



# License to fail? How leader group prototypicality moderates the effects of leader performance on perceptions of leadership effectiveness<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Leadership often serves as an explanatory category for performance outcomes (i.e., failure and success). This process can strengthen or weaken leadership effectiveness, because contingent on their performance leaders may gain or lose follower endorsement – the basis of leadership. Drawing on the social identity analysis of leadership, we hypothesized that leader group prototypicality and performance information interact to predict followers' perceptions of leadership effectiveness. Because group prototypical leaders are more trusted by their followers, we hypothesized that group prototypical leaders are evaluated as more effective after failure information than non-prototypical leaders. In contrast, we predicted that both prototypical and non-prototypical leaders should receive similar evaluations of leadership effectiveness after success. We found support for our predictions in a scenario experiment, a cross-sectional field study, and a laboratory experiment.

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## 1. Introduction

The impact people in leadership positions have on society is undoubtedly great. The actions of leaders may determine to a large extent the performance of organizations, sports teams, and political parties, and they may even change the course of history. This has made the study of leadership an important research topic in social psychology and organizational behavior for decades (Chemers, 2001; Haslam, 2001; House & Aditya, 1997; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Because of the central position within their group, leaders are often directly associated with the performance of their team or organization (Lord, Binning, Rush, & Thomas, 1978; Lord & Maher, 1991; Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985; Phillips & Lord, 1981). Consequently, followers' perceptions of leadership effectiveness are influenced by such performance information. Followers will perceive the leader as more effective after success information and as less effective after failure information. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that sometimes a leader's effectiveness evaluation is less contingent on the actual performance of the leader. Indeed some leaders even seem to receive as much follower endorsement after failure as after success. This raises the question as to which factors affect the degree to which followers' evaluations of leadership effectiveness are contingent on actual performance information.

It is important to understand the precursors of follower evaluations and endorsement after leader performance information, because the effectiveness of a leader depends on the degree to which the leader is able to influence and motivate followers (Chemers, 2001; Yukl, 2001). Whereas former research related to the “romance of leadership” suggests that followers' leadership effectiveness evaluations are directly influenced by performance information (Lord et al., 1978; Meindl et al., 1985), we extend this theoretical perspective in the present research by incorporating principles of the social identity analysis of leadership (Haslam, 2001; Hogg, 2001; Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003; Turner, 1991). We argue that followers' effectiveness evaluations are influenced by performance

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information as well as characteristics of the leader in terms of team membership. More specifically, we focus on the moderating effect of leader group prototypicality (i.e., leader's representativeness of the group identity) on the relationship between leader performance information and perceptions of leader effectiveness, proposing that leader group prototypicality prevents negative evaluations after failure. In addition, we show that an underlying process for this effect is the greater trust in leadership given to a prototypical (vs. non-prototypical) group leader. Thus, we (1) extend the "romance of leadership" perspective (i.e., followers' evaluations of leadership effectiveness after performance feedback) by highlighting the role of the shared group membership of leaders and followers, and (2) we extend the social identity analysis of leadership by including leader performance as an important influence on leadership effectiveness evaluations. In addition, we provide empirical evidence for the mediating effect of trust in leadership in enabling a group prototypical (vs. non-prototypical) leader to receive relatively high follower effectiveness evaluations after failure.

## 2. Performance information and leadership endorsement

The question of how followers' evaluations of leadership effectiveness are influenced by performance information has received strong research interest in social psychology and organizational behavior (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Ensari & Murphy, 2003; Lord & Maher, 1991; Meindl et al., 1985; Lord et al., 1978; Shamir, 1992). Research by Lord and colleagues demonstrates that performance information related to the leader's team influenced leadership perceptions (Lord et al., 1978; Lord, Foti, & DeVader, 1984; Phillips & Lord, 1981; Rush, Thomas, & Lord, 1977). They showed in a series of experimental studies that leaders of well-performing teams are evaluated as better on behaviors like initiation of structure and consideration than leaders of low-performing teams. Subsequently, Meindl and colleagues (Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987; Meindl et al., 1985) put forward the "romance of leadership" theory to explain this attribution process. They argued that people have a romanticized, heroic view of leadership. This, in turn, leads to a kind of figure-ground perception of the leader compared to other possible causal factors of an event. Consequently, the leaders are accorded more influence on events than is justified and, thus, leadership serves as an explanatory category for performance of the team and organization — both organizational success and failures are often attributed to the leader. Such attributions subsequently influence followers' leadership evaluations and leadership endorsement.

Although this line of research increases our understanding of how and why follower evaluations of leadership effectiveness are affected by performance feedback, it lacks one important aspect. It fails to take into account the role of the shared group membership of the leader and followers. Participants in these studies were never asked to evaluate *their own leaders*, but evaluated a leader as essentially uninvolved observers. Lord and colleagues showed their participants videos of interacting groups (Lord et al., 1978; Phillips & Lord, 1981) or provided descriptions of a leader (Rush et al., 1977). In a similar vein, Meindl and colleagues (Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987; Meindl et al., 1985) provided descriptions of organizational performance and examined attributions to the leaders of these organizations, or they analyzed media attention to the leader when companies were performing poorly or well. Yet leaders do not only lead groups, they are also members of the groups they lead (Hollander, 1964). To put it differently, leadership processes take place in the context of a shared group membership, where leaders, as group members, ask followers, as group members, to exert themselves on behalf of the collective. Thus, follower evaluations and endorsement of a leader also depend on characteristics of the leader as a group member (Haslam, 2001; Hogg, 2001; Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003; Reicher & Hopkins, 2003; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003).

### 2.1. Social identity analysis of leadership

One influential approach to understanding the influence of shared group membership on perceptions, evaluations, and behavior is the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). The important assumption of this approach is that individuals perceive the social world in terms of social categories. The perceived membership in social categories can contribute to the self-definition of the individuals. People define themselves not only on the basis of their individual characteristics and their interpersonal relations (i.e., personal identity or personal self), but also in terms of characteristics of an ingroup to which they belong (i.e., social identity or collective self) in comparison to an outgroup. Hence, group membership can shape people's cognitions, feelings, and behavior.

Recently, the social identity approach has been used to explain leadership processes (Duck & Fielding, 1999; Haslam & Platow, 2001; Hogg, 2001; Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003; Pierro, Cicero, Bonaiuto, van Knippenberg, & Kruglanski, 2005; Platow, Haslam, Foddy, & Grace, 2003; Reicher & Hopkins, 2003; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). Moreover, Haslam, Platow, Turner, Reynolds, McGarty, & Oakes (2001; see also Haslam & Platow, 2001) have shown that such a perspective has relevance for the "romance of leadership". They showed in an experimental study that leaders who behaviorally affirm the social identity of the group (i.e., show behavior that is in line with the norms and values of the group) receive less negative attributions after an organizational crisis than leaders who were identity-negating (i.e., show behavior that deviates from the group's values and norms). Thus, followers' negative attribution of organizational failure is moderated by the degree to which leaders show identity-affirming behavior.

The social identity analysis of leadership, however, makes not only predictions in terms of how a leader should behave, but also in terms of how a leader is generally perceived (i.e., characteristics and attributes) by the group members. A central variable in this respect is the concept of leader group prototypicality. Group prototypicality refers to the extent to which the leader is seen to embody the group identity — the group prototype (i.e., group prototypes are fuzzy sets of characteristics that in a given context define the group in comparison to relevant other groups; Hogg, 2001; Turner et al., 1987). The group prototype describes and prescribes group membership appropriate attributes in a specific context. When group membership is salient, followers' perception of the leader are contingent on the leader's group prototypicality, and followers' evaluations of the leader are affected by how similar (in terms of characteristics and attributes) the leader is to the prototype of the group. Leaders that are perceived to

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