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Acting with the best of intentions... or not: A typology and model of impression management in leadership

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ABSTRACT

Impression management (IM) is important for effective leadership. Followers accept influence from individuals who meet their perceptions of what it means to be a leader, and IM is an important way of impacting those perceptions. Yet, the extant literature on leader IM is fragmented. We unify the literature in this area by creating a multi-dimensional typology and multi-level model of IM in leadership. We examine the multi-dimensional nature of IM as a construct composed of information processing, communicative, and goal-directed components, thereby creating eight IM archetypes. Then, we examine how IM can be used to impact follower perceptions of the leader through the lenses of transformational/charismatic, authentic, and leader categorization theories. This research unites a currently fragmented area of research and sparks new questions about how leader behaviors can be used to influence followers toward multi-level leadership outcomes.

Impression management (IM) is foundational to effective leadership (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). Followers more readily accept influence from individuals perceived to match the follower's understanding of the ideal leader (Lord, Foti, & DeVader, 1984), and IM is a means of impacting those perceptions. However, despite the importance of IM to leaders, extant literature investigating leader IM is fragmented. IM has been examined within different types of leadership including charismatic leadership (Sosik, Avolio, & Jung, 2002), transformational leadership (Gardner & Cleavenger, 1998), the romanticism of leadership (Gray & Densten, 2007), and leader-member exchange relationships (Zhang, Deng, Zhang, & Hu, 2016). IM also has been examined at different levels of leadership including CEO IM (Westphal & Graebner, 2010) and manager IM (Fisk & Friesen, 2012). Moreover, support for IM-related research is found in various theories across disparate disciplines ranging from social psychology (e.g., Leary & Kowalski, 1990) to organizational studies (e.g., Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997) to communication (e.g., Burgoon, Guerrero, & Manusov, 2011).

This extensive literature would benefit from theoretical integration, which can provide important insights in leadership research (Avolio, 2007). The purpose of the present paper is to integrate knowledge across various disciplines and theories to achieve three goals: 1) develop a 3-dimension typology of IM behaviors that elucidates the underlying nature of leader IM as consisting of information processing, communication, and leader goals; 2) propose a model of IM that presents a framework for understanding the means by which leader IM impacts leadership outcomes; and 3) demonstrate the utility of the

typology for predicting how leader IM influences follower perceptions using three prominent leadership theories. The typology and model appear in Fig. 1.

The typology is grounded in our definition of *impression management* as conscious or unconscious, authentic or inauthentic, goal-directed behavior individuals engage in to influence the impression others form of them in social interactions (e.g., Bolino, Long, & Turnley, 2016; Schlenker, 2011). This definition sets the scope of IM in our paper in two important ways. First, it clarifies that our discussion involves IM directed toward others, rather than including a similar construct, self-deception, that involves IM-like behavior directed toward the self (e.g., Farnham, Greenwald, & Banaji, 1999). Second, the definition provides the three dimensions of our typology: information processing (automatic or controlled), communication (authentic or inauthentic), and goals (pro-self or pro-social). These three dimensions create eight IM archetypes. In developing our typology, we draw from dual processing theory (Schneider & Chein, 2003), authentic communication (Molleda, 2010), and social value orientation (Van Lange, 1999).

The second goal of our paper is to present a model showing the process by which leader IM impacts leadership outcomes. Our model suggests the three dimensions of leader IM have biological, psychological, and social underpinnings. It also suggests that leader IM has a direct impact on follower perceptions, and through that, has an indirect impact on leadership outcomes. Thus, the heart of our model is grounded in the knowledge that follower perceptions ultimately determine the consequences of the leader relationship (Shamir, 2007).

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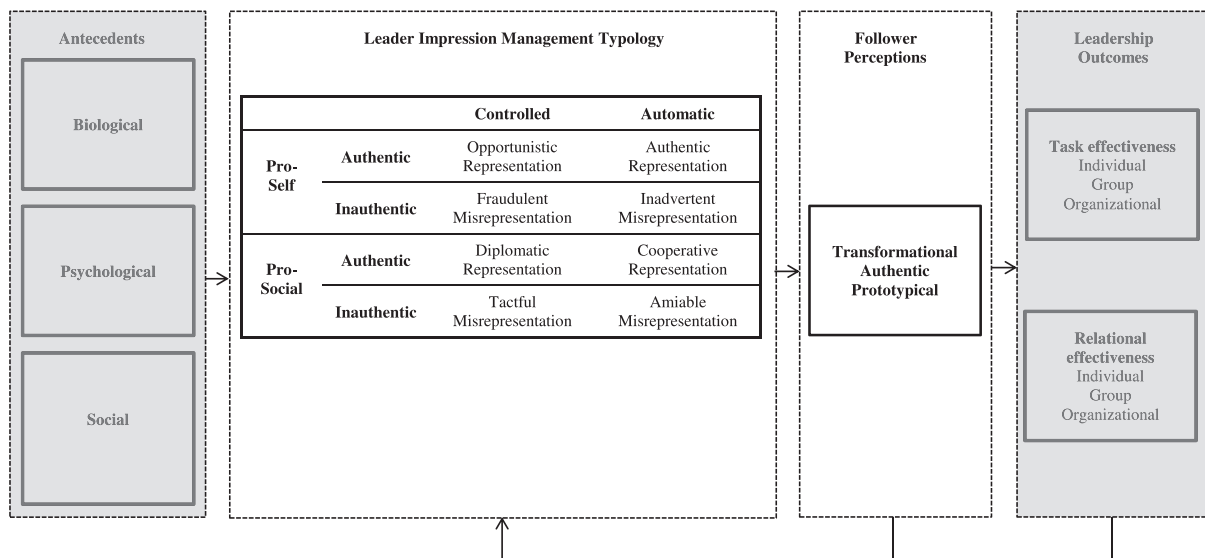


Fig. 1. Impression management in leadership.

Because leadership is a dynamic process that occurs over time (Hogue & Lord, 2007), our model also suggests that leader IM behaviors are influenced by feedback the leader receives from downstream processes.

The third goal of our paper is to show the usefulness of our typology for predicting the impact of leader IM across various leadership theories. We focus on three theories in which follower perceptions are particularly salient: transformational/charismatic leadership theory (Howell & Shamir, 2005), authentic leadership theory (Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005), and leader categorization theory (Lord et al., 1984).

Our paper is structured to walk the reader through the central portion of the model. In particular, Fig. 1 is presented with Leader IM Typology and Follower Perceptions highlighted, while Antecedents and Leadership Outcomes are shaded. Space constraints do not allow a detailed discussion of Antecedents and Outcomes. Rather, we incorporate information about Antecedents into our discussion of the Leader IM Typology, and we incorporate information about Outcomes into our discussion of Follower Perceptions. We begin with our typology.

Leader IM behaviors

Our typology classifies types rather than tactics of IM behavior. Our intent is not to suggest that one tactic (e.g., mimicry) belongs to one archetype and a different tactic (e.g., ingratiation) belongs to another. Rather, our archetypes signify that the underlying nature of IM is complex. In particular, we pose these archetypes not as leader traits but as behaviors that are influenced by factors both internal and external to the leader. We briefly illustrate the complexity of our dimensions through a discussion of a sampling of the dimension's biological (e.g., physiological), psychological (e.g., cognitive, emotional), and social (e.g., contextual) underpinnings. We provide greater detail of dimensional complexity as we discuss each dimension's dual character.

Controlled or automatic processing

The first dimension in our typology addresses the leader's cognitive information processing. Dual processing theory proposes that human cognitive functioning is the result of two processes, automatic and controlled, which differ by the amount of effort and attention needed to categorize, buffer, associate, and prioritize information (Schneider & Chein, 2003; Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977). This dimension

informs our understanding of the speed and ease with which IM occurs for leaders.

The conscious or unconscious dimension of IM involves biological, psychological, and social processes related to the neuronal connections that underlie information processing. Automatic and controlled information processing occurs in the cortico-basal ganglia system of the brain, yet each type of processing operates using a different sort of processing network (Yin & Knowlton, 2006). Controlled processing functions along an action-outcome associative network that relies on conscious awareness of desired outcomes. Alternatively, automatic processing functions along a stimulus-response sensorimotor network that relies on learned connections between a behavior and its stimulus trigger.

The same IM tactic may be engaged in a controlled or automatic way. For example, a leader may choose to imitate the behaviors of group members in a conscious attempt to fit in. Alternatively, imitation may occur through activation of mirror neurons, which are a unique type of neuron that can be triggered by the presence of others. Once activated, mirror neurons are responsible for automatic social imitation (Gallese, Eagle, & Migone, 2007), which tends to enhance the likelihood of fitting in and being liked (Jacoboni, 2009). Thus, one dimension of leader IM involves whether the IM results from controlled or automatic information processing.

Controlled processing

Controlled processing occurs when an individual uses volitional control and attention to activate a temporary sequence of data modules, or nodes (Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977). Individuals are assumed to possess a central control system that is equipped with goal processors, attention controllers, activity monitors, and episodic stores. The central control system assesses the priority of multiple stimuli, engages in memory retrieval and storage, initiates corresponding output reporting to other systems (such as motor or vision centers), and receives and processes feedback from data modules.

Controlled processing may involve both newly learned and previously stored information (Schneider & Chein, 2003). An example of the former might be a leader who explicitly assesses a novel situation to create an intentional plan for engaging in IM. An example of the latter might occur when a familiar environmental stimulus activates a previously learned IM response that the leader then engages in a controlled way to determine the appropriateness of the response. Controlled processing tends to occur slowly, with multiple tasks performed serially (Fisk & Schneider, 1983). Therefore, controlled processing tends to be

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