Leading from different psychological distances: A construal-level perspective on vision communication, goal setting, and follower motivation

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ABSTRACT

How should leaders construct and communicate their messages to most effectively motivate their employees? We offer an integrative framework to address the diverging and complementary nature of two established approaches to employee motivation: Vision communication and goal setting. Specifically, while vision communication involves formulating relatively abstract, far-reaching, and timeless messages, effective goal setting involves formulating specific, challenging and time-constrained objectives. Building on construal level theory of psychological distance, we argue that the experience of *construal fit* between the attributes of a message and the attributes of the situation will enhance its motivational effectiveness. We present a framework that addresses *when* visions and goals achieve construal fit and explains *why* and *how* construal fit leads to increased follower motivation. We discuss different approaches to integrating visions and goals, propose directions for future research, and illustrate how the notion of construal fit may be used for explaining key organizational phenomena.

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This paper focuses on a fundamental open question in the motivation literature, namely, how should leaders construct and communicate their messages in order to most effectively motivate their followers? Despite being at the center of attention for both psychologists and management scholars for decades, the role of leaders as drivers of follower motivation remains one of the most challenging issues in organizational behavior (Bass, 2008; Day, 2012). Considerable research suggests that leaders sometimes focus on the desirability of actions and outcomes, presenting an abstract and super-ordinate vision for organizational members, and on other occasions focus on the feasibility of actions and outcomes, and set concrete, subordinate goals for organizational members. The critical question we undertake in this paper concerns the conditions under which each of these approaches is likely to be more versus less effective.

Vision communication and goal setting are two major theoretical approaches that explicate links between leadership and managerial behavior and employee motivation and performance (Locke & Latham, 2002; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; Van Knippenberg & Stam, 2013). Two relatively independent streams of research have validated these theories in terms of their impact on the

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performance of individuals and organizations (Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003; Fanelli, Misangyi, & Tosi, 2009; Greer, Homan, De Hoog, & Den Hartog, 2012; Latham, Erez, & Locke, 1988; Nanus, 1992). These streams of research tend to be separated by disciplinary boundaries, such that vision research is pursued primarily by leadership scholars whereas research on goals is pursued by psychologists and organizational behavior scholars. Yet, despite the similar effects on outcomes, these motivational approaches entail contradictory mechanisms. Most notably, effective vision statements tend to be relatively abstract, based on imagery, far-reaching and timeless; in contrast, effective goal setting involves formulating specific, challenging and time-constrained objectives that involve quantifiable in-role performance (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Locke & Latham, 1990; Van Knippenberg & Stam, 2013). As Kirkpatrick and Locke (1996) noted: "Although visions and goals are similar in some respects (e.g., both refer to desirable ends), there are significant differences between them. Visions are general and are never fully achieved in practice … whereas goals are specific and can be readily achieved" (p. 37).

Despite recent recognition by scholars (Van Knippenberg & Stam, 2013) and calls for using "more integrative approaches to studying visionary leadership" (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013, p. 48), no previous work has attempted to subsume these two motivational approaches under a single theoretical framework that addresses some of the seemingly contradictory predictions of these approaches. Our work helps explicating links between personal, organizational, and environmental conditions and the relative effectiveness of each of these diverging motivational strategies. Few studies (e.g., Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Whittington, Goodwin, & Murray, 2004) have looked at aspects of goal-setting together with forms of vision communication, however, they did not attempt to integrate vision and goals, nor did they examine moderators that enable such integration. In one of these studies (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996) vision statements were phrased in terms of extended performance goals rather than ideological vision statements, rendering the contrast with goals less relevant. Earlier work that did look at moderators did so separately for vision and goals (see Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996 for a meta-analysis of the moderators of vision; see Locke & Latham, 2002 for a review of moderators of goals).

Building on construal level theory of psychological distance (CLT; Trope & Liberman, 2010), we identify moderators that allow co-examination of the relative effectiveness of vision and goal setting. As such, our work facilitates a theoretical integration of the seemingly contradictory predictions put forth by the literatures on vision communication and goal setting. We propose that despite being communicated in different terms and time perspectives, visions and goals may well augment and complement each other when used appropriately across situations and time in organizations. As such, one contribution of this paper is in using an established framework in cognitive social psychology to address a theoretical gap between two dominant research streams in management. A second contribution of this work is in identifying the organizational conditions under which each of these approaches is likely to be more versus less effective (Berson, Shamir, Avolio, & Popper, 2001; Locke & Latham, 2002). Overall, we take a contingency approach (e.g., House, 1971) to the relationships between leadership and employee motivation by highlighting *when* each approach is likely to be effective as well as *why* and *how* each of these approaches influences employee motivation and performance.

Despite its relatively recent introduction (Trope & Liberman, 2003), CLT has received outstanding attention in Psychology (e.g., Fujita, 2011; Magee & Smith, 2013), as well as in other disciplines, such as Marketing (White, MacDonnell, & Dahl, 2011), Strategic Management (Barreto, 2013), and Leadership (Popper, 2013). CLT establishes the relationship between psychological distance and individuals' thought processes. According to CLT, individuals mentally represent (i.e., construe) distant situations and objects such as future events, physically or socially remote individuals, and hypothetical events using abstract representations (high-level construals); in contrast, individuals think about near future events, close others, and probable events using concrete representations (low-level construals) (Maglio, Trope, & Liberman, 2013; Trope & Liberman, 2010).

In line with CLT, we suggest that followers' reactions to a leader's communication are shaped by the content properties of the message (e.g., its concreteness vs. abstractness), and the social and temporal distances between leaders and followers. Importantly, communications that address hypothetical and temporally-distant desirable end states (i.e., visions) are experienced as more abstract than communications that address probable and temporally-proximate desirable end-states (i.e., goals). Thus, two of the four dimensions of psychological distance in CLT (which we review later) – hypotheticality and temporal distance – directly influence the perceived abstractness of the message.

Experiencing a "construal fit" between the attributes of a message and the attributes of the situation (i.e., social and spatial distances between leaders and followers) in which the message is being delivered and received enhances the likelihood and degree of social influence. This prediction is consistent with research showing that goals are more likely to affect behavior when goals and behavior are matched in terms of their construal level (i.e., the degree of abstractness versus concreteness in which people construe behavior and events; Eyal, Sagristano, Trope, Liberman, & Chaiken, 2009; Giacomantonio, De Dreu, Shalvi, Sligte, & Leder, 2010). For example, Torelli and Kaikati (2009) found that abstract values influenced judgments and behavior when individuals were induced to think about their ultimate life goals (i.e., have abstract mindset) but not when asked to think about specific examples for these life goals (concrete mindset). It is also consistent with other fit frameworks (e.g., regulatory fit: Lee & Aaker, 2004; person–organization fit: Kristof Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991), which highlight the positive consequences of experienced fit.

In particular, we propose that formulating messages at a construal level (e.g., abstract vision or concrete goal-setting) that fits the experienced psychological distance between the leader and the followers will enhance follower motivation. We summarize these ideas in Fig. 1. In addition, because we integrate concepts from different disciplines we provide a table (see Table 1) with brief definitions of the constructs we use in our theoretical development. A more detailed explanation of each term is provided in the text when the term is used in developing our arguments and propositions.

The following sections review previous research pertaining to vision communication and goal setting, and compare the two approaches. We subsequently introduce CLT and discuss how this theory can be used to conceptualize the differences between