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Are people-oriented leaders perceived as less effective in task performance? Surprising results from two experimental studies

Leire Gartzia ^{*}, Josune Baniandrés

University of Deusto, Spain

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ABSTRACT

In the leadership literature, there is consensus that leadership effectiveness is associated with two basic dimensions: people orientation and task orientation. The present work suggests that, when making judgments of leaders, observers tend to perceive these dimensions as opposed. In particular, data from two experimental studies indicate that people orientation of target leaders reduces the extent to which they are perceived as competent in task-related leadership activities such as managing a financial transaction, guaranteeing the quality of manufacturing processes or increasing profits. These findings are tested in relation to both male and female target leaders. Implications of these results for management research are discussed in terms of how people orientation and effectiveness in task-related managerial activities may be perceived by observers as two opposite sides of a continuum.

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1. Introduction

The dimensions of people and task orientation are essential in the leadership literature, and researchers have often taken them as rather independent (Bass, 1990; Fleishman, 1989; Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004) or positively correlated (Dennison, Hooijberg, & Quinn, 1995; Schriesheim, House, & Kerr, 1976). Challenging this view, in the present paper we aim to show that leaders' people orientation is perceived by observers as a hindrance for task performance. Stemming from implicit leadership theories (Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984; Lord & Maher, 1991), which focus on the beliefs that people hold regarding the attributes and behaviors that detract from the perceived effectiveness as a relevant dimension of leadership, and from theories that suggest that the self vs. others distinction constitutes a basic perspective for describing and judging people (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001), we argue that people orientation and task performance are related in surprisingly negative ways and influence social judgment of leaders. In particular, we propose that perceivers use compensatory thinking when evaluating leaders in those domains, such that perceived people-orientation of leaders produces lower perceived effectiveness in relation to task-related managerial activities. To test this proposition, we rely on two experimental manipulations of male and female target leaders' endorsement of people-orientation.

1.1. Leadership as a combination of people and task orientation

Whereas for the past 15 years many leadership dimensions have been investigated (e.g., change-oriented, servant, external, or participative leadership), in the fundamental leadership literature there is a remarkable consensus that leadership is linked to two basic dimensions, albeit with different names and somewhat different interpretations: people-orientation and task-orientation (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003; Yukl, Gordon, & Taber, 2002; Yukl, 2012). People orientation includes activities such as helping and showing concern for subordinates, developing their skills, delegating work, promoting positive interpersonal relationships and being supportive and cooperative. In contrast, task orientation includes activities such as focusing on the work to be done, requiring subordinates to follow rules and procedures, using power, or ensuring achievement of organizational goals (Bakan, 1966; Bass, 1990).

These two dimensions were labeled by the Ohio State researchers as consideration and initiating structure (Bass, 1990; Fleishman, 1973), although their underlying basis is similar to the abovementioned conceptualizations. Consideration is defined as the extent to which a leader shows concern and respect for subordinates, looks out for their welfare, and expresses consideration and support, whereas Initiating Structure is the degree to which a leader is oriented toward goal achievement and includes some directive leadership functions such as criticizing poor work of subordinates or speaking in a manner not to be questioned (Bass, 1990; Halpin, 1957). Although additional orientations have also been identified as relevant, such as the way leaders initiate and implement change (i.e., Yukl et al., 2002), there is consensus that the people and task orientations are basic dimensions of leadership that at their

^{*} Corresponding author at: Department of People Management in Organizations, Deusto Business School, University of Deusto, Spain.
E-mail address: leire.gartzia@deusto.es (L. Gartzia).

core emphasize two primary functions: either the integration of the individual into a larger social context that creates the conditions for others to cooperate and contribute or assertion of leaders' own power and instrumental achievement of goals (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003). Also, note that task orientation is eventually related to task performance to the extent that it assumes leaders' ability to appropriately perform task-related managerial activities (e.g., achieving organizational and/or strategic goals, guaranteeing the implementation of organizational processes, appropriately managing activities that serve to increase profits, etc.). In short, task orientation as operationalized in most conceptualizations, including Yukl's task-oriented categories (Yukl et al., 2002), ultimately encompasses task performance or, in other words, leaders' ability to get task-related managerial issues done.

Generally, the task and people leadership dimensions have been treated as independent and as functioning in an "additive" model, such that they have independent additive effects on leadership effectiveness (Bales, 1950; Bass, 1990). For instance, task orientation would be relevant for accomplishing a managerial task, whereas people orientation would be relevant for motivating followers. Therefore, both leadership dimensions are fundamental to boost effectiveness. Situational leadership theories (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2001; House, 1996), which focus on the importance of the situation to the effectiveness of task and people leadership, are representative examples of this view. For instance, Blake and Mouton's managerial grid provides a scale from one to nine for each of the two dimensions (i.e., labeled "concern for production" and "concern for people") and assumes that leadership effectiveness is optimized when a manager is characterized as high in both (Blake & Mouton, 1964).

Although both people and task leadership dimensions have proven to be associated with organizational performance and positive managerial outcomes (Judge et al., 2004), in the last decades leadership researchers have emphasized the people-oriented dimension. Indeed, one of the key defining characteristics of leadership in the current organizational context is the ability of workers and managers to pay attention to personal and socio-emotional factors that go beyond technical knowledge, display warmth and lack of self-interest, or explicitly state an interest in helping others (Barsade & Gibson, 2007; Tse & Chiu, 2014; Zaccaro, 2007). Approaches such as authentic leadership, ethical leadership or empowering behavior are an example of this trend and emphasize leader features like considering individuals' emotional responses, being receptive to their needs, showing appropriate ideological and moral values, and focusing on individualized attention (Avolio et al., 2009; Bass, 2010; Garcia-Morales, Jimenez-Barrionuevo, & Gutierrez-Gutierrez, 2012; Rego, Sousa, Marques, & Pina, 2012). Therefore, people-orientation is in principle a desirable set of leadership abilities that observers should associate with effectiveness in managerial functions.

1.2. The slightly opposing nature of the two leadership dimensions

Whereas the abovementioned two basic leadership dimensions, namely task and people orientation, are usually treated as independent from the perspective of actual behaviors (e.g., a leader can show high scores in both and indeed such combination of behaviors is associated with effectiveness), we do not have a clear understanding of how these results differ from the perspective of the ideas that people have about what effective leaders are. Research on implicit leadership theories (ILT) has shown that people hold particular beliefs about what behaviors and attributes effective leaders should exhibit, whereby the more prototypical leaders are, the more positive participants are likely to rate them (Lord et al., 1984). This perspective is important because when leaders are seen as a prototype by meeting the expectations that followers have of them, then followers ascribe them respect, trustworthiness and authority (Hollander, 1978), which in turn enhances perceptions of effectiveness (Kalshoven & Den Hartog, 2009).

Although individual differences in implicit leadership theories exist, there is considerable common ground between individuals in their

leadership prototype. Thus, research suggests that there are some attributes of leadership that are universally endorsed, including intelligence, success, dominance or masculinity (Offerman, Kennedy, & Wirtz, 1994). The so-called "think manager–think male" stereotype (for a review, see Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011) is an example of this stereotyped view of leadership, and suggests that we often imagine leaders to be male and to be endorsing stereotypically masculine characteristics such as dominance, assertiveness and independence. This stereotyped vision of effective management implicitly conveys a non-people oriented prototype of leadership whereby people orientation may be inherently seen as an obstacle for successfully accomplishing task-related managerial activities.

One of the most important attempts to examine whether people orientation is indeed negatively associated with perception of competence in task-related outcomes and whether there is an opposing nature of task and people orientation in relation to individuals' stereotypes and perceptions is that of social psychology researchers, who have shown that these two dimensions also constitute the basis for describing and judging people (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Helgeson, 1994; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005). The task and people fundamental factors of leadership coincide with the two basic dimensions of social judgment that psychologists have repeatedly identified in human behavior and social judgments, namely the perspective of the self (i.e., *agency*) and the perspective of others (i.e., *communion*). Agency refers to characteristics such as ambition, goal-orientation, independence or assertiveness, which are often associated with the task-oriented dimension of leadership (Bakan, 1966; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992). Communion, on the contrary, refers to interpersonally oriented characteristics that are present in the people-oriented definition of leadership (Bakan, 1966; Eagly & Johnson, 1990).

The literature on the content of group stereotypes has extendedly examined these dimensions and has shown that many judgments have an oppositional content, so that positive evaluations on one of the dimensions is related to negative evaluations on the other (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001). For instance, gender researchers have shown that women who are perceived as communal are simultaneously perceived as less agentic, and women who are perceived as agentic are attributed lower communion (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 2001). In line with this idea, there is also some evidence that cultures tend to be considered communal or agentic, but not both (Hofstede, 1980).

Although not addressed in the context of leadership, Judd et al. (2005) examined in a systematic way and from an experimental point of view the issue of whether people and task related dimensions (i.e., warmth and competence) are associated and found that people who were judged more positively on one dimension were judged less positively on the other. As these authors posited, "in some judgment circumstances, there is a comparative and compensatory process at work such that if one group or person is judged more positively than another, one attempts to rectify this disparity by asserting that the situation must be reversed on the other dimension of social judgment" (p. 910). From a managerial perspective, these findings suggest that when observers perceive that others are markedly oriented to people, they might simultaneously infer that they lack abilities associated with task orientation and related outcomes.

Although these dimensions are central in the field of leadership and management, only a few studies have addressed the issue of how they are related and influence social judgment of leaders. Indeed, the leadership literature has taken these two sides as rather independent (Bass, 1990; Fleishman, 1989) or even positively correlated, so that higher scores in one dimension are associated with higher scores in the other (Dennison et al., 1995; Schriesheim et al., 1976). Interestingly, however, Judge et al. (2004) found in their meta-analysis that the Consideration–Initiating Structure correlations varied depending on the measure used to assess these constructs, with average correlations being weakly negative in some cases. In line with this finding, a small number of studies

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