

Followers' leadership sense-making behaviour: How perceptions of the linkages between leaders and their close followers influence distant followers' behaviours.

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Abstract

Researchers exploring leadership have mostly focused their attention on leaders and their leadership styles whereas the role of the follower has been largely ignored. Prior research on transformational leadership asserts that interactions between leaders and followers are interpersonal in nature. However, this approach ignores the reality that leaders often spend more time with some followers than others. The current paper explores the role of the follower in the leadership process and asserts that distant followers engage in a leadership sensemaking process when deciding to follow the leader. Part of this sensemaking process entails distant followers observing interactions and making linkages between leaders and close followers. It is asserted that the observed linkages between leaders and close followers influence distant followers' perceptions of follower instrumentality, willingness to follow the leader, responsibility to the leader, and subsequent follower behaviours. Implications for future research on leadership are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Researchers have recognized that leaders and followers jointly shape the leadership process (e.g., Shamir & Howell, 2000). For instance, Hollander (1993) asserted that followers play a vital role in defining and determining leaders' actions. Similarly, Shamir and Howell (2000) point to the equally active roles of leaders and followers, despite relational imbalances, in shaping the leadership process. Yet, until recently, the role of followers has been largely ignored. Erhart and Klein (2001) indicate that, as a result, much work remains to be done to understand the follower aspect of the relationship. For example, do all followers engage in the same process when following leaders? Do leaders' interactions with certain followers *signal* to the

other followers the courses of actions the leaders desire most? How do the interactions between leaders and certain followers influence other followers' perceptions of those leaders?

Recent research on followers has indicated that followers are not a homogenous group. For instance, followers can differ in their attachment styles. Keller (2003) identifies secure followers as those with a consistent positive relationship with leaders, anxious-ambivalent followers as those who attempt to cling to leaders and, finally, avoidant followers as those who evade leaders' attempts to build a relationship. Similarly, Dvir and Shamir (2003) differentiate between direct and indirect followers. Direct followers build close relationships with their leaders characterized by direct work relations, limited number of followers, close communication, and face-to-face evaluation. In contrast, indirect followers display opposite characteristics. Consequently, leaders have divergent influences on followers. That is, the processes of leadership influences are likely to be different for close and distant followers (Shamir, 1995). While research on transformational leadership indicates that leaders influence followers through close, interpersonal interactions, Shamir (1995) suggests that distant followers may engage in a different process than close followers. In a follow-up longitudinal study, Dvir and Shamir (2003) differentiated direct from indirect followers and also examined the influence of followers' developmental characteristics on predicting transformational leadership. They found, contrary to their hypothesis, that direct followers who had high initial development had transformational leadership ratings that decreased over time and visa versa. Yet the opposite effect was found with indirect followers. Dvir and Shamir (2003) found that indirect followers, who had initial high initial development level, reported increased ratings of their leaders over time and visa versa. These results show that different levels of followers have varying responses to leadership. While research on transformational leadership proposes that leaders and followers engage in repeated close interpersonal interactions, recent research by Keller (2003) suggests that followers engage in a much more distant sensemaking process in their attempts to understand their leaders. Despite the recognition that there are different levels of followership, little is known about how these different processes of followership interact amongst followers. It is the purpose of this paper to explore how leaders' interactions with their close followers influence the leadership sensemaking of distant followers. It is asserted that by examining the different processes of followership, organizational theorists will have a more comprehensive understanding of organizational leadership.

2. Prior research on leadership and how they relate to followership

Over the past ten years there has been increased attention on the topic of leadership. A search of the PSYCINFO database with the keyword leadership from years 1993 – 2003 indicated that there have been over 5,300 published articles on the topic of leadership during this period. In comparison, there were only 3,594 published articles on leadership between the 20 year period between 1960 and 1980. While it can be argued there are more publications now than in the period between 1960 and 1980, there is no denying that the topic of leadership has garnered much attention in the organizational literature.

One of the major reasons that leadership has warranted such empirical attention is through its effects in organizations. Leadership has been shown to influence corporate culture (Book, 2003), performance (Jones, 2002) and perceived organizational success (Weinberg & McDermott, 2002). Leadership has also been shown to influence cooperation (De Cremer & Van Knippenberg, 2002), harassment reporting (Offermann & Malamut, 2002) and feedback-seeking (Levy, Cober, & Miller, 2002). Consequently, there is little doubt that leadership has a major influence on organizations and their employees. Despite much research being conducted on leadership, the common assumption among most leadership theories is that all followers engage in a similar process and the differences in the level of involvement is due to different levels of leadership. For example, research conducted on transformational leadership indicates that transformational leaders display charismatic behaviours, stimulate inspirational motivation, offer intellectual stimulation and provide followers with individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Once leaders are assessed by followers on these leadership behaviours, these behaviours are analysed on how they influence followers' behaviours. The results are then analyzed to determine how different levels of transformational leadership behaviours influence followers behaviours. This methodology assumes that the effects of transformational leadership on followers are linear and that followers engage in a parallel method in determining their level of involvement with a leader.

The assumption that *all* followers partake in a *similar* process when choosing whether or not to follow a particular leader may not be accurate. Research on leader-member exchange (LMX) theory indicates that leaders treat certain followers differentially (Graen & Wakabayashi, 1994). The leader-member exchange theory posits that there are different kinds of relationships with different groups of followers and there are two basic groups of followers. One group of followers are considered an *in-group* and are favoured by the leader. In-group members receive a considerable amount of attention, time and recognition from leaders. Conversely, out-group members are often disfavoured by leaders and receive fewer valued resources from their leaders than in-group members. Research on LMX indicates that leaders distinguish between in-group and out-group members very early in their relationships and on little information. Leaders choose their in-group members on age, gender, personality and/or competence (Phillips & Bedian, 1994; Dunegan, Duchon, & Uhl-Bien, 1992). It has also been shown that leaders give higher performance ratings and provide more mentoring to in-group members over out-group members (Duarte, Goodson, & Klich, 1993; Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994). Consequently, researchers have provided ample evidence that leaders treat followers differentially. Given that leaders treat followers dissimilarly, it follows that not all subordinates engage in similar processes when following their leaders. While close followers may engage in and respond to a transformational leadership process, distant followers may employ a more distant sensemaking process in following their leaders. A review of the sensemaking literature can provide sufficient answers on the process distant followers partake in when following their leaders.

3. Sensemaking Literature

The topic of sensemaking gained prominence in organizational studies after the publication of Weick's (1993) analysis of the Mann Gulch disaster. Weick (1993) analysed the disaster that occurred when 13 firefighters perished in a fire in the Mann Gulch area. Weick (1993) asserted that sensemaking is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense out of what occurs. In an examination of the disaster at Mann Gulch, Weick (1993) asserted that the disaster was due to the collapse of sensemaking, loss of role structure and increase in panic experienced by the firefighters. Consequently, sensemaking plays a vital role in organizational effectiveness.

In his book on sensemaking in organizations, Weick (1995) asserted that sensemaking in organizations consisted of seven properties:

- 1) Identity construction – people construe who they are through interaction with others.
- 2) Retrospection – people “make sense” of who they are after looking back at their interactions with others.
- 3) Enactive of sensible environment – people produce part of the environment they are in.
- 4) Shared meaning – this is sustained through the development and use of common language and social interaction.
- 5) Ongoing process – the process never stops.
- 6) Focusing on the environment enacting clues as to what the “larger picture” is and then draw on these to determine how to behave in the present.
- 7) Being driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. That is, people are not always accurate in “making sense” of their environment. People utilize plausible reasoning which involves going beyond the directly observable and/or consensual information to form ideas or understandings that provide enough certainty.

Applying Weick's (1995) sensemaking paradigm to followership, it could be argued that when initially examining a leader, distant followers initially engage in a sense of identity construction that is determined through their interactions with close associates of the leader. This would suggest that distant followers, initially, examine themselves, the leaders and their close associates and determine if there is a role for them in following the leader and, if so, would they be happy in that particular role. If the distant followers are satisfied with what their perceived role would be if they followed the leader, then they would engage themselves in the followership process and begin to follow the leader.

It is in following the leader that distant followers engage in the second aspect of sensemaking which is retrospection. That is, these followers utilize retrospection on their interactions with the leader and the leaders' close associates to determine how to behave in the future. It is examining these interactions in retrospect that distant followers determine how to act with close followers and what their role will be with close followers. Distant followers also engage in enactive of sensible involvement. This would entail followers enacting with the leader and their close associates to make sense of the environment and how to behave within that environment. The ongoing process between distant followers

and close followers and leaders refers to distant followers constantly picking up information and cues as to how to follow the leader. The sixth component of followership sensemaking is focusing on the leader-follower environment and extracting cues as what the “leader stands for” and then the distant follower allows these cues to determine how to behave in the present. The final aspect of involves being driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. This entails distant followers often examining the relationship between leaders and their close associates and making plausible assumptions as to how the leaders want them to behave. By determining how close followers behave, distant followers make plausible assumptions as to how they are to behave. They assume that if close followers of the leader are behaving in such a way, it must be the way the leader wants everyone to behave.

Although a new paradigm, the concept of leadership sensemaking has garnered the attention of organizational researchers. Keller (2003) reviewed the influence of parental images as a guide to leadership sensemaking. In her paper, Keller (2003) asserts that when scripted behaviour is effortful or interrupted conscious thinking is necessary (p. 154). She indicates that when scripts fail, individuals must develop explanations for why actual outcomes occurred instead of anticipated outcomes. The form of developing explanations takes the form of sensemaking. Keller (2003) asserted that different attachment styles influence the amount of sensemaking that followers employ which, in turn, influences their level of satisfaction and performance.

While Keller (2003) asserts that talking is the basic sensemaking device, Weick (1995) also indicated that there are many other aspects of sensemaking that people employ when working in organizations. Weick (1995) also asserted that sensemaking consists of identity construction, retrospective, enactive of sensible environments, social, and enactive cues processes. Many of these elements of sensemaking are due to distant followers examining the relationship between leaders and their close followers. For example, distant followers get a sense of their identity by examining the relationship between leaders and their close followers and what their position is in these relationships. Much of this process entails retrospection as distant followers review the interactions between close followers and leaders and perceive what their role is within the organization. Due to reviewing these interactions, distant followers “make sense” of their leaders and pick up cues as to how to behave in the future.

As one can see from the distinction between close and distant followers, close followers are more likely to be influenced by transformational leadership behaviours whereas distant followers engage in a leadership sensemaking process. Much of this leadership sensemaking process entails observing and enacting cues from interactions and the linkages between leaders and close followers. Consequently, the interactions and *perceived linkage* between leaders and their close associates play a crucial role in how distant followers are going to behave. That is, distant followers watch the interactions between leaders and close followers to determine who the leader chooses to associate with and what the leader values. Distant followers’ rationale is that if leaders choose to spend time associating with and placing close followers in positions of influence, then distant

followers assume that this is what their leaders highly value. By utilizing the sensemaking property of introspection, distant followers evaluate what the *link* or *connection* is between their leader and their close followers and subsequently decide how to behave in the future. Given that the *perceived linkage* between leaders and close followers plays a vital role in shaping the attitudes and behaviours of distant followers, it is important to examine different types of possible *perceived linkages* and determine how these linkages may influence followers.

4. Different types of perceived linkages between leaders and close followers

Perceived Consistency Linkage

Suppose for example there is a male leader who indicates that he understands completely the struggle women went through in the 1970s until today to gain recognition for their contributions and equal status with men. Then suppose, for example, that this leader has only entrusted male subordinates to take the position directly beneath him, many of whom will be the people who take over his duties when he is away. How will this affect his leadership with the rest of the group? Social psychologists Heider (1958) and Festinger (1957) indicated that the desire for consistency is the central motivator of behaviour. Consequently, followers desire consistency from the leaders. If leaders are not consistent in their behaviour then it influences the trust the followers have in them as leaders. A study by Akinyele (2000) examined the development of trust in relationships between supervisors and subordinates. In the study, Akinyele (2000) interviewed supervisors and subordinates in a government agency and analysed transcribed notes from taped interviews on their thoughts of trust in their relationship. Akinyele (2000) found that consistency was an emerging theme in the development of trust between a supervisor and a subordinate. Consequently, the more perceived consistency between what leaders espouse to believe in and the distant followers' perceived link between leaders and their close followers, the more trust the followers will have in them as leaders.

Proposition 1: The more perceived consistency between what leaders espouse to believe in and the perceived link between leaders and their close followers, the more trust the followers will have in them as leaders.

Given that followers will have more trust in leaders who display consistency in what they say to believe in and the perceived link between the leaders and their close followers, it also follows that a leader will be more effective in achieving their goals in there is consistency between the what they say and the perceived link between the leaders and close followers. For example, MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Rich (2001) examined the impact of transformational and transactional leadership behaviour on the sales performance and organizational citizenship behaviours (OCBs) of salespeople. They found that trust had a strong and indirect effect on sales performance and OCBs. A similar study conducted by Dirks (2000) examined the relationship between trust, leadership and team performance of a men's basketball team. Dirks (2000) found that trust in leadership mediated the relationship between past performance and future performance. Dirks (2000) founds that trust in leadership is both an outcome and

determinant of team performance. Consequently, The more trust the followers have in their leaders, the higher their level of performance.

Proposition 2: The more trust distant followers have in their leaders, the higher their level of performance, organizational citizenship behaviours, and willingness to follow the leader.

Procedural justice literature may also provide evidence of employees examining linkages between leaders and their close associates. Greenberg (1987) describes procedural justice as the perceived fairness of the process used to determine the distribution of rewards. Procedural justice has been shown to affect employees' organizational commitment, trust in their bosses and intentions to quit (Dailey & Kirk, 1992; McFarlin & Sweeney, 1992; Korgaard, Schweiger, & Sapienza, 1995). It is likely that subordinates or followers that see inconsistent links between what their leaders say and the link between their leaders and second-in-commands, the lower their levels of procedural justice. Consequently they will report low levels of organizational commitment and higher intentions to quit the organization.

Proposition 3: The more perceived consistency by distant followers between what leaders espouses to believe in and the perceived link between leaders and close followers, the more perceived procedural justice the distant followers will report and, consequently, high levels of organizational commitment and low levels of intention to quit will be reported by distant followers.

Perceived Liking Linkage

Perceived liking is another *linkage* that followers may perceive to be between leaders and their second-in-commands. The relationship between leaders and their second-in-commands may be considered to be a liking relationship. Liking between a supervisor and a close follower may be perceived to be due to physical attractiveness of the close follower, similarity of between the leader and close follower and/or cooperativeness of the close follower. Physical attractiveness has been linked to such qualities as talent, honesty and intelligence (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991). That is, people who are physically attractive are often perceived as more attractive, more talented and more honest than those who are not perceived as physically attractive. Furthermore, it has been shown that good grooming of applicants account for more favourable hiring decisions (Mack & Rainey, 1990) and that attractive individuals get paid 12-14% more than unattractive coworkers (Hammermesh & Biddle, 1994).

Similarity is also another perceived reason for followers' perceived leaders liking their close followers. Social psychology indicates that people like others who are similar to themselves (Byrne, 1971). Liking has been related to how similar people dress (Emswiller, Deaux, & Willis, 1971), how similar their names were (Garner, 1999), and the similarity of their political preference (Furnham, 1996). Therefore, followers examining the relationships between leaders and their close associates would assume that followers and leaders are alike.

Social psychology also indicates that cooperativeness is another reason why people like others. Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, and Skinner (1961) in their classic summer boys camp study found that by simply separating boys into to different cabins created a "we" versus "them" mentality and created such hostility

that the boys from different groups harassed one another and called each other names. In order to reduce this hostility, Sheirf et al. (1961) got the boys from different cabins to cooperate in different activities. As a result, the hostility diminished, thus indicating the powerful effects of cooperation. Subsequent research on cooperation indicate that it is related to trust and reciprocity (Chaudhuri Sopher & Strand, 2002), charismatic leadership (De Cremer, 2002) and procedural fairness (DeCremer & VanKnippenberg, 2002).

Consequently, leaders who are perceived to like their close followers may be seen by distant followers to like the close followers due to physical attractiveness, similarities and/or cooperativeness. Yet liking may not be perceived to be an appropriate link between leaders and their close followers. Research on LMX indicates that supervisors who treat their subordinates differentially are perceived negatively by “outgroup” members (Graen & Wakabayashi, 1994). Consequently, it is predicted that leaders who are perceived to have a liking link between themselves and their close followers, the less likely distant followers will have trust in them as leaders.

Proposition 4: Leaders who are perceived to have a liking link between themselves and their close followers, the less likely distant followers will have trust in them as leaders.

Given that liking may be perceived to be an inappropriate link between leader and close followers and that this liking may be due to similarity, cooperativeness and/or physical attraction, it is plausible that the close followers may be perceived by followers to have been placed in their positions due to the *liking* link between the close followers and the leaders. Consequently, the more perceived liking between the leader and the close followers, the lower procedural justice distant followers will report. This low level of procedural justice will lead to lower levels of organizational commitment and higher levels of intention to quit by distant followers.

Proposition 5: The more perceived liking between leaders and close followers by distant followers, the less perceived procedural justice distant followers will report and, consequently, lower levels of organizational commitment and lower levels of intention to quit.

Instrumentality

Instrumentality beliefs have been shown to be an effective construct in many areas. Instrumental beliefs are the beliefs that if people perform certain acts, they will be instrumental to them getting a desired outcomes. Instrumentality beliefs have been examined often in union contexts (See, Barling, Fullagar, & Kelloway, 1992). In the union context, instrumentality beliefs have been shown to predict whether union members will vote for a union (Barling, Kelloway, & Bremermann, 1991). More recently, instrumentality beliefs have been shown to be related to accidental outcomes (Barling, Kelloway, & Iverson, 2003), organizational citizenship behaviors (Haworth & Levy, 2001) and self-concept and adjustment (Stake, Zand, & Smalley, 1996). Consequently, instrumentality beliefs have been shown to largely influence human behaviour. Instrumentality is not a novel concept in the realm of leadership literature. House’s (1971) path-

goal leadership theory asserted that leaders' behaviours are acceptable to followers to the degree that was perceived to offer the followers an immediate or future source of satisfaction. Therefore, the leaders were instrumental in the followers attaining either immediate or future goals. Yet the path-goal theory is silent on what happens to distant followers when they perceive close followers to be receiving favours from the leader due to instrumental purposes. On one hand, path-goal theorists would assert that distant followers would respond favourably when they interpret the links between the leaders and their close followers as instrumental because they would view the leader as a path to meet their needs and objectives. Yet literature on procedural justice would seem to indicate that distant followers would respond unfavourably when they perceive instrumental links due to the *perceived unfairness* because they may see the behaviour as less *procedurally fair* than if the link were a consistent link. Therefore, distant followers who perceive an instrumental link may perceive the relationship between leaders and their close followers either favourably or unfavourably.

Proposition 6: The more perceived instrumentality by distant followers in the link between leaders and their close followers, the less perceived procedural justice the distant followers will report and, consequently, lower levels of organizational commitment and higher levels of intention to quit will be reported.

Proposition 7: The more perceived instrumentality by distant followers in the link between leaders and close followers, the more likely followers will perceive their leaders to be able to meet their desires and, consequently, high levels of organizational commitment and low levels of intention to quit will be reported.

5. Perceived linkages and sensemaking

The central reason for examining the linkages between leaders and close followers is that the relationship between the leaders and their close followers *signal* to distant followers that this is what leaders value most in their subordinates. By the very fact that the close followers are placed in a trusted position close to the leader would indicate to distant followers to take notice. Signal theory in the Finance literature indicates that organizations signal to other organizations and to the financial markets their financial viability through their financial actions (for example see, Erevelles, Roy & Yip, 2001). When this is applied to leadership, one can see that leaders often signal to distant followers what leaders value most through their relationship with their close followers.

These signals, through leaders' relationships with their close followers, allow distant followers *make sense* of who their leaders are and what qualities their leaders highly value. This *followership sensemaking* influences whether and to what extent distant followers will participate in the leadership process.

6. Summary and concluding comments

The importance for organizational theorists to examine the linkages between leaders and close followers and how this influences others is we begin to gain a fuller understanding of leadership within organizations due to exploring different levels of leadership. Organizational psychologists have been calling for an

examination of the relationship *between* leaders and followers (Matusek, 1997, Avolio, 1999) and the *space between* employees (Bradbury & Lichenstein, 2000). Therefore, by examining employees' perceptions of the linkages between leaders and close followers would be an interesting beginning how perceptions between leaders and close followers influence others within the organization. Therefore, we gain a more complete knowledge and understanding of leadership.

7. Implications for leaders and researchers

Much of the research conducted on leadership has examined the leadership process from the leaders' perspective and has largely ignored the followers' role in the process. Although, recently there has been some research conducted on the followership process, little is known about the interaction on different levels of followers. This paper, hopefully shed some much needed light on the overall process of followership. The major implication for leaders within organizations is that they should pay particular attention to the people they place directly beneath them and the people they closely associate with within their organizations. The interactions with close followers provide information to distant followers who are observing these interactions as to who the leaders are and what they value. Therefore, it is vital that leaders of organizations place people beneath them that are consistent to what they state they believe and are consistent to the policies they have implemented in the past. This would engender trust within distant followers which, in turn, would increase trust, organizational citizenship behaviours and overall performance. It is also vital that leaders avoid placing people beneath them for reasons for *non-procedural* reasons, otherwise it might influence their overall effectiveness within organizations due to the distant followers' perceptions of this relationship.

This paper also highlights the need for researchers to be cautious of assuming that all followers are similar and follow similar processes when following a leader. While this paper suggests that close followers may engage in a transformational leadership process, distant followers engage in a more distant sensemaking process when following their leaders. Consequently, researchers need to distinguish between distant and close followers and be aware of the different processes that each employ in the leadership-followership process. By examining followers and the different levels of followers, organizational understanding of leadership will be more fully understood in this broader context.

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