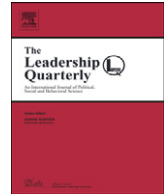




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## An integrative model of leadership behavior

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## ABSTRACT

Decades of questionnaire and interview studies have revealed various leadership behaviors observed in successful leaders. However, little is known about the actual behaviors that cause those observations. Given that lay observers are prone to cognitive biases, such as the halo effect, the validity of theories that are exclusively based on observed behaviors is questionable. We thus follow the call of leading scientists in the field and derive a parsimonious model of leadership behavior that is informed by established psychological theories. Building on the taxonomy of Yukl (2012), we propose three task-oriented behavior categories (enhancing understanding, strengthening motivation and facilitating implementation) and three relation-oriented behavior categories (fostering coordination, promoting cooperation and activating resources), each of which is further specified by a number of distinct behaviors. While the task-oriented behaviors are directed towards the accomplishment of shared objectives, the relation-oriented behaviors support this process by increasing the coordinated engagement of the team members. Our model contributes to the advancement of leadership behavior theory by (1) consolidating current taxonomies, (2) sharpening behavioral concepts of leadership behavior, (3) specifying precise relationships between those categories and (4) spurring new hypotheses that can be derived from existing findings in the field of psychology. To test our model as well as the hypotheses derived from this model, we advocate the development of new measurements that overcome the limitations associated with questionnaire and interview studies.

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## 1. Introduction

Over 100 years of leadership research has yielded strong evidence that an organization's success depends upon its managers' leadership (e.g., Wang, Tsui, & Xin, 2011). According to Nohria, Joyce, and Roberson (2003), CEOs account for up to 15% of the variance in an organization's financial outcomes. Consequently, a large proportion of leadership research has been devoted to the question of what constitutes effective leadership behavior. This field of research aims to identify the qualities that distinguish excellent leaders from their average colleagues, rendering the former more successful in excelling at financial goals, inducing follower satisfaction and securing external resources.

Although our understanding of effective leadership behavior has advanced over the past 100 years and now constitutes an established research area, leading scientists in the field have recently questioned certain widespread assumptions regarding effective leadership behavior (e.g., Avolio, 2007; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013; Yukl, 2012). These critics have found evidence of confusion of actual leadership behavior with followers' perceptions of leadership behavior (Dinh et al., 2014). This confusion is generated and aggravated by flawed measures. As a result, van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) emphasized two major problems

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in current leadership theory that threaten the validity of many previous findings: 1) a lack of distinct conceptual definitions, resulting in considerable overlap among different concepts, and 2) a lack of coherent causal models that include specific mediating and moderating processes.

Contending that those problems are too severe to be resolved through minor modifications to existing theories, van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) called for the abandonment of the current focus on contemporary leadership concepts and hence for new conceptualizations. In line with other authors (e.g., Avolio, 2007; DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011), they encourage the scientific community to generate more sophisticated and integrative leadership theories that are based on sound methodology and that span different streams of research outside the core leadership literature.

In this paper, we follow van Knippenberg and Sitkin's (2013) call: We derive a model of leadership behavior that integrates the most fundamental findings of past leadership behavior research with well-established psychological theories and that ceases to perpetuate the flaws of contemporary models. We begin by first reviewing the fundamental criticisms. We then review the findings of recent meta-analyses (DeRue et al., 2011) and taxonomies (Yukl, 2012) of effective leadership behavior (perceptions) that are related to superior leadership outcomes. Next, we integrate these behaviors into a coherent theoretical framework based on fundamental psychological research. The theoretical framework is derived from the essence of leadership, "influencing and facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives" (Yukl, 2012, p. 66), and is based on the two meta-categories of task- and relations-oriented leadership behavior. Corresponding to these two meta-categories, we integrate two streams of psychological research: 1) motivation and action theories that explain how individuals establish and accomplish their goals and 2) group and engagement research that analyses the conditions under which individuals invest their resources in a collective endeavor. We then derive an integrative model of leadership behavior that fulfills the following criteria:

1. It discriminates actual behavior from perceived behavior.
2. It sharpens the behavioral concepts and reduces overlap among them.
3. It suggests specific relationships between its concepts, introduces a process perspective and hence prompts new hypotheses that could motivate future studies.
4. It integrates established psychological theories and thus taps into a wealth of scientific knowledge to spark theoretic proliferation.

Equipped with these four contributions to the field of leadership research, the integrative model of leadership behavior is proposed as an advance in scientific efforts towards a more integrative and theory-driven leadership theory. We show that the new model meets all of the criteria of a good theory (Filley, House, & Kerr, 1976): generality, parsimony, external and internal consistency as well as testability. As such, the model offers orientation by providing a parsimonious and coherent framework in the discussion of effective leadership behavior. Such a framework allows for a consistent and meaningful integration of co-existing – and often diverging – leadership concepts. Thereby, the framework helps to prevent duplication of effort and promotes cooperation between distant research groups and disciplines. Despite being parsimonious, the model provides rich detail and concreteness as it connects to a considerable wealth of existing psychological theories and research. This theoretical foundation grants researchers immediate access to untapped resources and knowledge outside of the core leadership community and stimulates new research hypotheses. Taken together, the model combines two important strengths of a good theory: It offers a high level of general breadth as well as a profound level of detail.

We are aware that the endeavor to develop and establish such a model requires the expertise and support of the entire scientific community in this area. The proposed model is therefore not intended to be the ultimate truth but rather a starting point to spark new thoughts and hypotheses, as well as new models and methods to test them.

## 2. Current state of leadership behavior research

Before beginning any endeavor, it is crucial to realize where one stands in terms of theory and to take stock of the tools at one's disposal. In our case, we need to understand the strengths and weaknesses of current leadership behavior research to avoid perpetuating its flaws.

### 2.1. The lack of theory-based conceptualizations of leadership behavior

Contemporary leadership behavior research has been criticized for its weak theoretical foundation (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). One reason for this might be that, in the 100 years of leadership research, the majority of studies have investigated leadership behavior using interviews or questionnaires. The model of charismatic-transformational leadership (Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999) exemplifies this approach: as a first step, researchers interview a group of theoretical or practical experts. The experts explicate their cognitive models that describe what distinguishes the best leaders. In a second step, based on qualitative analyses of these interviews, researchers generate survey items (e.g., the MLQ in Avolio et al., 1999). The MLQ survey and its subsequent revisions are the foundation of the vast majority of current research on transformational leadership.

Although an observation-based, inductive procedure guarantees the practical relevance of the identified leader behaviors, it is beset by problems that question the usefulness and validity of ensuing theories<sup>1</sup>: Most conceptualizations of leadership neither

<sup>1</sup> As van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) offer a detailed discussion on the conceptual limitations of current leadership theories, we only summarize their points. Readers are invited to consult the original work to understand the full complexity of these issues.

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