

# Conditions of problem-solving and the performance of charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic leaders: A comparative experimental study

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## Abstract

Theories contrasting charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic leaders hold that these three leader types display differences in how they construe and attempt to solve the problems encountered in leading others. To test this hypothesis, a measure examining differences among people in their preferred leadership style, charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic, was developed. Subsequently, people were asked to solve leadership problems in two domains. Solution quality and originality were evaluated. It was found that different types of leaders solved different types of problems successfully. However, these relationships varied as a function of domain and designation of the individual as a leader. The implications of these findings for understanding leadership types, and leader performance, are discussed. © 2008 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

Outstanding leaders, historically notable figures, such as Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, have an enormous impact on our world. Accordingly, students of leadership have spent some twenty years moving beyond normative leadership theories in an attempt to account for the behavior, and success, of outstanding leaders (Bass, *in press*; Yukl, 2002). Typically, studies of outstanding leadership have focused on one style of noteworthy leadership — charismatic leadership or the closely aligned theory of transformational leadership (Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1990; Conger, 1999; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; House & Howell, 1992). Broadly speaking, the available evidence indicates that the future-oriented vision being articulated by charismatic leaders has a significant influence on leader performance (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996). Nonetheless, the question remains as to whether the charismatic, or transformational, pathway represents the only way to become an outstanding leader.

Recently, Mumford and his colleagues (Mumford, 2006; Mumford & Van Doorn, 2001; Strange & Mumford, 2002, 2005), drawing from Weber (1926), have argued that at least two other pathways, or developmental roads, exist that would allow someone to emerge as an outstanding leader — the ideological and pragmatic pathways. Integral to

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Mumford's (2006) conception of these three distinct pathways to outstanding leadership, charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic, is the notion that underlying these three paths are differences in how leaders construe, or think about, the situations that give rise to the opportunity for outstanding leadership (Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjain, 1999; Hunt, Boal, & Dodge, 1999). Accordingly, our intent in the present study was to provide direct evidence bearing on the existence of these differential cognitive orientations among leaders who appear to be pursuing one of these three distinct pathways.

### 1.1. Model

The emergence of outstanding leaders, regardless of the pathway being pursued, appears linked to crises or ambiguous events that imply change in the existing social order (Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl, 2004; Halverson, Holladay, Kazma, & Quionnes, 2004; Hunt et al., 1999). For example, Hunt, Boal, & Dodge (1999) had students work on a task involving actions to be taken to improve a university's ranking, crises were created as groups worked on this task where confederate leaders executed scripts involving the expression of charismatic, visionary, exchange, and expressive leadership behavior. It was found that visionary and charismatic leaders were perceived more favorably in the crisis as opposed to the non-crisis condition. Other work using historiometric methods (Strange & Mumford, 2002) and naturalistic methods (Drazin et al., 1999), also indicates that outstanding leaders emerge under conditions of crisis.

Crises are unique events, relative to other conditions, in that goals and paths to goal attainment are unclear (House, 1977). Thus, crises may be viewed as a novel, ill-defined problem. As a result, crises allow the environment to be construed, or understood, in different ways. Leaders, of course, provide a framework that allows others to understand and respond to the crisis. Therefore, the key to understanding the basis for outstanding leadership is to understand the processes that leaders use to formulate an understanding of the crisis situation. Accordingly, Mumford (2006) argued that ultimately leaders must help followers make sense of the crisis situation by clarifying goals and pathways to goal attainment (Fiol, Harris, & House, 1999; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Thus, the key to understanding outstanding leadership will lie in sensemaking.

Mumford & Strange (2002) have proposed a set of mechanisms describing how leaders go about sensemaking. They argued that leader sensemaking is based on a mental model of the social system at hand. These mental models represent abstract, schematic, knowledge structures describing key causes of system behavior relative to select goals and outcomes (Goldstone & Sakamoto, 2003; Hmelo-Silver & Pfeffer, 2004; Johnson-Laird, 1999). With analysis of causes, and reconfiguration of causes in relation to emergent goals or outcomes leaders can create a prescriptive mental model describing an ideal social system (Mumford & Strange, 2002; Strange & Mumford, 2002). This prescriptive mental model allows sensemaking, and, under certain conditions, formation of viable visions as the prescriptive mental model is transmitted to followers.

Some support for this model has been provided by Strange & Mumford (2005). They asked 212 undergraduates to assume the role of principal of a new experimental school and to write a speech to be delivered to students, teachers, and parents describing their vision for the school. Prior to preparing their speeches, they were 1) asked to review either good or poor case models provided by a consultants report, 2) analyze either goals and/or causes of student performance, and 3) list seven positive and seven negative experiences they had experienced in high school or not reflect on the past. Students, teachers, and parents then rated the vision statements on speeches written after participants worked through these exercises. It was found that analysis of causes when strong base models were presented and the analysis of goals when weak case models were presented resulted in the production of stronger vision statements as evaluated by students, teachers, and parents.

Within this sensemaking framework, charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic leadership are held to arise from the strategies leaders apply in constructing prescriptive mental models (Mumford, Antes, Caughron, & Friedrich, *in press*). Fig. 1 provides a summary description of the differences observed among the prescriptive mental models formulated by charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic leaders. This figure considers key attributes of these descriptive mental models with respect to crisis conditions, sensemaking, the type of experience used in sensemaking, targets of influence, and assumptions made about causation.

Charismatic leader's prescriptive mental models reflect a future-oriented vision (Conger & Kanungo, 1998). Thus, charismatic leaders articulate a change in the goals to be pursued. Although charismatic leaders stress future goals, the causes of goal attainment are held to be stable and under the control of followers who might act in these causes. Charismatic leaders, as a result, view as critical the mobilization of mass support as critical to executing their agenda (Fiol et al., 1999). Typically, charismatic leaders emerge and perform well in ordered environments where changes in

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