

Relationships between leadership style and vision content: The moderating role of need for social approval, self-monitoring, and need for social power

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between leaders' personal attributes, leadership style and vision content. One hundred eighty three corporate managers from six industries, who completed a 14-week leadership development course, provided self-reports of their need for social approval, self-monitoring, and need for social power by the second week of the course. Eight hundred and nine subordinates provided ratings of their manager's leadership style by the third week of the course. Upon completion of the course, the managers wrote vision statements which were coded using Berson, Shamir, Avolio, & Popper's [Berson, Y., Shamir, B., Avolio, B. J., & Popper, M. (2001). The relationship between vision strength, leadership style, and content. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 12, 53–73] vision theme categories. Charismatic leadership was most positively associated with inspirational vision themes, whereas contingent reward leadership was most positively associated with instrumental vision themes. Leaders' need for social approval, self-monitoring, and need for social power moderated these relationships.

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When one thinks of vision in terms of leadership, more often than not, it conjures images of famous charismatics who, through their passionate orations, persuade followers to believe in and pursue radical change. Such images in the minds of researchers have given rise to the study of a pivotal tool charismatic leaders use to gain and maintain power through their influence on followers — the construction and delivery of visionary statements (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Berson, Shamir, Avolio, & Popper, 2001; Kirkpatrick, Wofford, & Baum, 2002). *Vision* represents a leader's idealized goal that is shared with followers. Vision is central to the concept of charismatic leadership; some researchers have inextricably linked the two by using charismatic and visionary leadership synonymously (House & Shamir, 1993).

Charismatic or visionary leaders throughout history have used their gift of inspirational articulation making them catalysts for social, political or economic change and therefore, what are referred to as transformational leaders (Bass, 1985, Burns, 1978). Empirical evidence from the past 20 years has shown that such leaders, through their understanding of the people and events around them, construct and deliver compelling statements that inspire followers

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to accept their vision of the future and behave accordingly (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Strange & Mumford, 2002). Because visions are a means for such leaders to attract followers and promote change, effective envisioning processes require leaders to integrate aspects of their self-concept and personality into the vision (Shamir, Arthur, & House, 1994).

Whereas integrating aspects of the self into vision statements may be critical to the effectiveness of leader–follower identification processes (Shamir et al., 1994; Thomas & Greenberger, 1998), no prior research has examined the role that a leader’s personal attributes play in the formulation and articulation of vision statements. Failure by prior researchers to address this issue is unusual since theoretical overviews of charismatic and transformational leadership consider leadership influence to stem from the leader’s *personal attributes* and behavior, follower attributions, the context, or some combination of these factors (Bass, 1990; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; House & Howell, 1992). The present study addresses this gap in the literature by examining how three personal attributes of leaders (i.e., need for social approval, self-monitoring, need for social power) influence the relationship between leadership style and themes contained in vision statements. We focused on these particular constructs because they represent core personal attributes that influence processes described in models of charismatic leadership (e.g., Bryman, 1992; Gardner & Avolio, 1998; House, 1977).

We proposed and tested competing moderated and mediated models of personal attributes, leadership styles and vision content. The moderated model depicted in Fig. 1A is grounded in Murtha, Kanfer, & Ackerman’s (1996) notion that certain traits are a blend of situational and dispositional elements, and Baron & Kenny’s (1986, p. 1178) argument that moderator variables can be introduced when a relationship holds for one subpopulation but not for another. Leadership research has extensively examined the role of moderators in models of leadership effectiveness (e.g., Howell, Dorfman, & Kerr, 1986), with most of these moderating variables being of the contextual type. However, Murtha et al. propose that *situational–dispositional traits* emerge to influence specific behaviors (e.g., charismatic leadership) and their effect on performance processes (e.g., visioning) under certain situations. These traits can be described in terms of the content of measurement items that tap into these situations. The view of Murtha et al. is consistent with research on visioning (Richardson, 1994; Thomas & Greenberger, 1998) which suggests that there are individual differences in leaders’ imaging ability that affect specific behaviors and psychological and performance processes. The alternative mediated model depicted in Fig. 1B is grounded in research (e.g., House & Howell, 1992) which considers traits as causes of leadership behavior.

Examining these constructs’ influence as moderating or mediating variables represents an important opportunity to expand on the work of Berson et al. (2001), as well as other work on vision (e.g., Den Hartog & Verbarg, 1997; Strange & Mumford, 2002). From this, we identified a set of mechanisms, previously untested, through which the leader’s personal attributes and behaviors combine to influence the content of vision statements. Understanding how these personal attributes relate to leadership styles and vision statements can help organizations identify candidates for transformational leadership training, improve training programs on vision statement formulation, and match talents and strengths of managers to the inspirational and instrumental needs of the organization.

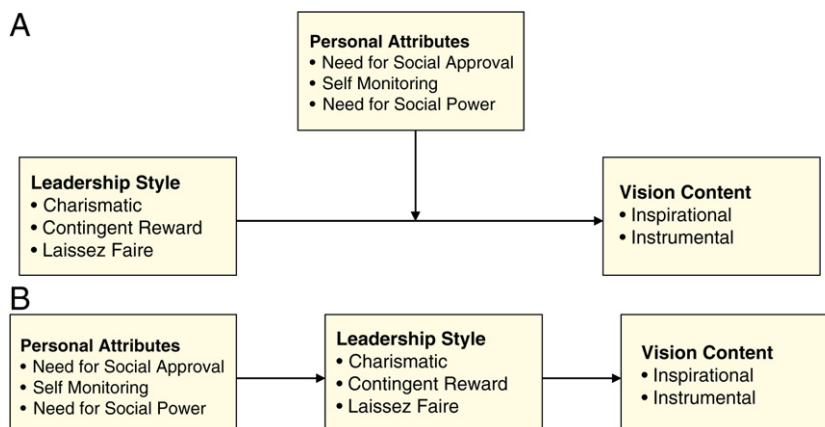


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model (A) and alternative model (B) of personal attributes effects on leadership style and vision content.

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