



Impact of situational framing and complexity on charismatic, ideological and pragmatic leaders: Investigation using a computer simulation

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ABSTRACT

Revisiting the work of Weber [Weber, M. (1921). *The theory of social and economic organizations*. New York: Free Press], Mumford and colleagues (e.g., [Strange, J. M., & Mumford, M. D. (2002). The origins of vision: Charismatic versus ideological leadership. *Leadership Quarterly*, 13, 343–377; Mumford, M.D. (2006). Pathways to outstanding leadership: A comparative analysis of charismatic, ideological and pragmatic leaders. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.] explored the thesis that in addition to charismatic leadership, there exist at least two additional pathways to outstanding leadership: ideological and pragmatic. Despite the compelling results of initial studies, however, questions remain as to when and under what situational conditions these three leaders operate most effectively. As such, an experiment was conducted to investigate two noteworthy contextual influences: 1) situational congruence with a leader's mental model and 2) environmental complexity. The experiment made use of a computerized leadership simulation where participants took on the role of a university chancellor. Results indicate that leader type, complexity, and situational framing were critical factors in determining leader performance on multiple game performance criteria as well as creative process criteria. Implications and avenues for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

There is little denying the impact leaders have on our lives (Bass, 2008; Yukl, 2006). Leaders possess both the capacity for outstanding achievement and at the same time, the faculty for deleterious harm (e.g., Bennett, 1976; Hyde, 1971) – this is particularly true for outstanding leadership, or leaders that “have a disproportionate impact on the institutions in which we work and the broader world in which we live” (Mumford, Strange, & Bedell-Avers, 2006, p. 3).

Not surprisingly then, there are few areas of organizational behavior as investigated as leadership – an area of research that continues to grow each year (Hunt, 1999; Lowe & Gardner, 2000).

Given the substantial influence leaders possess, it is not surprising that outstanding leadership has been examined by a number of researchers, using a variety of approaches. It is apparent, however, that the most frequently applied models fit into the charismatic or transformational leadership framework (Lowe & Gardner, 2000). Although variants of these approaches exist (e.g., Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Bass, 1985; House, 1977), there is general consensus that these approaches fall under the rubric of vision-based, or broadly-framed charismatic leadership (Hunt, 1999; Schyns, Felfe, & Blank, 2007; Yukl, 1999a,b). In fact, most charismatic and transformational approaches can trace their roots to the early work of Weber (1921) who used the term “charismatic-authority,” suggesting that this style of management was based on “devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual or person.” (Miller, 1963, p. 10).

Although the charismatic model has produced compelling results (e.g., de Hoogh, den Hartog, & Koopman, 2004; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996) some researchers have noted that not all leaders operate in a traditionally charismatic fashion, yet are

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still able to achieve exceptional outcomes. In a case study of Benjamin Franklin, for example, Mumford & Van Doorn (2001) observed that Franklin did not employ a vision-based approach to leadership, but rather operated in a more pragmatic, problem-solving manner and in doing so instituted such influential policies as the introduction of paper currency and paved roads. Similarly, in a review of 11 outstanding companies, Collins (2001) found the selected business leaders to be characteristically pragmatic, rather than charismatic, in their leadership style. Along these lines, a few researchers have posited that the charismatic approach may actually be limiting in some circumstances, suggesting that pragmatic approaches may be more effective in situations characterized by uncertainty (Khurana, 2002; Pasternack & O'Toole, 2002). In a discussion of 40 Fortune 500 firms, for example, Gary (2002) noted: "when the road ahead is unclear, vision can only take you so far" (p. 3).

In light of the observation that not all outstanding leaders fit the charismatic mold, and that charisma or visionary leadership can be insufficient at times, Mumford and colleagues (e.g., Strange & Mumford, 2002; Mumford, 2006) returned to Weber's (1921) original work to develop a more comprehensive approach to understanding outstanding leadership. Weber suggested that in addition to charismatic leadership, managers could also employ a "rational" approach that emphasized a pragmatic leadership style as well as a "traditional" or ideological approach, where the leader's influence rested in the belief in "the sanctity of immemorial traditions" (Miller, 1963, p. 10). Stated more directly, the extended leadership framework developed by Mumford and colleagues is comprised of three leadership styles: charismatic, ideological and pragmatic leaders, or the CIP model of leadership.

Empirically, this extended leadership model has been investigated and validated in a wide range of studies examining behaviors such as creative problem-solving (Bedell, Hunter, & Mumford, 2008; Mumford, Bedell, Hunter, Espejo, & Boatman, 2006), communication strategies (Mumford et al., 2006), political tactics (Mumford et al., 2006), Leader–Member Exchanges (LMX) (Mumford et al., 2006), mental-model formation (Strange & Mumford, 2002), Machiavellianism (Bedell-Avers, Hunter, Angie, & Vert, 2006), and early-life experiences (Ligon, Hunter, & Mumford, 2008). The results of these studies have been compelling and indicate that although the leader types do indeed differ on a number of key variables, each type is uniquely capable of outstanding achievement (Mumford, Strange, & Hunter, 2006).

It should also be noted that although the model was initially examined via the investigations of historically notable, outstanding leaders, recent evidence suggests that the model may also be applicable to more typical forms of leadership. For example, Bedell et al. (2008) examined the CIP model using a sample of undergraduate students engaged in a leadership problem-solving task. The results of the study were consistent with theoretical predictions derived from the outstanding leadership model, thereby lending some degree of support for extending the model to a broader range of leaders. Moreover, early studies that served as an impetus for pragmatic leader investigations examined more typical or day-to-day leadership (e.g., Connelly et al., 2000). This indicates that the CIP model has, at least in part, its roots in more typical forms of leadership (Mumford & Van Doorn, 2001).

Barring a few notable experimental studies (e.g., Bedell et al., 2008) the primary method used to investigate the CIP model has been historiometric – where historical data was quantified and subsequently analyzed using traditional statistical techniques (Simonton, 1990). Although this method has a number of unique advantages with regard to the study of outstanding leadership (e.g., enables access to numerous high-level leaders), it also has a number of limitations. For example, the historiometric approach is limited in that many environmental and situational conditions may only be controlled for rather than investigated directly. Similarly, little is known regarding how environmental influences, such as complexity (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2008) may impact leader behaviors as they encounter crises or problems inherently characterized by high levels of ambiguity and change (Hunt, Boal, & Dodge, 1999).

In sum, an extended model of outstanding leadership was developed in response to the observation that not all outstanding leaders operate in a charismatic fashion. Initial studies examining the CIP model have produced compelling results, strongly suggesting that there exist distinct yet equally viable leadership paths to outstanding achievement. Despite answering many questions, however, these studies and the methods applied present a number of new questions regarding charismatic, ideological and pragmatic leaders and the contexts they operate in. Thus, the aim of the present effort is to (1) experimentally investigate two important influences on leader behavior: situation framing and environmental complexity and more centrally, and (2) explore how these factors might interact to differentially influence the performance of charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic leaders.

1.1. An extended approach to outstanding leadership – The CIP model

Although the typology put forth by Weber (1921) served well as a framework, it was necessary to consider from a process-perspective how the three leadership types actually influence their followers. Accordingly, the sensemaking portion of the model was developed and emerged from the observation that outstanding leaders often emerge during times of crisis – a point noted by a number of leadership scholars (e.g., Hunt, et al. 1999; Mumford, 2006; Rivera, 1994), as well as leaders themselves. John F. Kennedy, for example, noted that as a leader he was grateful for the crises he faced because they allowed him the opportunity for outstanding achievement (Perret, 2001). What is unique with regard to the CIP model of leadership, however, is the consideration of how these leaders *respond* to crises. Certainly, all outstanding leaders are compelled to offer some form of sensemaking to their followers; to provide an interpretation of the situation and offer direction and comfort during times of stress and ambiguity. In fact, sensemaking stands as an important influence mechanism for several reasons. Sensemaking activities allow for leaders to articulate their goals and paths to attaining those goals at a time when subordinates are most ready to receive direction (House, 1971). Moreover, sensemaking provides followers the perception of control, allowing them to face the crises in a functional manner as well as simultaneously providing motivation via increased perceptions of self-efficacy (Tierney & Farmer, 2002).

Given the critical role that sensemaking plays in leadership (e.g., vision development, motivation) and the fact that all leaders do not influence followers in the same way, the extended model explores the underlying cognitive differences that would explain how leaders

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