Leadership across hierarchical levels: Multiple levels of management and multiple levels of analysis

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ABSTRACT

We examined differences in leadership influence processes, perceptions, and multiple levels-of-analysis effects between close and distant charismatic and contingent reward leadership across three hierarchical levels in 13 Korean companies. Multi-source data revealed that followers' commitment to the leader mediated relationships between leadership and followers' attitudinal, behavioral, and performance outcomes in close situations, but not in distant relationships. Leadership at higher levels of management was positively related to leadership at the next lower level, which in turn related to follower outcomes at the lowest echelon. Multivariate within and between analysis indicated multiple-level effects differing by leader–follower distance and for the variables of interest.

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Organizational leadership represents a linking process among various organizational members at different hierarchical levels (Likert, 1961). Close leadership between a focal leader and his/her immediate followers has been the subject of extensive research in various settings. But our understanding of distant leadership between a focal leader and his/her followers not reporting directly to him/her is much more limited (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Avolio, Zhu, Koh, & Bhatis, 2004; Waldman & Yammarino, 1999), and suggests several gaps in the leadership literature.

First, leadership scholars have tended to presume that organizational leadership at upper echelons represents distant leader–follower relationships. However, a leader's hierarchical level does not necessarily indicate the leader–follower distance, as evidenced by chief executive officers and their top management teams and U.S. presidents and their cabinet members (Shamir, 1995). Upper-echelon leadership perceived by close followers may not actually represent leadership at a distance and the perception of leadership and its effects may not be applicable to distant followers.

Second, the extant literature on charismatic leadership has been criticized for focusing primarily on leaders' personal characteristics and thus failing to recognize leadership based on a social relationship between the leader and follower (Howell & Shamir, 2005). The identification of differences in leaders' behaviors and influence processes between close and distant situations needs to be complemented by explanations of why those behaviors and processes are relevant to those situations in terms of follower perception formation and subsequent attitude change.

Lastly, leadership is by nature a multiple-level phenomenon occurring between an individual leader and individual followers, groups of followers, and/or collectives of the groups of followers (Dansereau & Yammarino, 1998). In particular, consideration of leader–follower distance requires us to reconceptualize previous multiple levels-of-analysis perspectives largely limited to close leadership situations and demands empirical testing of alternative possibilities regarding variability and other levels of analysis. Unfortunately, limited conceptual work (e.g., Waldman & Yammarino, 1999; Yammarino, 1994) exists which incorporates a multiple levels-of-analysis perspective to examine organizational leadership across multiple levels of management. Very few

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empirical studies correctly applied a multiple levels-of-analysis perspective to such an examination regardless of the leadership approach (Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005).

To begin to address these limitations in the current literature, this study examines various differences in charismatic and contingent reward leader influence processes and followers' leadership perceptions and outcomes across multiple levels of management through rigorous application of a multiple levels-of-analysis perspective. By integrating the literature on dual-mode information processing (Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) with the literature on charismatic and contingent reward leadership, we develop and test a conceptual model of close and distant charismatic and contingent reward leadership in organizations. Our study thus contributes to the leadership literature by providing conceptual and empirical evidence of differences in the appropriateness of these leadership behaviors and relationships across managerial levels and leader–follower distance.

1. Theoretical review and hypotheses

There has been no clear consensus on a theoretical and operational definition of leader–follower distance, due to little attention given to the construct in leadership literature. Antonakis and Atwater (2002) describe leader–follower distance as a configural effect composed of the following independent dimensions: (a) physical distance resulting from the difference in locations; (b) perceived social distance stemming from differentials in hierarchy, status, and power; and (c) perceived interaction frequency reflecting the perceived degree to which a leader and followers interact with each other.

Despite the configural nature of leader–follower distance, this study limits the conceptual discussion and empirical application to leader–follower distance which results from differences in organizational hierarchies. Greater hierarchical differences (i.e., socially distant) in organizations may most often manifest both greater physical distance and a lower frequency of direct
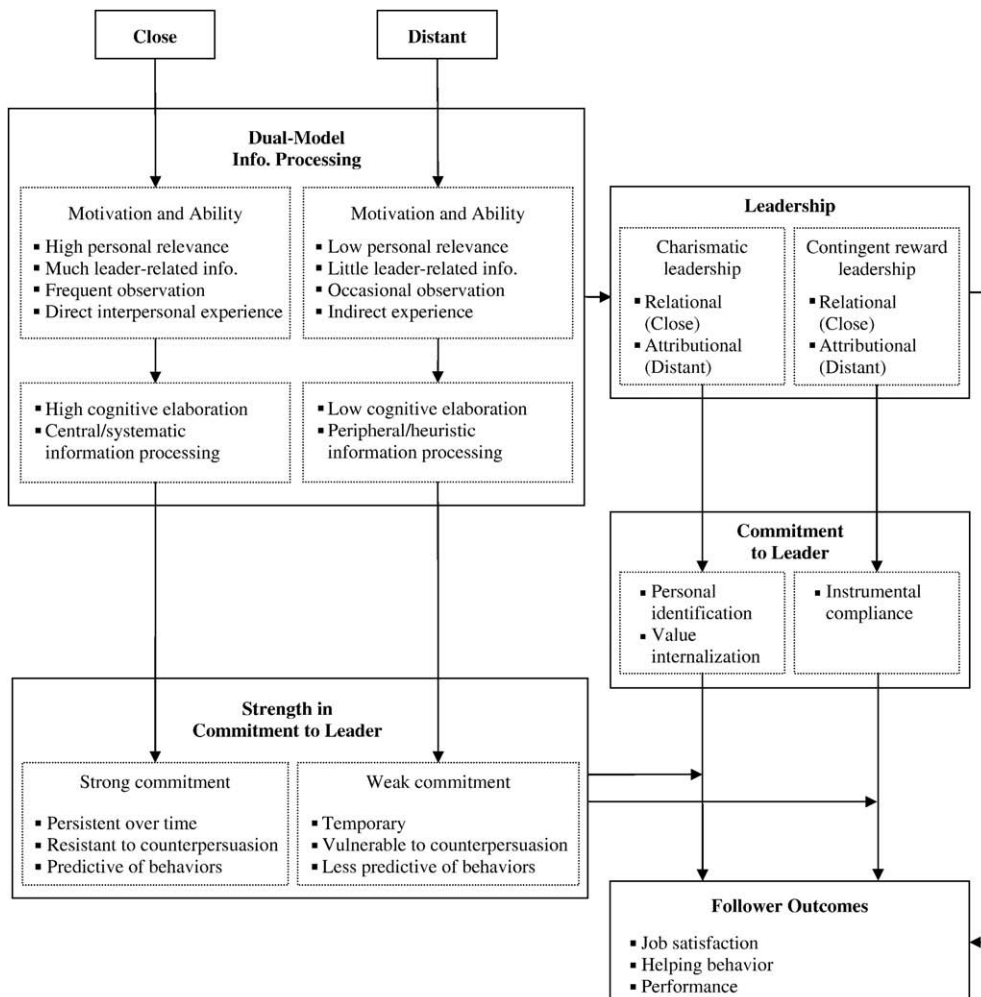

Fig. 1. A model of close and distant charismatic and contingent reward leadership.