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### Deposited in DRO:

01 February 2011

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Schyns, B. (2006) 'Implicit theory of leadership.', in Encyclopedia of industrial and organizational psychology. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 334-335.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<http://www.sagepub.com/books/Book227706>

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**Schyns, B. (2006). Implicit theory of leadership. In: S. G. Rogelberg (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.**

### **Implicit theory of leadership**

What is leadership? Is it leaders' behavior or our image of it? For example, as a female manager, how often has an outsider taken you for your own secretary? How often does that happen to your male colleague? This is what research on implicit leadership theories (ILT) focuses on. What are our ideas of what a leader is like (e.g., male, see below)? In contrast to prior leadership research that has studied the leader and his/her behavior, scholars studying implicit leadership theories (ILT) have taken a different approach. According to ILT scholars, the *actual* behavior or characteristics of a person, the leader, are less important for finding out what leadership is than our particular *ideas* about what leaders are and what characteristics or behaviors they should exhibit. It has become clear that individuals are well able to produce ideas about leaders in general, ideal leaders, effective leaders and so on, without referring to an actual leader they know. When meeting a person labeled "leader", this image of a leader in general is activated. To illustrate: imagine you are at a party and your friend tells you that she is going to introduce you to a friend of hers who is a top leader of a fortune 100 company. Immediately, you will have an idea about this person's attributes. For example, you may imagine this person to be male, dominant, intelligent, and so on. These characteristics do not come out of the blue. Virginia Schein has found that we often imagine leaders to be male and recent research on the contents of our implicit leadership theories has found that characteristics such as dominant and intelligent are often named as typical for leaders.

Similarly, not only do we have ideas about “leaders” before or when we meet them, but, as the Robert Lord research group found, we also tend to label a person a “leader” who fits our ideas of a leader. This means that we are well able to say who we believe to be the leader of a group we are observing. But we would be wise to be cautious: We can, of course, be mistaken! Leaders who do not possess “typical” leader characteristics may often mistakenly be seen as a subordinate.

According to Robert Lord and colleagues, the implicit theories of leadership that are stored in our minds are often associated with the idea of success. When individuals observe groups and are given information concerning the performance of that group, they tend to remember more leadership behavior when told that the group was successful than when told the group was not successful. Remember, we are talking about different observations of exactly the same behavior, simply due to differing information concerning group success!

Interestingly, this is a tendency we can also find on a broader societal level. James Meindl and colleagues examined newspaper articles and found that particular emphasis was put on the leader of a respective company in times when companies performed well and in times when they performed poorly. We all know this phenomenon from our daily lives: just think about how often sport coaches are made responsible for the failure and success of their team and are, in times of failure, consequently replaced.

### **What Effects do Implicit Leadership Theories have?**

What consequences does the knowledge that people have ideas about leaders have for organizations and their leaders? Judith Nye has focused on the idea that a match between followers’ implicit leadership theories and their leader’s behavior may have an impact on

the evaluation of their leaders. Nye and her colleagues found that once followers have ideas about leaders that do not fit their leader's actual behavior, their evaluation of their leader will be less positive. This is of course important for a leader to know, as it can have an impact on his / her effectiveness with these followers. In addition, we have seen in leadership research that different followers may see the same leader in different ways. Implicit leadership theories can help us understand this fact. Birgit Schyns, Jörg Felfe and colleagues undertook research on the perception of leadership and found that implicit leadership theories impact the perception of leadership. This means that implicit leadership theories, or the ideas we have about what leaders are like, impact what we see in our own leaders. This then can explain why one follower may "see" a "different" leader than another follower. Taking into account how often followers are asked to rate their leaders, for example in the context of 360-degree feedback, the impact of such an effect should not be overlooked. Tiffany Keller reports another critical finding, namely that the match between the implicit leadership theory of an employee and his/her actual leader predicts job satisfaction.

### **Are Implicit Leadership Theories Generalizable?**

In our world of diversity, intercultural cooperation, mergers and expatriates, it is important to be aware of the differences in implicit leadership theories that exist between different members of the work force as well as different cultures. Laura Graves and Gary Powell found evidence that men and women differ in their implicit leadership theories. We also know from research by David Day and Charlotte Gerstner that students with different cultural backgrounds have different implicit leadership theories. The Globe project undertook a cross-cultural endeavor to examine implicit leadership theories about

effective leaders in 62 different cultures. This group found that some of the attributes associated with charismatic leadership are considered indicators of effective leadership across different cultures, while the importance of other characteristics of effective leadership are different in different countries.

This research indicates that leaders working in different cultures may be confronted with followers who have different ideas about how leaders are and how they should be. This influences the expectations followers have concerning their leaders and, in turn, will probably impact their evaluation of these leaders and influence the amount of effort they are willing to exert to support these leader. Imagine, for example, a very individualistic leader acting in a collectivist country. Strategies can be extremely successful in one country and can trigger misunderstandings and even repudiation in another country. We can imagine that the idea of a leader in a collectivist country is more dominantly shaped by an emphasis on group identity than on individual achievements. So, due to such different implicit leadership theories, leaders may have different effects in different countries.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

We have seen in this short overview that implicit leadership theories exist, which is to say that people have particular beliefs concerning leaders even before they encounter a leader and that they apply these beliefs to a person labeled “leader”. We have also seen that these theories develop early and are different for male and female individuals, as well as for individuals with different cultural backgrounds. In addition, this overview shows the consequences of implicit leadership theories for organizations. Let’s now turn to related issues that have begun to be discussed only very recently.

## **The Future of Implicit Leadership Theories**

Recently, the concept of implicit leadership theories has been broadened. In 2005, Reinout de Vries and Jean-Louis van Gelder introduced the term “implicit followership theories”, arguing that not only do people have idea about how leaders are but also about how followers are. In a similar direction, Mary Uhl-Bien has argued that individuals have implicit relationship theories. These theories have impact on the cooperation between, for example, leader and follower, as both enter the relationship with different or similar ideas about what such a relationship should look like. Brigitte Kroon introduced the idea of implicit organizational theories. Her line of argumentation considers how these implicit organizational theories impact the start-up of a company, that is, how they shape not only our image of companies but also how actual companies are shaped by the idea of its founders.

These examples show how implicit theories in general, and implicit leadership theories specifically, have an impact on leaders, members, and organizations in general.

**Birgit Schyns, University of Twente, Enschede, The Netherlands**

**See also: Leadership/ management development, general**

**Stereotyping/prejudice**

**360-degree feedback**

**Global leadership and organizational behavior effectiveness (GLOBE) project**

## Further readings

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