



## Linking leader behavior and leadership consensus to team performance: Integrating direct consensus and dispersion models of group composition

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### ABSTRACT

We sought to establish whether mean level within-team assessments of a leader's transformational behavior and the extent of perceived variability (i.e., consensus) among team members' ratings around this mean level are separate yet related indicators of leader quality. To this end, using data from 108 work teams in a multinational field setting, we explored the relationship between managers' transformational leadership behavior and team performance as moderated by the extent of variability among team members' leadership behavior ratings. Recognizing that the relationship between leader behavior and team performance is indirect, we further examined whether team empowerment served as a mediating mechanism through which transformational leadership is evoked. Study results, based on ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses and bootstrapped estimates, were consistent with the hypothesized conceptual scheme of moderated mediation, in that the joint effects of transformational leadership behavior and consensus about transformational leadership were found to have an indirect effect on team performance through team empowerment. These findings broaden the focus of transformational leadership theory by illustrating that, within a team context, the transformational leadership–performance linkage is more nuanced than previously believed.

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In an effort to understand the antecedents of job performance, leadership research has traditionally emphasized the relationship between managers and subordinates as *individuals* (Day, Gronn, & Salas 2004). With the widespread shift to team-based organizations, however, there is mounting evidence that a manager's leadership behavior in supervising subordinates as a *group* influences the performance in and of teams (Kozlowski & Ilgen 2006; Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp, & Gilson 2008). Recognizing this shift in emphasis, Chen, Kirkman, Kanfer, Allen, and Rosen (2007), among others, have observed that a focus on group methods of leadership raises a series of yet unanswered questions. For example, what compromises may occur when managing both individuals and teams as a whole? Do efforts to lead and motivate teams affect individual leader–follower interactions, and what are the likely consequences for one-on-one relationships between team members? Are the behaviors necessary for building and leading high performing teams the same as for motivating performance at the individual level? Such questions have prompted leadership researchers (e.g., Chen & Kanfer 2006) to explore the interplay between simultaneously managing team members as individuals and as a group *in toto*.

Illustrative of these researchers' efforts are studies investigating leadership behavior as a group-level phenomenon. Bass, Avolio, Jung, and Berson (2003), for instance, were interested in examining how leader behaviors directed at teams as a whole relate to unit performance. In doing so, they relied on a *direct consensus model of composition* (Chan 1998). Consistent with the direct consensus model, individual and team effects are partitioned using group mean scores to measure the *absolute level* of a

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leader's behavior. Tests of within-group agreement (e.g.,  $r_{wg}$ ; James, Demaree, & Wolf 1984) are typically then computed to determine whether creating aggregate scores from individual level data is empirically justifiable; unexplained variance is regarded as noise or measurement error (Kozlowski & Klein 2000).

In contrast to this view, it has been increasingly argued that unexplained variance among team members' assessments may convey relevant unit-level information rather than simply reflect error variance (Chan 1998; Harrison & Klein 2007). Exploring this possibility, leadership researchers have recently considered what are termed *dispersion models of group composition*. In a dispersion composition model, within-group variance (or, alternatively, within-group agreement or consensus) is treated as a meaningful higher level construct rather than a statistical prerequisite for aggregation (Chan 1998). Within the leadership domain, the extent to which team members agree about the quality of their managers' leadership behavior has been dubbed *leadership consensus* (Feinberg, Ostroff, & Burke 2005; see also Lindell & Brandt 2000). In a dispersion composition model, leadership consensus is considered high when team members' perceptions of a leader's behavior are homogenous. Conversely, leadership consensus is considered low when team members' perceptions of a leader's behavior are heterogenous or dissimilar. In either instance, the degree of consensus is, by definition, a group-level measure of the amount of variability in team members' perceptions of the quality of their managers' leadership behavior. As discussed below, evidence from a handful of studies suggests that team members' consensual perceptions about the quality of their managers' leadership behavior may be an important explanatory variable for understanding the influence of leadership within teams.

The primary aim of the present study was to extend transformational leadership research by integrating a direct consensus model of composition and a dispersion model of group composition within a single framework. To this end, the present study contributes to the leadership literature in two ways. First, it answers recent calls for research exploring whether differences in leadership consensus moderate the relationship between the general (i.e., average) behavior exhibited by a leader and team performance (e.g., Cole & Bedeian 2007; Dawson, González-Romá, Davis, & West 2008). The current investigation focuses on transformational leader behaviors for two principal reasons: (a) they "dominate" current thinking about leadership research and (b) they are at the core of contemporary leadership theory (Judge & Piccolo 2004, p. 762). Second, recognizing that the relationship between leaders' transformational behavior and team performance may not be direct, we cast team empowerment as a mediating mechanism in an attempt to replicate prior research (e.g., Chen et al. 2007). In doing so, the present study responds to Schaubroeck, Lam, and Cha's (2007) challenge that leadership researchers go beyond investigating transformational leadership's main effects (at the team level) and to examine not only the boundary conditions under which transformational leadership is most likely to be effective, but also the mediating processes by which transformational leadership exerts its effect on workplace outcomes. Thus, by simultaneously considering leadership consensus and team empowerment in a hypothesized model, we broaden the focus of transformational leadership theory by illustrating that the transformational leadership–team performance linkage is more nuanced than previously believed.

## 1. A follower-centric approach to leadership: Conceptual issues and empirical findings

Leadership researchers have long acknowledged the importance of a manager's leadership behavior in shaping team members' psychological and work group climate perceptions (e.g., González-Romá, Peiró, & Tordera 2002; Kozlowski & Doherty 1989; Zohar & Tenne-Gazit 2008). Dragoni (2005) asserted that, as leaders, managers transmit their belief systems to team members through role modeling, providing guidance in the form of direct and indirect feedback, and by reinforcing behavior that supports a leader's favored achievement orientation. Following research that casts leaders as "climate engineers" (Naumann & Bennett 2000) and "meaning managers" (Rentsch 1990), we view leaders' behaviors and group interactions as contributing to team members' shared perceptions. Thus, recognizing that leadership is a socially constructed phenomenon heavily influenced by intra-team factors and relationships (Meindl 1995), we approached leadership from a follower's point of view.

Taking this a step further, and consistent with a dispersion model of group composition, we also recognize, to the extent a leader "creates consensus and a similarity of perceptions" among team members, "the degree of consensus within a particular constituency of a leader can be interpreted as an additional parameter" with which to assess leader effectiveness (Feinberg et al. 2005, p. 472). Based on this reasoning, it is logical to distinguish between within-team member perceptions of a leader's average behavior and the extent of perceived variability (i.e., dispersion) among team members' ratings around this mean (Meade & Eby 2007). Thus, in keeping with Chan's (1998) composition typology, we expected that the degree of agreement among a team's members about the quality of their manager's leadership behavior would contain meaningful information (see also, Harrison & Klein 2007).

Of particular relevance to the present investigation, Chan (1998) has suggested that different composition models can be "applied to the same data in a study" (p. 244). Further, Harrison and Klein (2007) have argued that a mean-by-variability interaction is implicit when specifying a consensus variable. Building from this base, we speculated that leadership consensus functions as a boundary condition influencing the impact of a manager's transformational leadership behavior on team performance. As such, a team's effectiveness may *hinge* on a manager's ability to create a consensus in members' perceptions of the manager's leader behavior.

## 2. Consensus among team members' leadership perceptions

Klein and House (1995) were among the first to suggest that a consideration of the consensus among team members' leadership perceptions would refine and clarify the leadership domain by offering new insights into motivating team members as both individuals and *en masse* as a group. They reasoned that intragroup consensus vis-à-vis team members' leadership

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