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Leader opportunity versus threat verbal framing and nonverbal emotional expressions impact followers' creative performance☆

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ABSTRACT

A core function of leadership is to motivate followers, yet little research describes mechanisms by which leaders impact their followers' motivation. The purpose of this paper is to present and test a novel theory of leaders' influence on follower creative performance based on approach-avoidance motivation theory (Carver & Scheier, 1998) and self-regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 2000). Two forms of leader approach-avoidance communication behavior, verbal framing and nonverbal emotional displays, are hypothesized to impact follower creative performance. Two experimental studies provide support for the theoretical model using distinct leadership stimuli and creative performance tasks.

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> Our nation also needs a clear strategy to confront the threats of the 21st century – threats that are more widespread and less certain. [*February 2001*].…we have a great opportunity during this time of war to lead the world toward the values that will bring lasting peace. [*January 2002*].
>
> [U.S. President George W. Bush]

Employee creativity has received much attention in the literature partly due to the belief that it is critical to organizational success (Amabile & Kramer, 2011; Drucker, 1985). Creativity impacts organizational success across a variety of jobs and industries (Amabile, 1996; Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002), and has many benefits including the generation of novel ideas, products, and procedures that fuel innovation and may be a source of competitive advantage (Oldham & Cummings, 1996). Mumford and Gustafson (1988) defined creativity as the generation of ideas, and innovation as the successful implementation of ideas. Much of the extant research on how to foster creativity has focused on macro factors such as organizational structure (Damanpour, 1991), climate (Hammond, Neff, Farr, Schwall, & Zhao, 2011), and strategy (Hage, 1999). Leaders may greatly benefit from understanding how to elicit creativity from their followers, yet little guidance on how to do this is available in the research literature.

Creative work often involves complex and ambiguous tasks for which employee discretion and autonomy are needed (Mumford et al., 2002). In their review, Mumford et al. (2002) noted that leader technical expertise and creativity can benefit

employee creativity, and the absence of intellectual stimulation, support and involvement may constrain it. Research also shows positive effects for LMX (Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999), transformational leadership (Jung, 2001), and supportive versus abusive leader behaviors (Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta, & Kramer, 2004; Liu, Liao, & Loi, 2012). However, little is known about how leaders impact the cognitive or motivational processes involved in creativity (Reiter-Palmon & Illies, 2004).

One way leaders influence and motivate their followers is by crafting and delivering impactful and persuasive messages (Conger, 1991). While the content of these messages is important, the manner in which they are framed and delivered may have an equal or even greater impact on followers, whether by design or by accident (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999). Studies of leader rhetoric generally have focused on aspects of message content such as imagery (Naidoo & Lord, 2008), metaphor (Mio, Riggio, Levin, & Reese, 2005), vision (Berson, Shamir, Avolio, & Popper, 2001), and values (Carton, Murphy, & Clark, 2015). However, there is little rigorous research on leader communication in general (van Knippenberg & Stam, 2014), and on the specific question of how leader message framing (e.g., issues framed as opportunities versus threats) may impact follower creativity and other outcomes. Recent advances in motivational theory provide a strong basis for understanding leaders' influence on followers' creativity. In particular, theories of approach-avoidance motivation (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998; Gray, 1981; Higgins, 1997) suggest that leaders' may influence the salience of approach versus avoidance concerns to followers, thereby impacting their motivation (Kark & Van Dijk, 2007).

The purpose of this research is to examine how leader message framing and delivery impacts followers' creative performance. The primary contributions are twofold. First, prior theorizing is bolstered by integrating ideas from the approach-avoidance, regulatory focus, and organizational sensemaking literatures to propose relationships between specific leader verbal (i.e., framing) and nonverbal (i.e., emotional expressions) behavior and follower creative performance. Second, two empirical studies are presented that provide evidence for causal relationships between these leader behaviors and followers' creative performance.

Leaders as motivators

Motivation has been a central feature of theories of leadership for decades. Early research focused on differentiating successful managers from their peers on the basis of motivational need profiles (e.g., the AT&T studies; Bray, Campbell, & Grant, 1974). More contemporary theories addressed how leaders influence *follower* motivation: transformational leaders transform followers' values and priorities (Yukl, 1998) while charismatic leaders convey high expectations, provide a compelling vision for the future (Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Ehrhart & Klein, 2001), and activate followers' collective self-concepts (Lord & Brown, 2004). While leaders may influence their followers' motivation in many ways, leader communications, particularly those that help followers make sense of work situations, are likely to play a critical role in all of them.

Sensemaking involves extracting cues from ones environment to construct an understanding of a complex, uncertain or ambiguous situation (Weick, 1988). Sensemaking is critical during crises where stakes are high and past schemas for action may no longer work. The interpretations of *others* are sought out to guide ones sensemaking (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Volkema, Farquhar, & Bergmann, 1996), and leaders are well positioned to provide such guidance. Dutton and Jackson (1987) argued that leaders categorize strategic issues either as *opportunities* or *threats*. They described opportunities as positive situations in which gains are likely, and over which one has high control, and threats as negative situations in which losses are likely, and over which one has little control. Empirical studies have shown that in ambiguous situations, threat (as opposed to opportunity) framing leads to rigidity and risk-averse decisions (Chattopadhyay, Glick, & Huber, 2001; Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981).

By categorizing issues in these terms leaders may shift their followers' sensemaking. For example, framing a crisis as an opportunity may encourage (e.g., flexible thinking) or forestall (e.g., risk-aversion) psychological states in followers that impact creativity. Researchers have studied the effects of opportunity versus threat framing on leader decision making (Chattopadhyay et al., 2001), but not on such follower outcomes. One way to understand framing effects is through their links to approach and avoidance motivational systems.

Approach-avoidance motivation

In contrast to theories which emphasize a single motivational system governed by the hedonic principle (e.g., Hull, 1952), approach-avoidance theory posits the existence of *two* discrete systems, one concerned with approaching positive stimuli, the other with avoiding or withdrawing from negative stimuli (Elliot & Thrash, 2002; Gray, 1981). Two distinct motivational systems are thought to have evolved in response to the critical adaptive problem of balancing needs to approach potentially beneficial (e.g., food, mates) and avoid or withdraw from potentially harmful (e.g., predators, noxious substances) stimuli (Elliot & Covington, 2001; Tooby & Cosmides, 1990). More generally, people immediately, without intention, and at times without awareness evaluate most if not all of the stimuli they encounter in terms of their goodness or badness (Zajonc, 1998). Subliminal priming research has shown that stimuli can be evaluated rapidly and without intention (Bargh, Chaiken, Raymond, & Hymes, 1996), and that reactions to primes can result in automatic approach or avoidance behavior (Chen & Bargh, 1999). The implication with respect to leadership is that certain leader behaviors may activate approach or avoidance motivation in followers automatically. Approach-avoidance also manifests in conscious strategic goal striving inclinations.

Because they serve different adaptive purposes, approach and avoidance systems entail distinct emotional and cognitive processes. According to Carver (2001), when approaching a desired incentive one feels elated when progressing well, and sad when doing poorly. When avoiding an anticipated punishment, one feels calm when doing well, and anxious when doing poorly (cf.