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Leadership and team identification: Exploring the followers' perspective

Hendrik Huettermann [a,*], Sebastian Doering [b], Sabine Boerner [c]

[a] *Institute for Leadership and Human Resource Management, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland*
[b] *Center of Excellence "Cultural Foundations of Social Integration", University of Konstanz, Germany*
[c] *Department of Politics & Management, University of Konstanz, Germany*

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of leadership on followers' identification with their work group. Adopting a qualitative research approach, it takes on the followers' perspective for inductively deriving leadership behaviors that pertain to the development of team identification. Based on in-depth data from members of seven teams in the context of UN peacebuilding operations, four aggregate leadership dimensions can be identified that are conducive to members' team identification: providing guidance, encouraging involvement, role modeling, and administering teamwork. Accordingly, this study adds to the exploration of leadership behaviors relevant for team identification that have not been considered by extant research. The results may lay the foundations for future investigations on complementary effects of different leadership behaviors for fostering followers' identification with their work group.

1. Introduction

Research on members' identification with their work group has gained considerable academic attention in recent years (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). Team identification has shown to play an important role for facilitating cooperation in teams and cushioning dysfunctional team processes (e.g., van der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005), thereby leading to, for example, improved team performance and job satisfaction (e.g., Bezrukova, Jehn, Zanutto, & Thatcher, 2009; Cicero, Pierro, & van Knippenberg, 2007). Hence, strong team identification is considered to serve as "social glue" for teams (van Vugt & Hart, 2004, p. 585) and as a crucial enabler for team members' willingness to achieve common objectives (van Knippenberg & Ellemers, 2003).

Against this background, research has sought to identify factors that strengthen members' team identification. For example, perceived team status (Chattopadhyay, George, & Lawrence, 2004) and levels of communication and interaction in the team (Postmes, Haslam, & Swaab, 2005) have proved to be relevant in this context. One factor that has received particular attention for promoting members' team identification is leadership (van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004, 2005). Sometimes referred to as "entrepreneurs of identity" (Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005, p. 556), leaders are believed to activate the collective level of followers' self-concepts, thereby strengthening their identification with the workgroup and stimulating their team-oriented efforts (Lord & Brown, 2004; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003).

However, examining extant research on the nexus of leadership and team identification, almost all studies investigate the effectiveness of predefined leadership styles (i.e., charismatic and transformational leadership; e.g., Pierro, Cicero, Bonaiuto, van Knippenberg, & Kruglanski, 2005; Shamir, Zakay, Breinin, & Popper, 1998, 2000) for promoting followers' team identification; only one study inductively explores other leadership behaviors that might be relevant for team identification, though exclusively

from the leaders' point of view (Sivunen, 2006). Hence, while the followers' perspective has already been more comprehensively investigated in other areas of leadership research (e.g., Bligh, 2011; Carsten & Bligh, 2007; Shamir, 2007), it has been largely neglected in works on leadership and team identification (van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Yet, exploring the followers' perspective seems to be warranted in particular for two reasons. First, from a theoretical point of view, identification with social entities is considered to be a highly subjective process, involving deep-rooted thoughts and beliefs on the part of the individuals that develop identification (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Pratt, 1998). Thus, adopting the perspective of those becoming identified (i.e., the followers) appears to be indispensable for exploring leadership behaviors relevant for team identification (van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Second, from an empirical point of view, existing studies have revealed only limited explanatory power; thereby, the amount of explained variance in team identification due to (charismatic or transformational) leadership ranges between 6 (e.g., Shamir et al., 1998) and 16% (Kearney & Gebert, 2009).[1] Hence, an exploration of the followers' perspective may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of which leadership behaviors are conducive to team identification.

Against this background, the aim of our analysis is to explore the followers' perspective and to scrutinize which leadership behaviors are perceived to be relevant for the development of team identification from the followers' point of view. In doing so, we may broaden the range of leadership behaviors relevant for team identification in addition to those identified by existing research. In line with the increasing number of qualitative studies in leadership research (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Gardner, Lowe, Moss, Mahoney, & Cogliser, 2010), we adopt an exploratory research approach, thereby focusing on formally assigned leaders that are (internal) members of their respective teams (see taxonomy of team leadership by Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010). Based on qualitative data from interviews with members of seven work teams in the context of two United Nations (UN) peacebuilding operations, we inductively derive leadership behaviors that pertain to the development of team identification. As a result, we identify nine leadership behaviors that are conducive to members' identification with their work group. These leadership behaviors fall into four aggregate leadership dimensions: "providing guidance", "encouraging involvement", "role modeling", and "administering teamwork".

Our results confirm several findings of previous research, for instance with regard to the importance of leaders' exemplary conduct for fostering followers' team identification. However, we also identify a number of leadership behaviors that have not been considered so far. For example, we find directive and participative leadership behaviors to complement each other in promoting followers' team identification. With our analysis, we thus echo the call by van Knippenberg et al. (2004) for broadening the leadership aspects studied in conjunction with team identification. The results of our exploratory analysis may lay the foundations for future quantitative studies that investigate the complementary effects of different leadership behaviors on team identification (van Knippenberg et al., 2004).

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: In the second section, we elaborate on the concept of team identification and we review the literature on the influence of leadership on team identification; on this basis, we specify the goal of our analysis. The third section provides an introduction to our empirical study, outlining our methodology and sample. In section four, we present the results of our qualitative investigation on the role of leadership behaviors for team identification. We conclude by discussing the results of our analysis.

2. Conceptual background and literature review

2.1. Team identification

Generally, social identification is defined as a deep, psychological, self-defining affective and cognitive bond between an individual and a social entity (Edwards & Peccei, 2007). Individuals are said to identify with a social entity when they (1) label or categorize themselves as members of it, (2) define themselves with the same characteristics used to define the social entity (e.g., values, norms, attitudes, etc.), and (3) feel psychological attachment and a sense of belonging to it (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Pratt, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; van Knippenberg & Ellemers, 2003). Hence, through the process of identification with a social group, an individual comes to hold a social identity as "[…] that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). Individuals' motivations for social identification include, for example, self-esteem enhancement, uncertainty reduction, and a desire to be both the same as and different from others (e.g., Brewer, 1991). When the focus of identification is the work team as a social entity to which an individual is assigned, we refer to this process as team identification (van Knippenberg & Ellemers, 2003).

As individuals are usually members of various social groups (e.g., based on team membership, nationality, or gender), they can have multiple foci of identification and thus a range of potential social identities (Riketta & van Dick, 2005). These can be overlapping, inclusive, exclusive, or nested within one other (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Brewer & Gardner, 1996). In a given situation, individuals invoke that social identity which they perceive to fit the situational context best (i.e., it becomes "salient"); an individual's multiple identities can be ranked in a "salience hierarchy" according to their relative salience (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000). Several situational cues have been argued to make team membership the salient social category for individuals' self-concepts, for instance perceived team status (Chattopadhyay et al., 2004), levels of communication and interaction (Postmes et al., 2005), and especially leadership (e.g., van Knippenberg et al., 2004). With regard to the latter it is argued that by tying followers' sense of self to the collective, leaders may activate team identification as the salient social category (Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999).

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[1] Range is restricted to studies that report change in explained variance due to charismatic/transformational leadership.