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# **How to understand and handle divergent views on the need for leadership interventions: a social constructionist approach**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper addresses the challenge of how to understand and handle divergent views on the need for leadership interventions between managers and subordinates. Recent popular discourses of leadership, such as the authentic leadership perspective, privileges the potential leader himself or herself as the origin of leadership. This perspective thereby neglects the view of the followers and the essentially socially constructed relationship between leaders and followers. Based upon a critique against essentialist views of leadership such as authentic leadership we suggest a model on how to analyse divergent views between leaders and followers and its implications regarding managerial discretion regarding leadership initiatives.

## INTRODUCTION

From a managerial perspective, it might be tempting to follow one's own conviction and preferences in terms of leadership style and interventions. After all, managers are hired and paid to take responsibility for the results and performance of their units, and might feel expected to know what to do in terms of leading their subordinates. This tendency is further fuelled by popular discourses on the 'right' type of leadership such as 'authentic leadership' (Avolio & Luthans, 2006) or 'tough empathy' (Goffee & Jones, 2000), both departing from the manager's/leader's 'true' self and understanding of the situation.

The problem arises when the subordinates hold a clearly different view on what managerial leadership acts (if any) are needed. How should one understand and relate to subordinates' (perceived) need for managerial leadership (direction and/or support in an asymmetrical relationship, targeting the feelings and meaning making of the subordinates)? If there are conflicting views among managers and subordinates on what leadership interventions that are appropriate in a given situation, should one as a manager depart from the own conviction or the subordinates' perspective as a starting point for deciding what managerial leadership acts that are needed?

During the last few decades, many studies have highlighted the importance of followers and followership in order to better understand leadership (e.g. Bligh, 2011; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Kelley, 1988; Kelley, 1992; Meindl, 1995; Riggio et al., 2008; Shamir et al., 2007), where followers' attributions, acts, and identity positions are key for establishing a leader-follower relationship. In many ways, this body of literature has problematized a one-sided managerial perspective on the leader-follower relationship (e.g. Bennis, 1999; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Weick, 2007). At the same time, an influential stream of leadership literature has highlighted the importance of authenticity and authentic leadership (e.g. Avolio & Luthans, 2006; Avolio et al., 2009; Goffe & Jones, 2005), suggesting that managerial leadership acts should depart from a high degree of consistency between a person's (usually a manager's) 'true self' as it is consciously understood and his or her actions. Furthermore, studies with a social constructionist perspective have offered additional and important insights (e.g. Cunliffe, 2008; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Grint, 2000; Hosking, 2007; Meindl, 1995), recognizing that it is an issue of *perceived* (by followers and/or managers) needs, rather than

‘essential’ needs that are put into question. From this perspective, the perceived need for managerial leadership (if/what/how/when) is a negotiated co-construction, based on the current and historical interplay between the manager and his/her current and former colleagues, superiors, subordinates, etc. This, however, has not been seriously acknowledged in the authentic leadership discussion, where a single model of leadership behaviour (being authentic) is advocated as the preferred one in every situation. This lack of situational moderators, as noticed by Mumford & Fried (2014), is addressed in this paper.

The focus of this paper is on managerial leadership, i.e. attempts by managers occupying formal hierarchical positions to exercise leadership (influencing the feelings and/or meaning-making of others) towards formal subordinates. Drawing upon a social constructionist perspective, the aim of this paper is to offer a framework on how the dilemma of divergent views (among managers and subordinates) on the need for leadership interventions can be understood and perhaps handled. Looking at leadership as a relationship we problematize the idea and value of authentic leadership (Avolio & Luthans, 2006; Avolio et al., 2009; Goffe & Jones, 2005) and its essentialist version of a leader’s ‘true self’ as the proposed origin of successful leadership attempts (George, 2003; Harter, 2002). Furthermore, we propose a model on the ability of a manager to ignore and/or override the subordinate’s view, without risking resistance and failed leadership attempts (subordinates that more or less openly refuse a follower identity due too much, too little or the ‘wrong’ type of leadership interventions) based upon two important dimensions –the emotional strength attached to the issue at hand and the degree of consensus among the potential followers. Our contribution is therefore both theoretical and practical. From a theoretical perspective, we contribute to the growing criticism against the concept of authentic leadership and offer further insight in two key dimensions of the socially constructed relationship between leaders and followers. From a practical perspective, we offer an alternative and constructionist informed framework on the issue of how to include followers in the framing and conduct of managerial leadership.

## **LEADERSHIP AS A SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED RELATIONSHIP**

Much leadership discourse implicitly or explicitly approaches leadership as a particular relational phenomenon involving ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’ (Brower et al., 2000; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Hollander, 1978). There are, however, different ways of incorporating ‘the

relational' into leadership theory. According to Uhl-Bien (2006), so called relationship-based perspectives of leadership often view relationship as the particular type of connection between otherwise separable individuals. In this view, the relationship is seen as the outcome of individual agency, shaped by the attributes, expectations and behaviors and expectations of the actors involved. The dominating relationship-based approach to leadership is the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) which focuses on individual behavior as people engage in a two-way influencing process in the pursuit of mutual goals (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

A truly relational perspective of leadership, however, moves even further and puts the relationship rather than the individuals in the focus of attention and 'views leadership as social reality, emergent and inseparable from context...an iterative and messy social process that is shaped by interactions with others' (Uhl-Bien, 2006:664). Understanding leadership as a process continuously shaped by social construction implies that leadership is seen as a co-constructed, negotiated reality: '...a product of sociohistorical and collective meaning making, and negotiated on an ongoing basis through a complex interplay among leadership actors, be they designated or emergent leaders, managers, and/or followers' (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010:172). Instead of focusing on individual attributes of leaders or followers

*a relational ontology raises different questions for leadership. For example, it asks how the processes of leadership and management in organizations emerge –e.g., how realities of leadership are interpreted within the network of relations; how organizations are designed, directed, controlled developed on the bases of collectively generated knowledge about organizational realities; and how decisions and actions are embedded in collective sense-making and attribution processes from which structures of social interdependence emerge and in turn reframe the collectively generated organizational realities (Uhl-Bien, 2006:662).*

From this perspective, taken-for-granted realities are seen as outcomes of interactions between and among social actors, where language and communication play a pivotal role, not just mirroring reality but rather constituting it (Berger & Luckman, 1966: Hacking, 1999). Therefore, there is a general acknowledgement that multiple realities can compete for truth

and legitimacy (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010), an assumption of great importance for how to view managers' and subordinates' perceptions of appropriate managerial leadership interventions.

This perspective challenges many influential, essentialist views on the issue of how managers/leaders can or should adapt their leadership to their subordinates'/followers' needs, requirements or the leadership situation at hand. Situational leadership theory (SLT) for example, suggests that there is no such thing as a universal superior style of leadership. Effective leadership is situation-dependent and leaders should adapt their style and leadership acts to the 'maturity' of the individual or group they are aspiring to lead (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). The basic principle is that individuals with a high level of maturity, i.e. a mix of high competence for the task and commitment to do the task, need less (directive and supportive) leadership in order to do their job compared with individuals with less competence and commitment (Blanchard, 2008). A similar view is demonstrated in House's (1971; 1996) Path-goal theory, where the leader should adapt to and complement subordinates' abilities and compensate for their deficiencies. In both theories, it is the manager's/leader's prerogative to decide what leadership the potential followers are in need of, dependent on his/her assessment of their 'maturity', 'abilities' or 'deficiencies'. In contrast, Grint reminds us that from a constructionist perspective: 'what counts as a 'situation' and what counts as the 'appropriate' way of leading in that situation are interpretive and contestable issues, not issues that can be decided by objective criteria' (Grint, 2000:3). The construction(s) of the 'situation' or own 'deficiencies' made by the subordinates might therefore be at least as informed, authentic, important and relevant as the one made by their manager.

In addition to the manager (as a potential leader), the subordinates (as potential followers) constitute an important category of social actors that can influence how managerial leadership interventions are framed, initiated, implemented and evaluated. Followers construct leadership by granting a leader identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) or attributing leadership qualities (Barker, 2002; Calder, 1977; Meindl, 1995) to another individual, e.g. their formal manager. They can therefore be seen as active co-constructors of leadership (Collinson, 2005; 2006; Hollander, 1992; Kark & Van Dijk, 2007; Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007), but also co-constructors of what managerial leadership that is needed in a certain situation (Blom & Alvesson, 2014; Grint, 2000). Co-construction of the 'need' for managerial leadership that involves both managers and subordinates has then the (somewhat idealistic) potential of being characterized as a 'reflexive dialogical practice' (Cunliffe, 2002a), where managers (as

potential leaders) and subordinates (as potential followers) ‘become aware of how our assumptions, ways of talking, and our practical theories help shape, and are shaped by, our responsive interactions with others’ (Cunliffe, 2002a:46). A social constructionist view on leader-follower relationship therefore acknowledges the possibility of significantly divergent views of the need for leadership interventions between managers and subordinates. How could these possible divergent views be understood? What are the reasons for their appearance?

From the manager perspective, the prevalent dominant and positively-laden discourse of leadership may encourage managers to engage in meaning-changing or feelings-altering activities visavi his or her followers. To simply manage matters in the organization to make it possible for the subordinates to do their jobs may not positively reflect a favorable self-identity as a modern, progressive manager. The manager may also hold the view that it is his or her role and prerogative to steer the organization and according to own judgment of what is best for the organization, including its members. This is related to what Goffee and Jones (2000) call tough empathy: ‘... real leaders manage through a unique approach we call tough empathy. Tough empathy means giving people what they need, not what they want’ (p. 68). In others words, do not give in to what the followers expect from you if it is not in line with what you – as a manager/leader – think is right for them and in harmony with your view of what kind of leadership is needed.

The subordinates, on the other hand, may hold a substantially different view of what type of leadership intervention, if any at all, is preferred. Especially in professional organizations, where the employees are highly educated and hold a strong sense of professional identity, or in occupations where personal creativity and individuality is valued, to voluntarily accept a follower role might imply an unacceptable threat to identity and sense of autonomy (Alvesson & Blom, 2015). In cultures characterized by a low degree of power-distance (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004), the willingness to adopt a follower identity might be lower than in other cultures. Furthermore, the manager and the subordinates might have significantly different views of the organizational reality (Smircich & Morgan, 1982), views which are influenced by earlier experiences of management and leadership interventions and thereby shaping their current expectations of what type of leadership is needed or preferred.

So in the end, also the perceived need for managerial leadership (if/what/how/when) is a co-construction (or even a non-construction if the divergent views continue to be entrenched), based on the current and historical interplay between the manager and his/her current and former colleagues, superiors, subordinates, etc. Sometimes this is made in a smooth and harmonic way (e.g. Blom, 2012), but sometimes there are discord, conflict and tension between how the manager and the subordinates view the need for managerial interventions (e.g. Wenglén & Alvesson, 2010). In this case, should one depart from the manager's or the subordinates' view as a starting point for deciding what (if any) managerial leadership acts that are appropriate? We will return to this question in short but first discuss the important notion of authenticity in relation to managerial leadership.

## **AUTHENTICITY AND MANAGERIAL LEADERSHIP**

Looking at leadership as a socially constructed relationship raises important implications regarding the role of authenticity in leadership. Authenticity in general and the concept of authentic leadership in particular has received a lot of attention in recent years, fuelled by a desire to find the roots to positive leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) to counter corporate misconduct and install new meaning in the work place (Gardner et al., 2005). Among the many definitions of authentic leadership that has been proposed (Gardner et al., 2011), most of them focus on self-inquiry (Socrates), self-realization (Aristotle), self-awareness regarding one's thoughts, feelings, values and motives (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Luthans & Avolio, 2003), self-discipline (George, 2003) and, perhaps most importantly, a high degree of consistency between a person's 'true self' as it is consciously understood and his or her actions (Caza & Jackson, 2011; George, 2003; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). The assumption is that if you as a manager/leader know your true self and act 'unobstructed' (Kernis, 2003:1) in accordance with this true self, good things will follow such as e.g. increased trust in leadership, positive emotions, task engagement, greater commitment, more satisfaction and overall well-being (Avolio et al., 2004; Gardner et al., 2005).

The concept of authentic leadership heavily stresses the leader and his or her 'true self' (George, 2003; Harter, 2002) as the point of departure of what kind of leadership to provide potential followers. In fact, the etymological roots of authenticity, the Greek word *authentos*



can be understood as ‘to have full power’ (Trilling, 1972) indicating that an authentic individual is ‘the master of his or her own domain’ (Kernis & Goldman, 2006:293). In discussions of leadership authenticity, the leader centrism is far-reaching since it implies the salience of the self over role requirements (Henderson & Hoy, 1983; Gardner et al., 2011). ‘Authentic behavior refers to actions that are guided by the leader’s true self as reflected by core values, beliefs, thoughts and feelings, as opposed to environmental contingencies or pressures from others’ (Gardner et al., 2005:347). To not lead as an expression of the ‘true’ or ‘real’ self is morally and qualitatively dismissed as non-original as ‘authentic leaders do not fake their leadership’ (Shamir & Eilam, 2005:396).

Besides the inclination towards leader introspection, many scholars of authentic leadership also promote an interest in the relations with followers and with follower development. Gardner et al. (2005:345) write that ‘authentic leadership extends beyond the authenticity of the leader as a person to encompass authentic relations with followers and associates. These relationships are characterized by: a) transparency, openness, and trust, b) guidance toward worthy objectives, and c) an emphasis on follower development.’ Authentic leadership is supposed to positively model ‘authentic followership’ with followers likewise characterized by a high degree of self-awareness, self-regulation, autonomous motivation and who choose to follow out of genuine reasons (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005; Leroy et al., 2015; Shamir & Eilam, 2005).

However, from a relational perspective ‘the emphasis on leaders being true to themselves so that they can influence others through displays of their values and beliefs is curiously one-sided’ (Eagly, 2005:460) due to the focus on the action of the leader as well as his or her prerogative to define values and desirable goals as the origin of successful leadership behavior. How followers perceive managers ‘reflected self-image’ (Černe et al., 2014) is not as often brought into the discussion of authentic leadership. Ladkin & Taylor (2010) argue that a leader’s ‘true self’ is both personally made sense of and communicated through bodily expressions. To create embodied authentic leadership (ibid.) in a way that meets the expectations of the followers thereby becomes a key challenge. Furthermore, Erickson (1994) is questioning the possibility to objectively operationalize and measure the authenticity as a variable since ‘...authenticity is thus an entirely subjective, reflexive process that, by definition, is experienced only by the individual him- or herself’ (p. 35). From a constructionist perspective, one can go even further by questioning the ontological foundation

behind authentic leadership. The constant emphasis of a 'true self' implies a realist ontology, where the self is seen as an essential constant somehow accessible through introspection. This idea is however highly questionable. Instead, the self may be better understood as an ongoing accomplishment as people through social interaction and personal reflection actively try to form a somewhat coherent identity without ever reaching a core 'true self' (Gergen, 2000; Sparrowe, 2005). 'It is quite difficult to construct a true self in a socially varying, relational and dynamic workplace –an imperfect world- that calls for a variety of different roles and acts that do not necessarily overlap any notion of true self' (Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014:440). Ibarra (1999; 2015) argues furthermore that, from a practical perspective, embracing an understanding of the self as an ongoing accomplishment may often be advantageous. Through experience of interaction with our surroundings our personal identity constantly develops, including our way of engaging in leadership activities suitable to organizational needs. To be 'adaptively authentic' (Ibarra, 2015:58), leaders need to reflect upon experience already made in interactions with others and be open to change behavior if necessary. Accordingly, the construct (authenticity) is not just subjective; it is socially constructed (Sparrowe, 2005), where other actors (present or not) than the manager/leader continuously influence what is understood as authentic or not. As Eagly (2005) reminds us, the values being promoted by the leaders cannot necessarily be assumed to be shared by the potential followers. Instead values are often contested which necessitates negotiation and persuasion to achieve acceptance. Furthermore, this negotiation is contingent on the followers according the leader with necessary legitimacy to inspire follower's identification. There must be a congruity between the beliefs of what is expected by a certain social role (in this case the leader role) and the person trying to occupy it. This makes it harder, or sometimes impossible, for a person being seen as an 'outsider' with incongruent values or not consistent with the socially constructed role requirements to be accepted as a leader, no matter if the person expresses and acts upon his or her 'true self' or not (Eagly, 2005). Especially concerning managerial leadership, which is the focus of this paper, there are expectations and institutionalized legitimacy attached to certain managerial positions to engage in leadership activities (Smircich & Morgan, 1982) and to do it in a way that positively reflects the norms of that particular setting. Furthermore, these norms and expectations may very well vary in relation to different stakeholders which makes a consistent 'authentic' behavior problematic (Mumford & Fried, 2014) even though Goffee & Jones (2005) assert that leaders may display different personality traits to different groups and still being authentic as long as the behavior accurately reflects aspects of the inner self. Ultimately, trying to adopt a leadership position means to assume a certain social role where

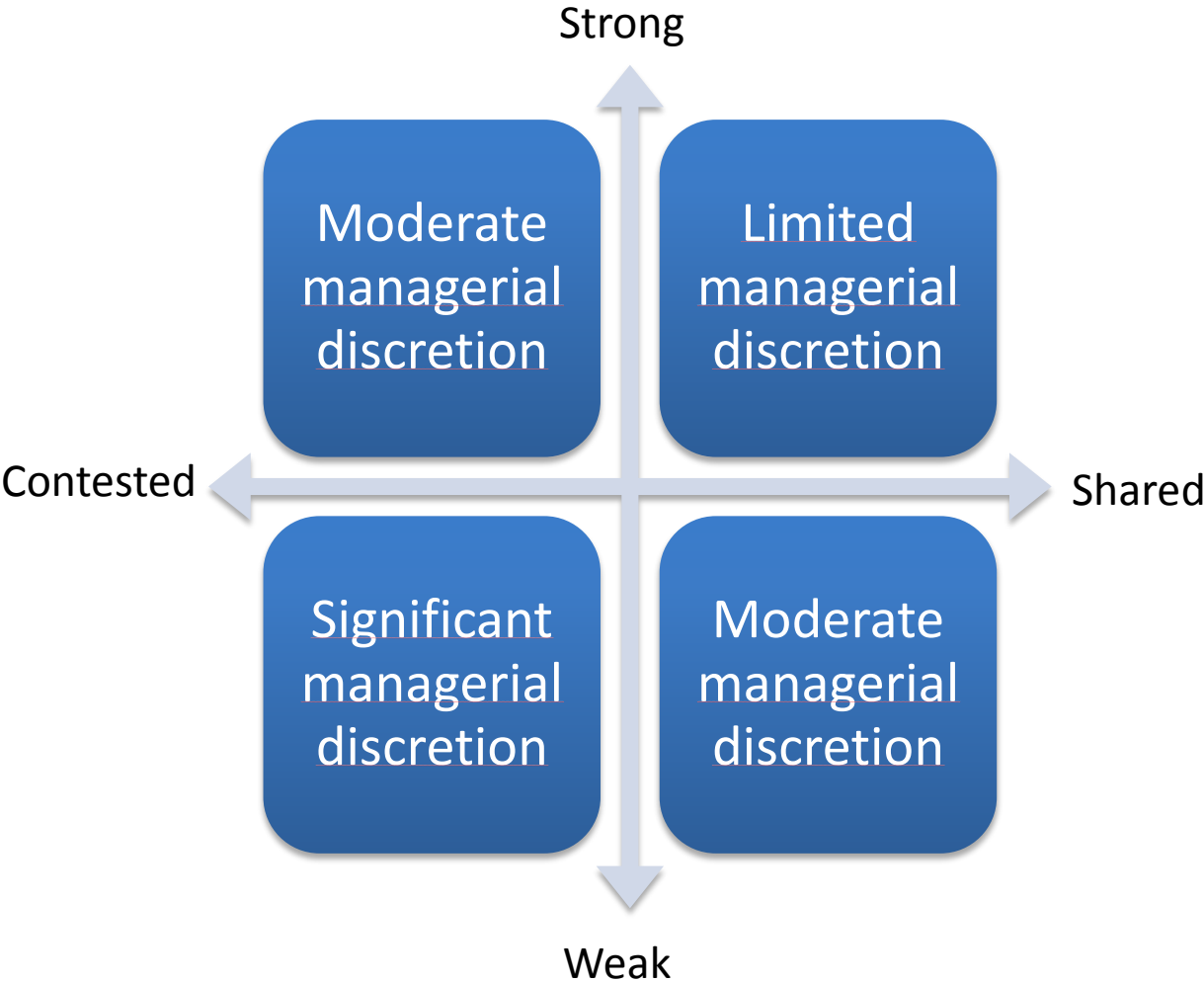
the performance is judged by the audience. The statement of Tony Hayward, former CEO of British Petroleum regarding the consequences of the disastrous oil spill in the Mexican gulf 2009, that ‘there’s no one who wants this thing over more than I do, I’d like my life back’ may very well have been a reflection of his true self and in that sense authentic. But it was certainly not what was being expected from a managerial leader in that position at that time.

### **CONSTRAINTS UPON MANAGERIAL DISCRETION - A HEURISTIC MODEL**

Even if social constructs per definition are preliminary, negotiated and in flux (Gergen, 1999; Hacking, 1999), some constructs seem to be more robust (i.e. become reproduced) than others over time. Logically, constructs that are shared by many are more likely to be discursively reproduced than constructs shared by few. Furthermore, constructs characterized by significant emotional investments (e.g. religions, ideas of the evolution, isms) are typically harder to challenge, replace or modify than constructs with less strong feelings attached to it. This would then also be applicable for managerial leadership, not at least because: ‘The success of symbolic management [e.g. managerial leadership as conceptualized in this paper] is largely dependent upon the evocation of emotions’ (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995:111). Managerial leadership, of necessity, involves some emotional labor and leaders are sometimes even conceptualized as ‘mood managers’ (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011). If a managerial leadership attempt is targeted at people sharing a strong and emotionally loaded counter-picture of what leadership is needed, the likelihood of them to voluntarily take on a follower identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) is probably lower, compared to a situation where they share the manager’s/leader’s view.

Leadership implies a certain amount of willingness from the followers’ side and a voluntary acceptance of a follower identity. If the subordinates’ leadership expectations diverge too much from the (perceived) leadership offered by the manager, this identity position is less likely to be taken. It is therefore important for a potential leader to get a good understanding of how the potential followers see the need for managerial leadership. So a solid understanding of the subordinates’ expectations and perceived need is vital, but does that mean that a manager necessarily should adapt to it? As described above, authors like Goffee and Jones (2000) would probably firmly answer ‘no’ to that question. From a pragmatic constructionist perspective however, the answer can be somewhat more nuanced than that. If

the subordinates' perceived need for managerial leadership stands in sharp contrast to the view of their manager, and the subordinates' construct is strong (they feel strongly about the matter) and widely shared within the group (strong consensus among the potential followers), it *might* – also from a managerial perspective - be more viable to adapt to it, than persisting and trying to force the subordinates into a follower position they likely will have an aversion to, resist or just ignore. Dissonance and disagreement within the group when it comes to how to define what type and amount of managerial leadership that is needed will potentially make a one-sided adaption to subordinates' construction(s) somewhat less obvious as an effective way to handle the situation, even if they feel strongly about their respective constructs. This might also be the case when the subordinates are in agreement, but have a lukewarm interest in what managerial leadership is offered. If they do not seem to care that much, and there is discord and disagreement within the group, then there is even more discretion, giving the manager a good opportunity to choose leadership interventions as s/he see fit, without risking to much opposition, conflict and resistance. The discussion above is conceptualized and illustrated in Figure 1.



*Figure 1 – Subordinates’ constructions of the need for managerial leadership*

This partly heuristic model shows, from a constructionist perspective, how two important dimensions – the emotional strength attached to the construct and the degree of consensus among the potential followers – affect the ability for a manager to ignore and/or override his/her subordinates’ view, without risking resistance and failed leadership attempts (subordinates that more or less openly refuse a follower identity due to too much, too little or the ‘wrong’ type of leadership interventions).

Of course there is a possibility that the subordinates have got it all wrong regarding what leadership they are in need of. Their view can be clouded by self-interest and a wish for more discretion and less direction and control. Their overview of their situation might be limited and they might suffer from information asymmetry in relation to their manager (this can however also be said about the manager in relation to the subordinates!). Goffee and Jones (2000:68) clearly separates subordinates’ ‘wants’ from ‘needs’, but from a constructionist perspective, the ‘wants’ of the subordinates can also be their sincere understanding of their need for managerial leadership, and the ‘need’ according to their manager can be nothing more than the “wants” of him/her. Who is in the best position to tell what is needed?

## **CONCLUSIONS**

From a constructionist perspective, the possibilities of exercising leadership are constituted by the socially constructed relationship between (potential) leaders and (potential) followers. As such, this relationship may be characterized by divergent views of when and what types of leadership interventions are needed. To understand the followers’ constructions of the situation we offer a model based upon two dimensions that imply different levels of managerial discretion regarding leadership intervention. Even though more dimensions of course matter, we believe that the two dimensions included in the model (how strong the

subordinates feel about the matter and the degree of consensus within the group) are vital for the ‘strength’ of a construct on the need for managerial leadership.

From a theoretical perspective, this model suggests important contingencies for when it is possible to act ‘authentically’ (that is, based upon managerial discretion) without high risk of resistance, ignoring and failed leadership attempts. We thereby contribute to filling the lack of situational moderators noticed by Mumford & Fried (2014) characterizing many ideological models of leadership such as authentic leadership. From a more general perspective, we follow the critical discussion of an essentialist authentic leadership (Ibarra, 2015; Ford & Harding, 2011; Mumford & Fried, 2014; Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014) and add to a more constructionist (Sparrowe, 2005) view of authenticity in the leadership/followership relationship.

From a practical perspective, the proposed model offers an analytical framework on the possibilities of managerial discretion regarding leadership intervention. As such, it can be seen as a slightly Machiavellian tool for when and how to influence subordinates. But it can also be seen as a first step towards taking the views of the subordinates seriously and into account, in order to construct a more facilitative and including leader-follower relationship.

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