

The Importance of Agreement and Consensus in Leadership Research:

Introduction to the Special Issue

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### Introduction to the Special Issue

Questions regarding the nature of leadership have persisted for decades. Specifically, is leadership best considered a behaviour that leaders convey or is it more phenomenological in nature such as based in the perceptions of followers? Complicating this already complex picture, what are the implications regarding the nature of leadership if leaders do not behave the same towards all their followers, or if followers do not perceive their leader the same way? And with regard to effective leadership, is it important that leaders and followers agree on their perception of leadership? These are some of the underlying questions guiding this special issue.

Leadership theory and research increasingly acknowledges that what leaders do is only part of what leadership is. Recent developments emphasise the role of the follower (e.g., Collinson, 2005; Uhl-Bien, 2006) and the context (Porter & McLaughlin 2006) in the process called leadership. One could argue that the focus of modern leadership research is shifting towards more follower-centric approaches that include taking into account interactions between leaders and followers and interactions among followers within teams or workgroups. Researchers are more attuned to addressing not only the interactional nature and process of leadership but also the role that followers' interaction among each other has in shaping leaders and its results. Of course, leadership does not occur in a vacuum devoid of followers; rather, it is very much a group phenomenon where leader-follower dyads are often interdependent with each other. The different relationships a leader has with each follower can influence other relationships in the collective that affect the results of leadership in positive or negative ways.

Concepts such as consensus in follower ratings of their leaders (e.g., Henderson, Liden, Glibkowski & Chaudhry, 2009; Nishii & Mayer, in press; Zhou & Schriesheim, in press) or

the agreement between leader and follower regarding their shared relationship (e.g., Cogliser, Schriesheim, Scandura & Gardner, 2009; Basik & Martinko, 2008) have gained recent interest. Continued methodological advancements in areas such as Within and Between Analysis (WABA; Yammarino, 1998) and Multilevel Analysis (e.g., Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) have further spurred these developments.

Nonetheless, a primary question behind these developments has remained relatively constant over the years: How do leaders influence or otherwise work with followers in reaching shared organisational goals? Research into agreement and consensus tries to answer this question by investigating the pattern of connections within groups: How does the agreement between leader and follower with respect to the leader's type of leadership influence followers' attitudes and behaviours? And how does a consensus among followers about their leader's leadership style influence followers' attitudes and behaviours? Research in this area as has shown that, as expected, consensus and agreement are positively related to relevant and important organisational outcomes (Henderson et al., 2009; Cogliser et al., 2009). Recently, Schyns and Day (in press) argued that the most successful combination of agreement and consensus in achieving so-called Leader-Member Excellence would consist of a high-quality exchange relationship, agreement between a leader and a given follower on this relationship, and consensus among followers in a workgroup regarding their respective relationships with the leader. Following this line of thinking, it would appear that consensus and agreement in leadership relationships is something organisations should value and support.

This special issue addresses issues of consensus and agreement across two different and predominant leadership approaches. The six papers included in this special issue address consensus and agreement in transformational leadership (e.g., Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio,

2006) as well as Leader-Member Exchange (LMX; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). These approaches stem from quite different traditions; however, it has been argued that it is possible for LMX to be transformational at least under certain conditions (Gerstner & Day, 1997). Day (in press) recently characterized transformational leadership theory and LMX theory as examples of “bridging” theories in terms of linking leadership approaches that emerged in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with those emerging and continuing to build in the first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But despite some similarity in effects, these theories arose from very different traditions. Transformational leadership is more leader-centric in terms of its emphasis on what a leader does or the impact of the leader’s behaviour on followers. LMX is more firmly rooted in the quality of the relationship that is thought to be negotiated and developed between a leader and someone considered to be a follower (e.g., associate, subordinate). In this way LMX theory adopts a wider theoretical lens by explicitly including the follower in the leadership process.

Much of the theoretical and empirical work in the area of consensus has focused on LMX given that it explicitly acknowledges differences in relationship quality between leader and member (e.g., Dansereau, Graen & Haga, 1975). On the other hand, agreement between leader and follower in terms of leadership ratings has often been addressed in the context of 360 degree feedback (e.g., Atwater, Ostroff, Yammarino & Fleenor, 1998). Yammarino and Atwater (1992) found that leader’ self-rating of charismatic leadership is often higher than the ratings by their subordinates or supervisors. This can be problematic as over-estimators may not be performing as well as other leaders (cf. Yammarino & Atwater, 1992). Although relatively less work on agreement and consensus has been done with regard to transformational leadership, that oversight is addressed with a couple of papers in this special issue.

This brief overview of prior research suggests that more research into consensus and agreement is needed. This includes research into agreement in LMX or consensus in transformational leadership as well as consensus and agreement in other leadership approaches. In addition, too little is known yet about antecedents of consensus and agreement. Thus, a purpose of this special issue is to attempt to address some of the gaps and shortfalls in the extant literature through theoretical and empirical examinations of core issues in leadership consensus and agreement, and to encourage future research in the area.

### Overview of the Special Issue

There are four papers in the special issue that examine various antecedents of agreement and/or consensus. Spitzmuller and Illies study the role of leaders' authenticity on consensus in followers' perceptions of transformational leadership. They propose that leaders' authenticity influences followers' perception of transformational leadership both on an individual and a group level (consensus among followers). Specifically, they argued that relational authenticity would be relevant for different aspects of transformational leadership. Their results support this general framework.

Eckert, Ekelund, Gentry, and Dawson examine the role of culture in the context of 360 degree feedback. Their guiding theoretical assumption is that power distance influences agreement between self- and other-ratings such that there is less agreement in high relative to power-distance cultures. Results provide mixed or partial support for this proposition and suggest the possibility of additional moderators to consider in future research.

In an effort to explain the often-noted issue of overall low agreement between leader and member with respect to their mutual relationship quality (Gerstner & Day, 1997), Van Gils, van Quaquebeke, and van Knippenberg theoretically examine the role of implicit leader and implicit follower theories in LMX agreement. They argue that these various forms of implicit

theories shape expectations of the relationship partner and thereby influence relationship quality perceptions.

In another theoretical contribution, Schyns, Maslyn, and Weibler examine how span of control as a proxy for leader distance influences consensus regarding different dimensions of LMX. Consistent with prior research on leader distance, they suggest that span of control affects follower consensus across different dimensions of LMX in different ways.

The remaining two papers investigate the effects of consensus/agreement in transformational leadership. Korek, Felfe and Zaepernick-Rothe examine the effects of consensus in transformational leadership on affective and normative commitment in the context of hypothesized mediating effects of meaningful task content and organisational climate. They argue that meaningful task content allows leaders to show transformational leadership (if the leader has the proper scope to influence the task) and gives followers the feeling that they should reciprocate. Their research also includes organisational climate as a mediator in the relationship between consensus in transformational leadership and commitment. Their results mainly support the moderating effects on affective commitment.

Finally, Felfe and Heinitz examined the effects of consensus among followers and agreement between leaders and their team members in transformational leadership on, among others, customer satisfaction. Specifically, they found that consensus and agreement moderate the relationships between leadership and commitment. They conclude that direct and indirect effects of consensus and agreement are clearly important for organisational outcomes.

### Conclusions and Future Research

The importance of follower consensus and leader/follower agreement has been highlighted with regard to different leadership approaches. As the various papers in this special issue demonstrate, there continue to be many open questions with regard to the antecedents of

consensus and agreement in leadership processes; however, their effects seem to becoming clearer. Contributions to this special issue (Korek et al.) as well as prior research (e.g., Liden, Erdogan, Wayne & Sparrowe, 2006) demonstrate consistent positive effects of follower consensus on organisational outcomes. In addition, contributions to this special issue (Felfe & Heinitz) as well as previous research (Cogliser et al., 2009) show that leader-follower agreement on a high level is positively related to organisational outcomes. The knowledge of these positive outcomes of consensus and agreement suggest an important need to for additional work on their respective antecedents. In this special issue culture (Ekert et al.), leader authenticity (Spitzmuller & Illies), implicit theories (van Gils et al.), as well as (low) span of control (Schyns et al.) were discussed. Further research into the development of consensus and agreement is needed in further understanding how agreement and consensus develop – and to identify obstacles to that development – so that leaders and their organizations can learn how to better us these important positive forces for enhancing leadership effects and associated work-related outcomes.

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