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Seeing eye to eye: A meta-analysis of self-other agreement of leadership

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ABSTRACT

The agreement between a leader's self-rating of leadership and ratings from the leader's subordinates, peers, and superiors (i.e., self-other agreement) is critical to understanding leadership, but questions remain regarding the extent to which leaders are aware of their behaviors. This meta-analysis investigates whether leader-observer agreement is influenced by type of observer and type of leadership. First, we examined the convergence (i.e., correlation) between leader- and observer-ratings along several dimensions of leadership (e.g., initiating structure, consideration, contingent reward, and transformational leadership). Our results indicated that leader-observer correlations were generally moderate and of similar magnitudes for task- and relation-oriented behaviors (with the exception of a strong correlation for contingent reward). Next, we compared leaders' and observers' mean-level ratings (i.e., Cohen's *d*), and found that leaders generally reported lower or similar levels of task-oriented behaviors but higher levels of relation-oriented behaviors. Last, several variables (e.g., sampling method and study purpose) moderated leader-observer convergence. Implications of these findings for research, theory, and practice are discussed.

Seeing eye to eye: A meta-analysis of self-other agreement of leadership

For nearly 20 years, scholars have paid considerable attention to whether leaders' perceptions of their leadership behaviors overlap with or diverge from the perceptions of their subordinates, peers, or superiors (e.g., Atwater & Yammarino, 1997; Fleenor, Smither, Atwater, Braddy, & Sturm, 2010; Halverson, Tonidandel, Barlow, & Dipboye, 2005). This is clearly reflected in the vast number of organizations relying on 360-degree feedback systems for leader development and evaluation (Bracken, Timmerreck, & Church, 2001; Maylett, 2009; Slater & Coyle, 2014). Self-other agreement of leadership behaviors is expected to reflect the leader's self-awareness regarding their leadership capabilities (Fleenor et al., 2010) and has also been linked to important performance and training outcomes. Leaders who are not in agreement with observers may have inflated perceptions of their leader behaviors relative to subordinates and, as a result, may make ineffective decisions or refuse training and development opportunities (Bass & Yammarino, 1991). On the other hand, leaders who are in agreement with observers are expected to be successful leaders and respond appropriately to constructive developmental feedback (Atwater & Yammarino, 1997). Thus, understanding leader self-other agreement is a vital component of not only leader training efforts, but also for the general comprehension of leader performance.

Self-other agreement of leadership behaviors is undoubtedly important, but surprisingly little is known about the actual relationship between leader- and observer-perceptions of leadership. Even though there are numerous primary studies examining

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leader-observer convergence, they have inconsistent findings, with agreement being weak in some cases (e.g., Arensberg, Schiller, Vivian, Johnson, & Strasser, 1996; de Vries, 2012; Ostroff, Atwater, & Feinberg, 2004; Warr & Bourne, 1999) and stronger in others (e.g., Church & Waclawski, 1999). One potential explanation for the inconsistent findings is that different observers are viewing the focal leader through different lenses due to evaluating the leader in varying roles (Atwater & Yammarino, 1997; Yammarino, 2003; Yammarino & Atwater, 1997). Managerial performance is multilevel in that individuals across organizational levels have different interactions with the focal leader (Oh & Berry, 2009), and as a result, have different expectations and interpretations of the same leadership behaviors. In particular, superiors rate them as followers, coworkers rate them as peers, subordinates rate them as managers, and leaders may rate themselves as an aggregate of all of these roles. Depending on the rater source from which observer-ratings are obtained, it is conceivable that self-other agreement of leadership could range from weak to strong across various studies.

Research demonstrates that the existence of different rating sources of performance must be acknowledged. Multisource feedback (i.e., 360-degree feedback) typically consists of obtaining evaluations from superiors, peers, self-raters, and subordinates. The idea behind 360-degree feedback is that different raters have unique (Atwater & Yammarino, 1997; Yammarino, 2003; Yammarino & Atwater, 1997), yet valid, perspectives of the focal employee, and provide incremental validity in predicting criterion variables. Indeed Conway and Huffcutt's (1997) meta-analysis on performance ratings found low to moderate correlations between self- and observer-ratings. In particular, self-ratings had low correlations with ratings from other raters, as did subordinate-ratings. Furthermore, factor analytic studies have revealed that rater source (i.e., superior, peer, self-rater, and subordinate) explains a substantial amount of variance in performance ratings (Hoffman, Lance, Bynum, & Gentry, 2010; Scullen, Mount, & Goff, 2000). Therefore, it is expected that different rater sources provide dissimilar perspectives of the focal leader, and thus, research on self-other agreement may focus on the *difference* rather than *similarity* between self-ratings and observer-ratings.

These inconsistent patterns of relationships call for deeper investigation for the following reasons. First, although leader-ratings are expected to be relatively valid and reflect leaders' self-awareness of their leadership behaviors (Fleenor et al., 2010), it must be recognized that leader-ratings are self-ratings. As a result, leader-ratings may be substantially inflated relative to observer-ratings, not due to leaders' keen awareness of their own performance as leaders, but because of social desirability biases (e.g., Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Thus, a comprehensive understanding of the average level of convergence between leaders and observers is essential for evaluating the quality of leader-ratings. Second, the inconsistent relationships also translate into inconsistent evidence of construct validity. Strong leader-observer convergence implies that leader- and observer-ratings similarly reflect the leadership construct. However, the current evidence suggests that it cannot be assumed that leader- or observer-ratings are valid measures of leadership. Third, the conflicting findings also suggest that there may be situational elements (i.e., moderators) that have been previously ignored that influence the relationships between leader- and observer-perceptions of leader behavior. Finally, although existing primary research has evaluated leader-observer agreement on a variety of leadership dimensions (e.g., transformational leadership, contingent reward) and across different types of observers (i.e., peers, subordinates, superiors), these separate studies need to be integrated to provide a complete picture of leader-observer agreement. As such, the present understanding of convergence is likely incomplete because factors such as the leadership dimension and observer type are unaccounted for (Hiller, DeChurch, Murase, & Doty, 2011; Riggio, Chaleff, & Lipman-Blumen, 2008). Leadership is neither a monolithic construct nor solely directed towards subordinates, indicating the need for better consideration of these issues.

In the current study, we quantitatively investigate the relationships between leader- and observer-perceptions of leadership. First, we find the meta-analytic correlation between leader- and observer-ratings in order to assess the degree to which leaders and observers report similar patterns of leader behaviors. Because different observers should have different perceptions of the same leader, we do not expect self-other correlations to be high. Second, we meta-analyze the mean difference between leader- and observer-ratings to evaluate whether leaders and/or observers engage in over-reporting or under-reporting of leader behaviors. Third, we examine the influence of several moderators (e.g., sampling method, study purpose) on the agreement between leader- and observer-ratings.

Our study of leader-observer convergence makes the following contributions. Prior summaries have been primarily restricted to qualitative work (e.g., Fleenor et al., 2010) while the present study systematically analyzes multiple effect sizes to yield a more precise conclusion of leader agreement. Next, whereas previous meta-analyses of leader-observer convergence have focused on a single leadership dimension (e.g., leader-member exchange; Sin, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2009) or a single observer, we include multiple dimensions (e.g., initiating structure, consideration, contingent reward, and transformational leadership) and several types of observers (e.g., the leader's peers, subordinates, and supervisors) to gain a more complete understanding of leader self-other agreement. Furthermore, our study identifies the respective strengths and weaknesses of both leader-ratings and observer-ratings for use in organizational settings as well as for research and theory-testing purposes.

Finally, our study has policy implications for human resource management (HRM) by examining different styles of leadership. Specifically, classifying leadership into two categories – task-oriented and relation-oriented behaviors – provides a more nuanced understanding of self-other agreement in leadership. This in turn can improve HRM outcomes by offering tailored solutions for leaders with different styles, such that task-oriented leaders and relation-oriented leaders can respectively pinpoint relevant areas for development. For example, a task-oriented leader prioritizes the structuring of work tasks, so it could be beneficial to help leaders with generating creative ideas to clarify expectations and provide incentives to effectively motivate followers. On the other hand, a relation-oriented leader values interpersonal connections, so it would be useful to train leaders in channeling resources into cultivating a collective sense of purpose as well as giving personal attention to individual followers. Having a clearer picture of the different leaders' rating tendencies can enable the development of personalized training interventions that are more effective than a general solution that lumps together all types of leaders.

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