



# How displaying empathic concern may differentially predict career derailment potential for women and men leaders in Australia

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## ABSTRACT

Past research notes the importance of emotions in the workplace. Much less is known about the role that empathic concern, an affect-laden construct, plays in predicting a leader's career advancement using measures of one's upward mobility, such as career derailment potential. Data provided by practicing managers in Australia show that leaders who displayed behaviors that convey empathic concern receive lower ratings of career derailment potential. We also found that gender was a statistically significant moderator of these relationships. With boss rating of derailment potential as the outcome, the negative relationship between empathic concern and derailment potential was statistically significant for women only. With peer ratings of derailment potential as the outcome, the negative relationship between empathic concern and derailment potential was stronger for women than men. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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## Introduction

Scholars and practitioners alike note the importance of emotions in organizational life. Many have observed and studied the emotional capacity of empathy, the ability of a person to comprehend and convey understanding of the emotions and feelings another person is experiencing (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Vignemont & Singer, 2006). Indeed, leaders “must be sensitive to followers' emotional needs; they also need to display empathy towards their followers, and to understand how their followers feel” (Ashkanasy, Hartel, & Daus, 2002, p. 326). According to Davis (1983, 1996), one important aspect of empathy is empathic concern: how leaders experience feelings of warmth, compassion, and concern for others. More recently and consistent with Davis (1983, 1996), Batson (2011, p. 11) defined empathic concern as “the other-oriented emotion elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone else in need.” Despite recent research identifying empathy as an important construct to study in leadership and emotion management (Gooty, Connelly, Griffith, & Gupta, 2010; Humphrey, 2002; Rajah, Song, & Arvey, 2011), and its connection to transformational leadership (e.g., Avolio & Bass, 1995), leadership emergence and perceived leadership (Kellert, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002, 2006), little research has examined the relationship between displays of empathic concern and a leader's potential for continued career advancement, progression, upward mobility, or alternatively, his or her “career derailment potential.”

While many leaders have the ability, capacity, and capability to successfully advance in their organization, other leaders who similarly were expected to progress and advance to higher levels in organizations, do not. These leaders experience derailment,

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defined as when a leader “who was expected to go higher in the organization and who was judged to have the ability to do so is fired, demoted, or plateaued below expected levels of achievement” (Lombardo & McCauley, 1988, p. 1). Historically, a person's current job performance and effectiveness have been used as a proxy for the ability to progress and advance in one's career. Such measures however are not synonymous with derailment potential (Conger & Fulmer, 2003; Hall, 2002). Different than those who are able to progress, advance, and succeed in higher organizational levels, derailed individuals display certain behaviors that are indicative of an individual's career derailment potential (see Braddy, Gooty, Fleenor, & Yammarino, 2014; Gentry, 2010; Gentry & Chappelow, 2009; Gentry & Shanock, 2008; Hogan, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2010). Decades of research shows that certain behaviors, such as problems with interpersonal relationships or difficulty changing and adapting, are not simply a lack of certain skills or competencies. Rather, these behaviors indicate an inability to work with others to accomplish goals at higher positions in organizations that eventually limit one's own career advancement, resulting in a person plateauing in his or her career, being demoted, or fired (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007; Furnham, 2010; Hogan et al., 2010; Lombardo, Ruderman, & McCauley, 1988). Accordingly, we define career derailment potential based on whether or not a leader displays behaviors indicative of career derailment which ultimately limit or stall a person's career (Braddy et al., 2014; Carson et al., 2012; Lombardo & McCauley, 1988).

The purpose of our work is to advance the understanding of how, why, and under what conditions behavioral displays of empathic concern relate to ratings of career derailment potential. We thus aim to make two contributions to the literature. First, examining how behavioral displays of empathic concern (as rated by a leader's direct reports) are related to career derailment potential (as rated from a leader's boss and peers) can extend research by examining the predictive power of empathy, a construct that is growing in interest in leadership scholarship (Holt & Marques, 2012). Drawing on signaling theory, we contend that displaying behaviors that connote empathic concern is one key signal of other- (as opposed to self) focus. Such other-focus is important for working with others to attain goals at higher organizational levels, a critical requirement of those able to continue advancing to higher levels in the organization (Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2011), and a hallmark of low derailment potential (Gentry, 2010; Gentry & Chappelow, 2009; Hogan et al., 2010). Furthermore, our work can help bring attention to the importance of emotion management and regulation at work. A leader's public displays of empathic concern may be considered one form of emotional labor, which involves “management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). In order to develop effective interpersonal relationships, leaders may engage in emotional labor to signal to followers emotional displays of empathic concern, in an effort to show compassion and understanding (Humphrey, Pollack, & Hawver, 2008). Thus, displaying empathic concern may be an important aspect of emotional labor that signals an other-oriented compassionate focus on the well-being of followers, which ultimately may help the leader in the realm of career management and progression. Hence, we advance the field by examining how and why empathic concern may be related to career advancement, progression, and upward mobility outcomes specifically, career derailment potential.

Second, we contribute to the literature by considering rival hypotheses pertaining to gender as a possible moderator of the relationship between empathic concern and career derailment potential. This contribution adds to the growing literature that has begun to move past the simplistic arguments of whether women are more or less effective leaders than men and instead, examines when and why there may be gender differences (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Paustian-Underdahl, Walker, & Woehr, 2014; Vecchio, 2002, 2003).

### **Empathic concern and career derailment potential**

Signaling theory (Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Spence, 1974; see also Connelly, Certo, Ureland, & Reutzel, 2011) offers a description of how and why leaders may use behaviors that convey empathic concern as a signal specifically meant to shape ratings of their career derailment potential. According to signaling theory, people in organizations such as a leader's boss and peers, usually have incomplete information when evaluating said leader. Incomplete information stems from the high level of information processing demands placed on people to complete their own work as well as monitor others' work. Thus, a leader must signal, that is transmit purposeful information about his or her intentions or abilities, to meet the information needs and demands of that leader's own boss or peers, or in signaling theory terms, the receiver (Connelly et al., 2011). As part of their responsibility for their own career management and progression (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Wayne, Liden, Graf, & Ferris, 1999; Wayne, Liden, Kraimer, & Graf, 1997), leaders must be intentional in the signals they send concerning their ability to advance and succeed in higher organizational levels.

Ratings of career derailment potential are highly subjective because of the difficulty to accurately predict whether a leader who despite being competent in his or her current level, will succeed or fail at higher levels of the organization in the future. Others making judgments about a leader's future career potential (i.e., receivers) therefore rely heavily on the signals sent by leaders (Connelly et al., 2011). If signals leaders send do not meet the information needs, demands, and expectations of the receiver, those leaders are likely to be fired, transferred, or not promoted (Tsui & Ashford, 1994). Signals must match what bosses and peers expect leaders to do and the characteristics they expect leaders to have to be successful in higher-level organizational positions. If not, they will see the leader as having a high potential to derail.

Using signaling theory, our work aims to examine the relationship between empathic concern and career derailment potential. It should be mentioned that there are three other dimensions of empathy aside from empathic concern: perspective taking, fantasy, and personal distress, (Davis, 1983, 1996). Perspective taking involves adopting another's point of view. Fantasy deals with imagining oneself as a character in fictitious settings (e.g., books, movies). Personal distress refers to feelings of discomfort in intense interpersonal relationships. We believe empathic concern is the most useful of the four dimensions in the study of leaders and their career derailment potential. Though perspective taking and imagining one's self in another's situation (akin to fantasy) may undoubtedly play a role in promoting positive interpersonal outcomes, Batson (2011) explains that both states precede feelings of empathic concern. As a result, we focus on empathic concern in this study because it should have the most proximal effect on career derailment potential.

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