

The origins of vision: Effects of reflection, models, and analysis

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Abstract

Although vision is known to be a critical component of outstanding leadership, little is known about how people create viable visions. Drawing from a model of vision formation proposed by Mumford and Strange [Mumford, M. D., & Strange, J. M. (2002). Vision and mental models: The case of charismatic and ideological leadership. In B. J. Avolio & F. J. Yammarino (Eds.), *Transformational and charismatic leadership: The road ahead* (pp. 109–142). Oxford, England: Elsevier], 212 undergraduates were asked to form a vision for an experimental secondary school where they would be the new principal. In addition to a plan for implementation of their vision, participants were asked to write a speech describing their vision for the school that was to be given to relevant constituencies. The conditions of performance were varied to manipulate the quality of the models available, reflection on past experience in secondary schools, and analysis of key goals and key causes. It was found that the availability of viable models and an analysis of key causes, and key goals, coupled with reflection, led to the generation of evocative visions and somewhat better plans. The implications of these findings for understanding vision formation and leader development are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Theories of charismatic and transformational leadership differ from each other in some notable ways (Bass, 1990; Yukl, 2001). Nonetheless, these theories, unlike other theories of outstanding leadership

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(Mumford & Van Doorn, 2001), share a common core. They both stress the importance of vision (Antonakis & House, 2002; Bass, 1998; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Kim, Dansereau, & Kim, 2002). In fact, the evidence accrued in studies of charismatic and transformational leadership has indicated that vision is a powerful and pervasive mechanism of influence. Studies of leader vision have shown that articulation of a viable vision is related to various indices of organizational performance (Deluga, 2001; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996). Articulation of a viable vision, moreover, has been shown to influence follower motivation (Sosik, Kahai, & Avolio, 1999), effective group interaction (Parry & Proctor-Thompson, 2001), and satisfaction with both the leader and the group (Dumdum, Lowe, & Avolio, 2002).

Taken at face value, these findings appear to provide compelling evidence for the substantive meaningfulness of vision as an explanatory construct. However, as Messick (1989, 1998) pointed out, the meaningfulness, or validity, of a psychological construct such as vision, cannot be fully established through the kind of correlational and descriptive studies commonly used to provide evidence for the meaningfulness of vision. In addition, evidence should be provided bearing on the origins of the construct and the variables that shape its expression. Indeed, evidence along these lines, typically experimental evidence, not only strengthens theory development, but also is essential for effective application of available theory. One cannot develop human attribute unless the processes and experiences giving rise to this attribute can be identified (Mumford & Manley, 2003).

Although few scholars would dispute the need for studies examining the substantive origins of vision, it has proven difficult to conduct these studies. One reason is that theories specifying how leaders construct a vision, theories necessary to guide requisite manipulations in experimental studies, have not been available. Recently, however, Mumford and Strange (2002) have proposed a theory of vision formation. Accordingly, our intent in the present study was to determine if the manipulation of certain critical variables specified by this theoretical model of vision formation would influence the ability of leaders to construct and articulate viable visions as assessed by relevant target populations.

1.1. Vision formation model

Development of a model of vision formation must, of course, begin with a definition of what is meant by the term “vision.” Vision has been defined as an idealized future goal state (Conger, 1999; Yukl, 2001), as a plan for future goal attainment (Howell, 1988), and as an image of the future that articulates the values, purposes, and identify of followers (Boal & Bryson, 1988; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; Tichy & Devanna, 1986). What binds these different definitions together, however, is the emphasis placed on the construction of a distinct image of a group’s or an organization’s future. This observation, in turn, led Strange and Mumford (2002) to argue that vision involves a set of beliefs about how people should act, and interact, to make manifest some idealized future state.

This definition of vision is noteworthy, in part, because it implies that vision is ultimately a cognitive construction—specifically a mental model. Mental models are conceptual representations used both to understand system operations and guide actions within this system (Johnson-Laird, 1983; Sein & Bostrom 1989). These conceptual representations specify key causal concepts and likely outcomes of various causal actions in an integrated structure which links different causes to goals and outcomes (Holyoak & Thagard, 1997; Largan-Fox & Code, 2000; Rouse, Cannon-Bowers, & Salas, 1992). Mumford and Strange (2002) argued that mental models come in two forms: one form, a descriptive model, reflects the system as it is while the other form, a prescriptive model, reflects the system as it might be. It is this prescriptive mental

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