



What do people desire in their leaders? The role of leadership level on trait desirability

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ABSTRACT

Do individuals desire different traits in leaders dependent on the leader's position in the organizational hierarchy? To address this question, participants first rated the traits they perceived their current supervisor possessed, traits they desired in their supervisor, and traits they viewed were characteristic of a leader in that role (Study 1). Next, participants rated the desirability of these same traits for 6 high-level and 6 low-level leaders (Study 2). Finally, to force them to prioritize traits, participants designed ideal high-level or low-level leaders by "purchasing" leadership traits using limited budgets of tokens (Study 3). Overall, participants highly and consistently desired trustworthiness and intelligence across leaders, yet they differentially desired other traits depending on the level of leadership. In addition, the desired–current discrepancy predicted leader–member exchange, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, even after controlling for the prototype–current discrepancy. We discuss the implications of these findings for leadership selection, development, and promotion.

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Introduction

Although research on implicit leadership theories have extensively examined people's beliefs about the traits and abilities that characterize a leader (Lord, 1985; Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984), they have done so often without considering what traits people actually want their leaders to possess. In addition to asking people what traits they believe are "characteristic" of a leader (i.e., their leader prototype), it is important to consider what traits they desire in an *ideal* leader. In all, leaders greatly affect many important employee outcomes (e.g., Dobbs, 2000), and discrepancies between the traits subordinates desire and the traits superiors possess may ultimately lead to negative organizational outcomes (Bin Ahmad, 2008; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005). Despite the significant attention paid to desired leader behaviors, little research has examined the traits that subordinates desire in their leaders (de Vries, Roe, & Taillieu, 2002; Ehrhart & Klein, 2001; Vecchio & Boatwright, 2002).

It is also important to understand how trait desirability differs across different leaders. Many organizations promote solely based on past performance (Weiner, Graham, & Naglieri, 2003). However, just as certain leaders fit better within certain organizations, some leaders may be a better fit for low-level leadership positions (e.g., shift supervisor, mayor) whereas others may be better suited for high-level positions (e.g., company president, U.S. President). Low- and high-level leaders differ in a variety of ways, including their behavior and the perceptions and expectations of their subordinates (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Casimir & Waldman, 2007; Den Hartog et al., 1999; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996). Consequently, leaders with success at one level-of-leadership often do not obtain the same success at another level. One reason for this discrepancy may be that employees desire different traits in low-level leaders than in high-level leaders. High levels of some personality traits may facilitate employee performance and satisfaction when

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possessed by low-level leaders, yet those same traits may negatively affect organizations when held by high-level leaders, an idea consistent with competency modeling (e.g., Shippmann et al., 2000). If organizations consider what subordinates want in their leader, in addition to past performance, the success of leadership selection, development, and promotion is likely to increase.

The current research focuses on the effects of the hierarchical level of leadership on the traits individuals desire in leaders. We extend past research by addressing two focal questions: 1. Does trait desirability predict important organizational outcomes? and 2. Does the hierarchical level of the leadership role affect trait desirability? First, we examine the predictability of trait desirability (versus trait prototypicality) for three important organizational outcomes—job satisfaction, leader–member exchange, and organizational commitment. We then further examine trait desirability by presenting participants with several different low-level (e.g., Army lieutenant) and high-level (e.g., Army general) leaders and asking them to report the desirability of various traits for each ideal leader. Specifically, we test the overall hypothesis that individuals highly desire one set of traits (e.g., agreeableness, cooperativeness, supportiveness) for low-level leaders but highly desire other traits (e.g., assertiveness, confidence, courage) for high-level leaders. In all, we aim to contribute to the leadership literature by suggesting additional ways to consider personality in organizational contexts.

Theoretical rationale

For the purposes of the current research, we define traits as “relatively stable and coherent integrations of personal characteristics that foster a consistent pattern of leadership performance across a variety of group and organizational situations” (Zaccaro, 2007, p. 7; Zaccaro, Kemp, & Bader, 2004, p. 104). This definition includes “a range of stable individual differences, including personality, temperament, motives, cognitive abilities, skills, and expertise” (Zaccaro et al., 2004, p. 104). It is important here to clarify that this definition includes both personality traits and other personal characteristics not necessarily related to personality.

Implicit leadership theories (ILTs)

Individuals hold beliefs about the traits and abilities of a leader (Lord, 1985), and these beliefs represent their leadership schemas. To examine these schemas, researchers generally ask participants to list or rate the traits they feel apply to, characterize, or are prototypical of a leader. Researchers then group these traits into broader personality constructs that represent leadership schemas (e.g., Lord, 1985; Lord et al., 1984; Phillips & Lord, 1986). Despite the strict categorization-based approach that ILTs generally take, ILT researchers often use the resulting ratings to infer subordinates’ “ideal” leaders. However, the methodologies employed throughout ILT research measure the traits that people believe are characteristic of any leader. For example, in pioneering ILT research, Lord et al. (1984) asked participants to generate traits that applied to leaders and then asked additional participants to indicate how well each trait fit their “image of a leader.” Similarly, Offermann, Kennedy, and Wirtz (1994) had participants generate traits and then asked participants to rate how *characteristic* these traits were. Epitropaki and Martin (2005) also used a rating scale that focused on how *characteristic* traits were. Throughout this research, these ratings are often, if not exclusively, referred to as a “prototype”, which, by definition, is “a standard or *typical* example” (Prototype, 2012). It is, therefore, important to distinguish between the “typical” and “ideal” leader.

Rooted in the work of Rosch (1977; 1978), leadership categorization theory and other ILTs focus on subordinates’ use of traits and behaviors to categorize people as either leaders or nonleaders. This categorization relies on the similarity between subordinates’ prototype of a leader (i.e., “the most abstract yet representative example of a category”; Shondrick & Lord, 2010; p. 3) and the traits of a target person. That is, ILTs most often measure participants’ view of a *typical* leader—a view that often depends on people’s schema of a leader as well as their experience with people in leadership positions. The outcome of this categorization is a range of biased processes based on the tendency to perceive that person in a way that is consistent with the group in which s/he is categorized. In contrast, subordinates’ view of an *ideal* leader does not necessarily rely on stereotypes or schemas, and interactions with past leaders may or may not affect this idealistic view. Instead, an ideal leader is the person a subordinate would choose if they could choose their leader from a candidate pool of every person in the world. Another way to think of an ideal leader is to imagine subordinates possessing the ability to “build” their own leader (as we allow them to do in Study 3). What traits and at what level would that leader possess? The current research focuses on these questions to determine what traits people desire in a leader and how a discrepancy between the ideal and the real leader (i.e., a person’s current leader) affects leadership and organizational outcomes.

Does trait desirability predict important organizational outcomes?

Significant attention in the literature over the past 30 years has focused on implicit leadership theories (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Lord, 1985; Lord et al., 1984; Offermann et al., 1994; Phillips & Lord, 1986). We do not argue that prototypes are not important to consider in future research and practice. In fact, the congruency between actual leaders and leader prototypes predicts many important organizational outcomes on its own (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005), and we agree that individuals’ views of a “typical” leader is an important area of research. However, past research has not adequately examined individuals’ views of an “ideal” leader. Asking participants how “characteristic” traits are of a leader forces them to rely on their stereotypes of that leader and/or their experience with similar leaders in the past. In contrast, asking people to consider their ideal leader and reporting what traits that ideal leader possesses allows for measurement of the traits they desire in a leader. Both individuals’ stereotypes and their desires are likely essential for organizations to consider, but research has not yet adequately examined the latter and its effects on organizations.

Research that has examined what people desire in their leaders has been scattered and scarce. One line of research has examined desired leader *behaviors*, especially those related to certain leadership and supervision styles (de Vries et al., 2002;

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