



# A model of within person variation in leadership: Emotion regulation and scripts as predictors of situationally appropriate leadership

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## ABSTRACT

Leadership has been described as a relational process with substantial research examining a leaders' ability to interact with followers. At the same time, there has been a swell of research that considers leadership as a multi-level construct. The majority of this research starts from the individual level examining the relationship between leaders and individuals and groups. In this article, we argue that a significant aspect of multi-level leadership has been overlooked, the within-person variation leaders are expected to engage in when they work with others. To address this theoretical gap and encourage empirical testing, we develop a conceptual model that highlights how the within-person interaction of emotion regulation and leader scripts influences followers' perceptions of situational appropriateness of the leader behaviors. Implications for theory and empirical testing are discussed.

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## Introduction

Leadership has been examined extensively using multi-level frameworks for a range of models of leadership, including LMX (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), servant leadership (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008), shared leadership (Pearce & Sims, 2001), participative leadership (Somech, 2003) and transformational leadership (Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999; Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011). Research has also linked multi-level leadership to topics such as trust (Burke, Sims, Lazzara, & Salas, 2007), integrity (Palanski & Yammarino, 2009), efficacy (Chen & Bliese, 2002), and commitment to change (Herold, Fedor, Caldwell, & Liu, 2008). Indeed, this interest was sufficient to publish a special edition of *The Leadership Quarterly* devoted to this topic (Yammarino & Dansereau, 2008), which focused primarily on individual to group relationships. As a social influence process, it is not surprising that researchers have argued for the importance of considering leadership at multiple levels. Although this research has made a significant contribution to understanding multi-level issues in leadership, Ashkanasy and Jordan (2008) remind us of the importance of considering within-person variance in multi-level frameworks for leaders. Leaders are exposed to a range of situations on a daily basis, each of which will result in them experiencing a myriad of discrete emotions at the within-person level (Fisher & Noble, 2004). These experiences in a single day can range from extreme pride in their followers achieving goals (Katzenbach, 2003), to guilt about one of their decisions resulting in poor performance of the company (Schaumburg & Flynn, 2012), to anger or sadness in response to an organizational crisis (Madera & Smith, 2009). The sense-making process of these emotions differs significantly (Solomon, 1993).

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Consequently, how leaders emotionally regulate these interactions and situations will impact on their eventual response and the subsequent opinion of their followers. In this article, we present a model explaining how leaders are seen to act in a situationally appropriate manner by their followers in the face of significant daily situational variance.

The foundation of our model is an often-observed, yet under-researched phenomenon in organizations. When followers interact with leaders, a range of emotions can emerge which may or may not be situationally appropriate. While followers can admire consistency in a leader, consistency is not always about behaving in the same manner at *all* times. Rather, it is about leaders being consistent in appropriately responding to specific situations involving followers, which may require emotional variation, both within and across situations. Indeed, leaders who display consistent positivity towards followers are often perceived as being fake (Fleming, 2005), whereas leaders who appear open and who behave in an authentic manner (responding to the situation in a genuine way) are more likely to be seen by their followers as good leaders (Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2005). Hence, the central phenomenon we seek to explain is how leaders are able to display and use a range of emotions consistently across situations to be perceived as behaving in a situationally appropriate manner by their followers. Without establishing a framework that explains how leaders develop these perceptions of appropriateness, our understanding of how leaders are able to influence others remains incomplete (Krasikova & LeBreton, 2012). This is because appropriate emotions relevant to the situation at hand are more likely to help leaders influence followers in directions they desire.

To support our focus on the situational responses of leaders, we draw upon three theoretical frameworks: emotion regulation (Gross, 1998) and embodied cognition (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) in considering within-person processes and the Dual Threshold Model (Geddes & Callister, 2007) which contributes to understanding situationally appropriate responses for the leader. In line with the recommendations of Lindebaum and Jordan (2012), our focus in developing our model is on the utility of discrete emotions in specific situations, rather than looking at simple labels such as positive or negative emotions (for an extended debate on this point, see also Elfenbein, 2007; Solomon, 2003). In essence, we argue that follower perceptions of a leader's behaviors emerge from the situational appropriateness of an emotional display. To support this contention and to develop our model, we provide examples (based on the extant literature) of leaders using a range of discrete emotions. Later in this article, we show that it is not the valence of the emotion that matters, but rather the appropriateness of the emotion to the situation. Indeed, we anticipate that taking this approach will enable researchers to resolve some contradictory findings identified in previous leadership studies involving emotions, particularly in the domain of emotional intelligence and individual differences as predictors of leadership outcomes (see Connelly et al., 2013; Walter, Cole, & Humphrey, 2011).

Our model implies that leaders require the ability to regulate emotions, a circumstance appreciably recognized in the literature (see Humphrey, 2002, 2012a). Previous research has focused on a leader's abilities including their self-awareness and self-regulation (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) or their emotional intelligence (George, 2000; Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005) in the context of antecedent variables in the study of leadership, rather than as a within-person process. Gardner, Coglisier, Davis, and Dickens (2011) note that although broad foundational models of emotions have been applied to leadership research, an explanation of these affective processes is "crucial for the advancement of this field" (p. 1129). Similarly, Ashkanasy and Humphrey (2011) note the need to cultivate "broadly-based theories of leadership that incorporate an emotional dimension" (p. 365). In this article, we seek to explain one of these affective processes and advance a model clarifying how emotional regulation influences the *within-person variance* of leaders to develop follower's perceptions of the leader's situationally appropriate behavior. In so doing, our approach also addresses concerns about an excessive focus on leader-centric approaches (Yammarino, Dionne, Schriesheim, & Dansereau, 2008), focusing instead on the processes through which others see leaders as effective.

### **A model to understand within-person variation in leader's responses**

In our model (Fig. 1), a within-person variation is triggered when a leader encounters a situational cue or an event that triggers discrete emotions within the leader. The leader's decision on strategies they use when experiencing emotions is an important variable that assists them in their selection of (or decision on) a script that will be appropriate to that situation or triggering event. Specifically, a "script is a schematic knowledge structure held in memory that specifies behavior or event sequences that are appropriate for specific situations" (Gioia & Poole, 1984, p. 449). We make a clear distinction between experienced (or felt) emotions and expressed (or displayed) emotions (see Lawrence, Troth, Jordan, & Collins, 2011), while noting that emotion regulation involves both. Humphrey (2012a) recently argued for the central nature of distinguishing between a leader's feelings and their displayed emotions in leadership. Examining the current situation (see Fig. 1), the leader then (at both conscious and unconscious levels) draws on their past experiences, including case based knowledge (Mumford, Friedrich, Caughron, & Byrne, 2007; Schmidt & Rikers, 2007), heuristics (Abe & Izard, 1999), personal knowledge of the worker or group involved in the situation and organizational norms and social rules (Hertel & Kerr, 2001), and the followers' expectations of the situation to determine the script that would be most appropriate in that situation. The final step in our model is for the leader to combine their script with a suitable emotional expression to be seen by their followers to be behaving in a situationally appropriate manner. In terms of our dependent variable, we note that there is a difference between a leader behaving as the follower would prefer and the leader behaving in a situationally appropriate manner. For instance, although followers may wish to avoid confronting situations, they may find a disappointed leader addressing a performance issue as being situationally appropriate if followers have a desire to understand why the leader is disappointed with them.

As noted in our introduction, the central organizing framework for our model draws upon Lawrence et al.'s (2011) work outlining emotion regulation in the workplace. In terms of the scripts component of our model, we draw on the concept of embodied cognition (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). We also draw on Geddes and Callister's (2007) Dual Threshold Model to explain how leaders determine appropriate and inappropriate emotional expressions at work.

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