also see [Wager, Barbour, Yentis, & Kleinert, 2009](#)):

- An article’s findings are not reliable, possibly due to misconduct (e.g., data fabrication) or unintentional error (e.g., miscalculation, clerical error).
- An article’s methodology is not adequately described (so that accurate assessment of its contribution or verification of its results is not possible).
- An article is the product of plagiarism or its principal findings have been previously published without proper cross-referencing, permission, or justification.
- An article is the product of or reports unethical research.

Investigations into articles are typically initiated by a complaint from readers, board members, or associate editors, although it is possible that the editor might on his/her own initiative identify one or more of the problems noted above in an article for which he or she has been responsible. When a complaint is formally registered with an editor, the editor reviews the nature and significance of the complaint. If the complaint does not meet the criteria sketched out above and the identified problem is minor, a correction may be published by the publisher as recommended by the editor. If no problem is identified the complaint will not be pursued. If, however, the editor’s review indicates a serious problem, then an investigation must be initiated, with retraction being one of the possible outcomes.

Although the COPE process is rather complex due to differences among the fields in which journals operate, the essential process is as follows: First, the editor confirms that the complaint is, in fact, legitimate because people can make specious complaints and/or retaliatory complaints. This first step is typically accomplished by obtaining at least one external review of the nature and significance of the complaint.

Second, if the complaint is confirmed, the editor informs the authors of the article as to the specifics of the complaint through a formal letter or email, and requests a reply to the complaint. This letter is commonly sent to the corresponding author, although all authors may receive a copy of this letter/email as they also have responsibility for any article on which their name appears. In this letter the editor may, and often does, request original data. The reply provided to this letter of complaint is evaluated by the editor and others from whom the editor has determined to seek consultative feedback, and a decision is made as to whether the reply addressed, or did not address, the complaint or whether further investigation is required.

Intention to retract notification is provided to authors of potentially retracted articles. This intention notification provides the specific reasons for retracting.

Some publishers, such as Elsevier, give authors the opportunity to comment on this notification. Comments and potential amendments are accepted or rejected by the editor, although the editor is allowed to seek consultation with regard to his/her decisions. Additionally, the editor, even at this point, may decide not to retract, to publish a correction, or to take no action.

There are some additional points worth noting:

- First, retraction decisions do not imply scientific misconduct. Allegations of scientific misconduct are investigated by other institutional bodies (e.g., employing institutions, funding institutions). First and foremost, editors and publishers are concerned with the contents of their journals, not seeking to police or manage scientific conduct more widely.
- Second, retraction decisions are made by the publisher in consultation with the editor. Thus neither the editorial board nor professional societies are necessarily involved.
- Third, in line with Elsevier’s policy of editorial independence, the editor is the final decision-maker regarding the scientific grounds for retraction.

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