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Outsourcing inspiration: The performance effects of ideological messages from leaders and beneficiaries

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ABSTRACT

Although ideological messages are thought to inspire employee performance, research has shown mixed results. Typically, ideological messages are delivered by leaders, but employees may be suspicious of ulterior motives—leaders may merely be seeking to inspire higher performance. As such, we propose that these messages are often more effective when outsourced to a more neutral third party—the beneficiaries of employees' work. In Study 1, a field quasi-experiment with fundraisers, ideological messages from a beneficiary—but not from two leaders—increased performance. In Study 2, a laboratory experiment with an editing task, participants achieved higher task and citizenship performance when an ideological message was delivered by a speaker portrayed as a beneficiary vs. a leader, mediated by suspicion. In Study 3, a laboratory experiment with a marketing task, the beneficiary source advantage was contingent on message content: beneficiaries motivated higher task and citizenship performance than leaders with prosocial messages but not achievement messages.

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"Her son had been in a terrible accident... had her son been driving any other car, he would have been killed... The policeman said he was sure the Volvo had saved his life... the work we do at Volvo genuinely saves lives."

– Bob Austin, Volvo manager ([Hemmings Blog, 2010](#))

"My daughter escaped with minor bruises and scrapes... The police officer's statement to me: 'If it wasn't a Volvo, they probably would not have survived.'"

– Beverly Elliott, Volvo customer ([Volvo, 2009](#))

To inspire employees, organizations often make use of ideological messages (Katz & Kahn, 1966; Selznick, 1957). Ideological messages are persuasive appeals designed to convince employees to change their attitudes or behavior by invoking an inspiring set of shared values and ideals (Shamir, Zakay, Breinin, & Popper, 1998). In this respect, ideological messages are sense-giving or meaning-making communications (Pratt, 2000; Smircich & Morgan, 1982) that are thought to infuse meaning into work by providing employees with a stronger belief in the purpose and significance underlying the organization's products and services (Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006). These messages are designed to inspire employees by appealing to "a principled or altruistic model of human nature" (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003, p. 576).

Scholars have long assumed that ideological messages motivate employees to achieve high performance, but existing research does not depict such a clear-cut picture. Ideological messages are typically studied as one of many behaviors in which charismatic and transformational leaders tend to engage (Bass, 1985; Shamir et al., 1998). Thus, although considerable research has shown that charismatic and transformational leadership is associated with higher employee performance (e.g., Bono & Judge, 2003; Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006), it is difficult to isolate ideological messages as an active ingredient driving these effects (Brown & Lord, 1999). The few studies that have attempted to examine the unique effects of ideological messages have returned inconsistent or insignificant results. For example, in laboratory research, Kirkpatrick and Locke (1996) found that an ideological message about how high-quality products benefit customers weakly increased performance quality but did not influence performance quantity. In a field quasi-experiment in a call center, Grant (in press) found that an ideological message from a leader about why the work was important did not increase employee sales or revenue. Similarly, in a field study in the Israeli military, Shamir et al. (1998) found that ideological messages from leaders did not succeed in inspiring soldiers. Despite the theoretical and practical importance of understanding when ideological messages succeed in inspiring employees to perform more effectively, existing research has yet to clearly articulate the conditions necessary for ideological messages to be effective (Shamir et al., 1998).

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Virtually all of this past research has positioned leaders as the source of ideological messages (Bass, 1985; Yukl & Tracey, 1992). Leaders, however, are not the only individuals who can deliver these messages. In some organizations, ideological messages are delivered by beneficiaries—the clients, customers, patients, and other end users whose lives are affected by the products and services for which employees are responsible (Grant, *in press*). For instance, in addition to the Volvo example above, DaVita, an organization that runs kidney dialysis centers, shares videos in which patients and families articulate how the organization's work keeps patients alive, and SonoSite, a company that develops ultrasound equipment, has invited Army captains to tell employees about how their equipment has saved soldiers' lives in remote locations (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Recent studies have shown that when beneficiaries deliver these types of ideological messages, employees are motivated to perform more effectively (Grant, 2008; Grant et al., 2007). Nevertheless, research has yet to compare the impact of ideological messages from leaders vs. beneficiaries.

We propose that ideological messages tend to be more effective when they are delivered by beneficiaries than by leaders. We base this prediction on theory and research on attributional suspicion, which suggests that when audiences question a speaker's motives and intentions, they find the speaker's message less persuasive (DeCarlo, 2005; Oza, Srivastava, & Koukova, 2010; Williams, Fitzsimons, & Block, 2004). We expect that employees are less likely to be suspicious of ideological messages from beneficiaries than from leaders. This is because beneficiaries have less of a direct stake in employees' performance than leaders, who can be perceived as having an ulterior motive of using the ideological message merely to inspire performance for their own gain (e.g., Shamir et al., 1998; Vonk, 1998). However, we also propose that these effects are contingent on the content of the ideological messages: beneficiaries are uniquely qualified to deliver prosocial testimonials about the impact of the organization's products and services based on firsthand experience, but have no distinctive advantage in communicating messages about the organization's achievements.

We test these hypotheses across three experiments. Mindful of the importance of using experimental methods to isolate effects of specific behaviors (e.g., Brown & Lord, 1999; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002), we utilize both laboratory and field experiments, facilitating both internal and external validity. By demonstrating the importance of the source and the content in shaping the effectiveness of ideological messages, our research takes a step toward resolving conflicting results, and offers a contingency perspective on when leaders should deliver their own inspirational communications vs. outsource them to beneficiaries.

Ideological messages: the importance of the source

Our focus is on understanding how ideological messages from different sources influence employee performance—the effectiveness of employees' efforts in achieving organizational goals (Campbell, 1990). Ideological messages are communications that emphasize how the organization's work connects with employees' deep or core values (Shamir et al., 1998), and often are discussed in the context of visionary (Stam, van Knippenberg, & Wisse, 2010), charismatic (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993), and transformational (Bass, 1985) leadership. In theories of visionary leadership, ideological messages are viewed as part of the process of communicating a vision, linking images of the past and future to important values and purposes (Stam et al., 2010; see also Conger & Kanungo, 1987). In theories of charismatic leadership, ideological messages are included as part of a broader set of “behaviors that emphasize collective values and ideologies and link a mission, its goals, and

expected behaviors to those values and ideologies” (Shamir et al., 1998, p. 388). In theories of transformational leadership, ideological messages are associated with behaviors focused on inspirational motivation—creating a meaningful, compelling vision of the future (Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006). Whether these messages serve the function of inspiring employees, however, is an open question. Ideological and inspirational messages are communicative speech acts (Shamir et al., 1998), while inspiration is a psychological state experienced an employee involving transcendent motivation (Thrash & Elliot, 2003) that may or may not be evoked by an ideological or inspirational message.

We view an ideological message as a specific type of inspirational message. In general, inspirational messages involve articulating a vision with enthusiasm, confidence, optimism, and purpose (Bass, 1985; Joshi, Lazarova, & Liao, 2009; Yukl & Tracey, 1992). Within this category, ideological messages are a type of moral appeal (Chen, Pillutla, & Yao, 2009; Dorris, 1972) that emphasizes the link between the vision and core values or ideals (Shamir et al., 1998). Researchers have typically conceptualized ideological messages as focusing on values that transcend self-interest, communicating how the organization's work advances a greater good or is beneficial to other people (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003).¹

Organizational scholars have often assumed that leaders are the primary source of the ideological messages that are delivered with the intent of inspiring and motivating employees. Indeed, empirical evidence shows that leaders are more likely than peers or subordinates to attempt to inspire employees by delivering ideological messages (Yukl & Tracey, 1992). However, research suggests that leaders seeking to inspire employees by communicating ideological messages often encounter difficulties in establishing their credibility (e.g., Shamir, 1995; Shamir et al., 1998). For example, Lam and Schaubroeck (2000, pp. 988–989) stated that leaders “rarely have the credibility that is needed to persuade employees to alter their behavior.”

Alternatively, ideological messages can be delivered directly by beneficiaries—the customers, clients, patients, and other end users outside the boundaries of the organization who ultimately utilize employees' products and services (Grant, *in press*). Beneficiaries can provide personal stories, feedback, and testimonials that help employees understand their contributions and impact (Grant, 2007). Recent research has shown that these types of ideological messages from beneficiaries can lead employees to perceive their work as more socially beneficial and valued, which motivates them to achieve higher performance (Grant, 2008; Grant et al., 2007).

Ideological messages and suspicion of the source

We build on this evidence to propose that ideological messages are more likely to increase employees' performance when delivered by beneficiaries than by leaders. We base this prediction on

¹ It is important to distinguish our conceptualization of ideological messages from recent developments in research on ideological leadership. Mumford and colleagues have argued that charismatic and ideological leaders share a focus on creating change through presenting a vision that links to core values (Bedell-Avers, Hunter, & Mumford, 2008). However, they propose that charismatic leaders tend to be effective in ordered conditions by articulating a positive future vision that emphasizes human control to a broad audience, whereas ideological leaders succeed in chaotic situations by referencing past failures and situational control to a group of trusted followers (Bedell-Avers et al., 2008). Our approach builds on conceptualizations of ideological emphasis (Shamir et al., 1993; Shamir et al., 1998) and ideological currency (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003), and thus differs from research on ideological leadership in three key ways. First, as noted above, our focus is on specific messages, rather than overall behavioral styles. Second, we consider these messages as being delivered by beneficiaries as well as leaders. Third, we do not constrain ideological messages to focus on past failures or a small group of followers. We view ideological messages as those that define how the organization's work connects to core values, which can be based on past failures, past successes, or future threats or opportunities.

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