



# The role of vertical conflict in the relationship between leader self-enhancement and leader performance

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 13 June 2012  
Received in revised form 6 August 2013  
Accepted 21 August 2013  
Available online 21 October 2013

Editor: Shelly Dionne

### Keywords:

Leadership  
Leader performance  
Self-enhancement  
Vertical conflict

## ABSTRACT

Although studies have shown that inflated self-perceptions of transformational leadership behavior negatively affect leader performance, insight into the underlying processes explaining this relationship is lacking. The current study addresses this gap by identifying vertical conflict between leaders and subordinates as one such underlying process. Using a sample of 52 leaders supervising 259 subordinates, it was found that leader self-enhancement of transformational leadership behavior is significantly and positively related to vertical conflict about both task and relationship issues. Results further indicate that vertical task conflict rather than vertical relationship conflict mediates the negative relationship between leader self-enhancement and leader performance.

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## 1. Introduction

Three decades of research have revealed overwhelming evidence for the positive effects of transformational leadership (i.e., leadership based on charismatic and visionary behavior) on leader, subordinate, group, and organizational performance (e.g., Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that today's leaders are expected to be not only sensitive and considerate toward their subordinates' needs but also highly inspirational and charismatic (Kark & Shamir, 2002; Wang & Howell, 2010). These high expectations put pressure on leaders to portray themselves as 'good' transformational leaders (cf. Jung & Sosik, 2006; Sosik, Potosky, & Jung, 2002) and may lead them to see their transformational behaviors through a self-favoring lens (cf. Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994; Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003a). Indeed, research has suggested that many leaders tend to rate themselves higher on transformational leadership behavior than their subordinates rate them (e.g., Fleenor, Smither, Atwater, Braddy, & Sturm, 2010; Livi, Kenny, Albright, & Pierro, 2008).

While inflated self-perceptions of transformational behavior may boost leaders' feelings of efficacy and confidence (Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994), research has suggested that such overestimation may also have deleterious effects. Research on leader behavioral integrity, for instance, has argued for and demonstrated the need for consistency of words and actions (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007). Moreover, authentic leadership scholars argue that leaders are more effective when they possess more accurate self-knowledge, and use that knowledge to demonstrate that they are cognizant of their impact on others (Hannah, Woolfolk, & Lord, 2009). Consistent with this view, Van Velsor, Taylor, and Leslie (1993) found that leaders who overrate their

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transformational behavior compared to subordinates' ratings of that leadership behavior were seen as less effective by these subordinates. Likewise, *Atwater and Yammarino (1992)* and *Brutus, Fleenor, and Tisak (1999)* reported that overestimation of leadership behavior is associated with lower supervisor ratings of leader performance.

Although this research has advanced knowledge about the negative repercussions of leaders' inflated self-perceptions, several major issues remain. First, most studies to date have adopted the so-called self-other rating agreement (SOA) approach to self-enhancement, comparing self-perceptions of leadership behavior to how others (e.g., subordinates or peers) perceive the leader (for an overview, see *Fleenor et al., 2010*). However, as suggested by *Kwan, John, Kenny, Bond, and Robins (2004)*, such an approach does not take into account *how that person perceives others*. Ignoring how a person sees others can lead to problematic conclusions that confound self-enhancement bias with a general positivity bias in self-perceptions. Therefore, this study examines how leaders' enhanced self-perceptions of their transformational leadership behavior are related to their leader performance using *Kwan et al.'s (2004)* componential approach to self-enhancement. This analytical approach decomposes a leader's self-perception into three elements: a) how a leader is generally seen by followers (a target effect), b) how a leader generally sees followers (i.e. a perceiver effect), and c) an idiosyncratic bias in a leader's self-perception (i.e. a self-enhancement effect). Adopting this framework to disentangle self-enhancement from target and perceiver effects, and drawing on theory and research on self-enhancement theory (e.g. *Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008*), we examine how mere self-enhancement bias in leader self-perceptions of transformational leadership will be related to leader performance.

A second shortcoming of prior research is that no study has empirically investigated the processes that could explain the negative relationship between leaders' self-enhancement of transformational behavior and their performance. This gap in the literature is unfortunate because, although examining direct relationships is an important first step in any research program, the articulation and understanding of mediating mechanisms are critical if we are to truly understand, predict, and, ultimately manage a given phenomenon (*Anderson et al., 2006*). Based on a growing body of social psychological evidence indicating that self-enhancement generally produces negative effects on interpersonal processes and relationships such as reduced camaraderie, increased animosity, and even social exclusion (e.g., *Anderson, Ames, & Gosling, 2008; Anderson, Srivastava, Beer, Spataro, & Chatman, 2006; Colvin et al., 1995; Paulhus, 1998; Robins & Beer, 2001*), we examine whether disrupted interpersonal processes might explain the negative relationship between leader self-enhancement and performance. More specifically, we propose that an important explanation for the negative effects of self-enhancement on leader performance can be found in disputes, or clashes between a leader and his or her subordinates. Hereafter we refer to such leader–subordinates clashes as vertical conflicts (cf. *Xin & Pelled, 2003*). Drawing from intra-team conflict research (for an overview, see *De Dreu & Weingart, 2003*), we suggest that leader self-enhancement is positively related to two different types of vertical conflict between leaders and subordinates: task and relationship conflict. We further argue that both vertical task and vertical relationship conflicts are negatively related to leaders' performance.

By doing so, this study contributes to the literature in three different ways. First, by using a componential approach to self-enhancement (*Kwan et al., 2004; Kwan, John, Robins, & Kuang, 2008*), we disentangle an idiosyncratic self-enhancement bias from target and perceiver effects in leader self-perceptions and thereby provide a nuanced perspective on how this self-enhancement bias is related to leader performance. As such, we contribute to the self-enhancement and leadership literature by generating empirically-based knowledge on the nature and consequences of self-enhancement in the leadership domain. Second, by focusing on vertical conflict as an explanatory mechanism, we open the 'black-box' relationship between leader self-enhancement and leader performance. This should enable more accurate predictions, and should suggest ways to mitigate the negative consequences of leader self-enhancement. Third, although seemingly inherent to the leadership process, the issue of vertical conflicts between a leader and subordinates has received surprisingly little attention (e.g., *Frone, 2000; Janssen, 2004; Xin & Pelled, 2003*). Following *Xin and Pelled (2003)*, we demonstrate the usefulness of applying concepts from the intra-team conflict literature to the relationship between a leader and subordinates. Moreover, we identify leader self-enhancement as a potential antecedent and low leader performance as a potential outcome of vertical conflict.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. Self-enhancement of transformational leadership behavior

Self-enhancement has been defined as the desire to maintain, protect, and boost a positive self-concept, resulting from a large number of several different personality and environmental characteristics (*Leary, 2007*). Although cultural differences exist, self-enhancement is considered to be a universal human tendency (*Gaertner, Sedikides, & Chang, 2008; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003*). Abundant research has shown that people tend to hold inflated perceptions of their favorable attributes, abilities, and behavior and that this tendency can explain a wide variety of psychological and behavioral phenomena (for overviews see *Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004; Leary, 2007; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008*).

Although the tendency to self-enhance is well established, the question of whether self-enhancement is beneficial or detrimental to an individual's functioning continues to be debated. On the one hand, self-enhancement is thought to promote individual well-being because it boosts self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-efficacy (*Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994; Taylor et al., 2003a*). *Taylor and Brown (1988)* argued that these 'positive illusions' produce positive outlooks on the future, provide a sense of control in uncertain and stressful environments, and thus serve to defend us against stress (e.g., *Bonanno, Rennicke, & Dekel, 2005; Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003b*). On the other hand, self-enhancement is associated with deception and self-serving attributions that may offend or alienate others (e.g., *Anderson et al., 2006, 2008; Asendorpf & Ostendorf, 1998*;

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