***When your leader just does not make any sense: Conceptualizing inconsistent leadership***

**Abstract**

Perceived consistency, and even more so inconsistency of behavior is an important factor in the evaluation of other people. This is especially true for leaders, whose behavior is typically closely monitored and interpreted by their followers. While perceived consistency is typically rewarded, behaving inconsistently as a leader can be ethically problematic, as it violates fundamental ethical principles. To theoretically capture how followers interpret and react to unexpected, ambiguous and/or confusing leader behavior, we introduce the concept of inconsistent leadership. We define this new concept as a process in which over a longer period of time the activities, experiences, and/or relationships of an individual or the members of a group are repeatedly influenced by their leader in a way that followers cannot make sense of in light of prior behavior or traits of that leader. We propose that a sensemaking process is triggered in followers whenever they register salient/important leader behavior that is novel, ambiguous and/or confusing when compared to behavioral expectations for that leader. Ascriptions of inconsistent leadership arise when followers' sensemaking strategies temporarily or permanently fail to resolve the behavior-expectation discrepancy. Moreover, we clarify the relationships to other leadership concepts and delineate relevant follower and environmental influences on the sensemaking process. In doing so, we offer a clear conceptualization of inconsistent leadership and provide a solid base for future research.

Key words: leadership; leader inconsistency; inconsistent leadership; follower sensemaking; leader unethicality.

*"A leader must appear to be consistent. That doesn't mean that he has to be consistent."*

*Leonard James Callaghan, Former UK Prime Minister (in Webber, 1986. p. 110)*

Treviño et al. (2014) subsume under behavioral ethics "routine ethical behavior that meets the minimum moral standards of society (e.g., honesty, treating people with respect)" (p. 637). We argue here that a central aspect of leadership relating to ethical behavior is showing consistency as a leader. Leader consistency is reflected in theories of ethical leadership, which specifically underline the importance of consistency between leaders' values and their behavior (Brown et al., 2005; Treviño et al., 2014). Leader *in*consistency on the other hand is ethically problematic for at least two reasons: First, from a deontological point of view, inconsistent leadership violates basic moral principles, especially of honesty and fairness (Leventhal, 1980). It violates honesty when the leader's current behavior does not fit with their communication concerning appropriate behavior and/or important norms and values (Brunsson, 1989). It violates fairness when followers are treated differently in similar situations (lack of interactional justice; cp. Colquitt, 2001). At the same time, from a consequential point of view, inconsistent leadership violates ethical norms based on the negative consequences it entails for others. For example, generally erratic leader behavior can undermine followers' sense of (occupational) self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Schyns, 2001), as followers are not able to understand what their leader actually wants (thus creating task ambiguity, Simons et al., 2015). Consequently, they might start to question their own abilities and competence. Indeed, Johnson et al. (2012, p. 1263) emphasize that "leader behavioral consistency reduces uncertainty about the organizational environment and about leader-follower interactions".

Empirically, leader inconsistency has been shown to be problematic in terms of the negative effects on followers. For example, the degree of between-follower variability of abusive supervision is negatively related to followers' individual perceptions of the leader's ethicality, organizational ethicality, satisfaction with the leader, and affective organizational commitment (Ogunfowora, 2013). In addition, there is evidence that variably (i.e., inconsistently) fair treatment of followers resulted in greater physiological stress than both consistently fair *and* consistently unfair treatment (Matta et al., 2017). This implies that inconsistent leadership may have more severe consequences than even (consistent) destructive leadership (cp. Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Tepper, 2007).

Surprisingly, leader (in-)consistency has received very little attention so far (De Cremer, 2003; Johnson et al., 2012; Michel & LeBreton, 2011; Mullen et al., 2011) and it is often limited to particular types of inconsistency such as the misalignment of a leader's words and deeds (leader hypocrisy, Brunsson, 1989; behavioral integrity, Simons, 2002). Based on inconsistent leadership's inherent lack of ethicality, we argue that there is a need for an overarching concept that captures inconsistent leadership going beyond the narrow focus on particular types of inconsistency found in other conceptualizations. We therefore set out to conceptualize inconsistent leadership, following the recommendations by Podsakoff et al. (2016) on how to develop conceptual definitions. More specifically, we address the following issues.

First, we define the concept of inconsistent leadership and place it in the leadership landscape. Findings by Allgeier et al. (1979) and De Cremer (2003) convey the idea that inconsistency can be understood as objective behavioral change across situations. We propose, however, that not every change in the leader's behavior is a sign of inconsistency. Indeed, leaders *should* show different behavior in different situations in order to adapt to changing situational demands (cp. Vroom & Jago, 2007). Thus, our focus is not on changes in objective leader behavior

but rather whether or not those changes are perceived as inconsistent (e.g., due to a lack of situational explanation). Building on the notion that any form of leadership is ultimately based on follower perception and interpretation (Hansbrough et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2019) and that ethics are a perceptional issue as well (Folger, 2012), we focus on follower perceptions of leader behavior as inconsistent, recognizing that objective behavioral inconsistency is an antecedent of inconsistent leadership (for a similar argument see Simons et al., 2012; Simons et al., 2022).

Second, we use sensemaking theory to explain the black box between leader behavior and follower perceptions of inconsistent leadership. We will illustrate how perceptions of inconsistent leadership develop based on sensemaking processes for social information (Vonk, 1994). As Maitlis and Christianson (2014) point out, sensemaking is the process through which people try to understand issues or events in organizations that are unexpected, confusing, or ambiguous which holds particularly true for inconsistent leadership. Similarly, Sonenshein (2007) shows that issues often are not inherently ethical or unethical, but rather that organizational members socially construct ethical issues in response to ambiguous and uncertain work environments through a process of sensemaking (Treviño et al., 2014). If leaders do not act according to their words or prior behavior in comparable situations, followers can be expected to be confused and irritated and will therefore try to make sense of this inconsistent behavior.

Finally, we develop boundary conditions which facilitate or hinder the perception of inconsistent leadership for each stage of the sensemaking process. We argue that characteristics of followers as well as the (organizational) environment of leadership influence the attribution of inconsistent leadership during the sensemaking process. We moreover take into account that the perception of inconsistent leadership can be transient until at a later stage of the process the inconsistency is either resolved or otherwise turns into a stable attribution where the sensemaking

process does not lead to a resolution of the inconsistency. For each of those boundary conditions, we develop testable propositions that can guide future research in this area.

The purpose of the present paper is, therefore, to further our knowledge regarding inconsistent leadership and to put forward a model based on a sound theoretical background, allowing us to outline recommendations for future theory building as well as empirical research.

## Defining Inconsistent Leadership

To understand *in*consistent leadership, it is important to first gain an exact understanding of *consistency* in this context. Following Leventhal (1980), De Cremer (2003, p. 536) states that leader consistency implies "the rule that authorities use procedures consistently across people and over time". This definition underlines the ethical implications of inconsistent leadership, as violations of this rule would be evaluated as unfair and lacking integrity. The emphasis on consistency information – as quasi-objective data people can use in their sensemaking about others' behavior – was introduced by Kelley (1967) in his well-known covariation model. The sole focus of both Kelley and De Cremer on objective behavioral information is, however, insufficient for examining the inconsistent leadership. We argue that when a leader's behavior appears novel, unexpected, and/or confusing, a process of *sensemaking* takes place in which followers try to explain the variation of the leader's behavior (cf. Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015).

This notion can be illustrated by De Cremer's (2003) experimental study. He uses the phrase "takes decisions depending on the people and situations he is confronted with" (2003, p. 539) to describe varying and, in his view, inconsistent leadership. Staying with this example, however, actual variation in behavior might be considered consistent when followers are able to use contextual cues to make sense of the behavioral variation. For example, if a leader rewards one follower but not another one based on actual performance differences, and followers are

aware of these differences, we would argue that this leader behavior can be construed by followers as being contingent on performance. We would hence not expect that follower to perceive inconsistent leadership, as – if a leader did *not* react differently to different to salient situational demands – this would be perceived as inflexible or stubborn by followers rather than inconsistent.

According to Schyns and Schilling (2013), it is also important to distinguish between leader behavior and leadership. As the former is the more general term, it may include any type of behavior shown by a person in a leadership position, independent of whether or not this behavior is directed towards another person. Leadership is more specifically focused on follower-targeted influence, for example in terms of followers' activities, experiences, and relationships (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Consequently, not everything a leader does is leadership. For example, while a leader may unexpectedly change his/her travel schedule to visit a client, this would *not* be an example of inconsistent leadership as this act does not include follower-targeted influence. However, if a leader asks a follower to go on a business trip and then cancels the trip without explanation, this *would* be an example of inconsistent leadership.

Finally, we acknowledge that a single act of inconsistency is not sufficient to label a leader as showing inconsistent leadership, as an isolated act can be considered an anomaly and thus not indicative of an interactional pattern (cp. Schyns & Schilling, 2013). We thus define inconsistent leadership here as

> 'a process in which *over a longer period of time* the activities, experiences, and/or relationships of an individual or the members of a group are *repeatedly influenced* by their supervisor in a way that *followers cannot make sense of* in light of prior behavior or traits of that leader'.

The core aspect of this definition is the *subjective perception* of inconsistency between present leadership and the leader's prior behavior or ascribed traits. It should be noted that the

misalignment of words and deeds (Brunsson, 1989; Simons, 2002) is covered by this definition as prior behavior also implies the leader communicating his/her values, goals, or intentions in the past. Consequently, the definition points out that inconsistent leadership is based on the sense-making of within-person variation and not deviations from external sources such as for example other leaders. This within-person focus (i.e., comparing between current actions and former behavior or the perceived personality of the leader) is in line with the literature on consistency in general as well as perceived leader consistency in particular (e.g., Johnson et al., 2012; Simons, 2002). It should be noted that we will therefore use the term "inconsistent leadership" in the following in the sense of the followers' perception of their leader's behavior towards them.

## Inconsistent Leadership and Its Relationship to Other Leadership Concepts

Having defined inconsistent leadership, the next step in our conceptualization is to analyze its similarities with and differences from other leadership concepts to clarify its status as a discrete phenomenon. Due to the multitude of leadership concepts, we will concentrate on those that focus on discrepancies in leadership and briefly review the four most closely related leadership theories as well as elaborate how they differ from inconsistent leadership.

Behavioral Integrity (Simons, 2002) is the construct most obviously related to inconsistent leadership. It is defined as "the perceived pattern of alignment between an actor's words and deeds" (p. 19). Similar to inconsistent leadership, behavioral integrity is conceptualized as an observer's perception rather than an objective behavior (Simons et al., 2022). Behavioral integrity is narrower in focus than inconsistent leadership, as it exclusively focuses on words-deeds-alignment of leaders (Simons, 2002), although a recent overview paper acknowledges that the concept might need broadening to include "alignment not just between words and deeds, but also between words and words, and between actions and actions" (Simons et al., 2022). Behavioral integrity is an ascribed trait (e.g., Simons et al., 2022), that is, a stable attribution. Research into behavioral

integrity has mainly focused on employees' perception of their managers' word-deed-alignment. However, the definition allows for ascribing behavioral integrity to management more generally, to teams, or even whole organizations (Simons et al., 2022). In contrast, inconsistent leadership explicitly only focuses on leaders. Finally, while behavioral integrity explicitly excludes the notion of ethics (Simons et al., 2022), inconsistent leadership draws on behavioral ethics, notably in its negative connotation from followers' point of view.

A further interesting leadership concept to look at in our context is paradoxical leader behavior (PLB). Zhang et al. (2015) introduced this idea based on Eastern yin-yang philosophy. PLB describes meeting seemingly competing workplace demands simultaneously and over time (e.g., treating followers uniformly while allowing individualization; enforcing work requirements while allowing flexibility; and maintaining decision control while allowing autonomy). Conceptually, the approach focuses on leader behavior rather than its perception by the followers. Nevertheless, Zhang et al. (2015) assert that the positive effects of PLB they empirically found may depend on follower attitudes: "those who have 'black-white', 'either-or' views may be uncomfortable about following the paradoxical leader" (p. 560). Consequently, the main difference between paradoxical leadership and inconsistent leadership lies in the sensemaking of the followers. That is, followers' in-depth sensemaking will only be triggered if they perceive the leader's behavior to vary without situational explanations or to incomprehensively deviate from their expectations for that leader.

A different, yet related concept is ambidextrous leadership (Rosing et al., 2011; Zacher & Wilden, 2014), which involves a combination of behaviors that stimulate employee exploration ('opening behavior') and behaviors that facilitate exploitation of ideas ('closing behavior'). Rosing et al. (2011) assume that this combination of behaviors is specifically suitable when fostering innovation in work teams. Again, we expect that ambidextrous leader behavior will not

trigger further sensemaking if followers acknowledge the necessity of behavioral flexibility at different phases in the innovation process (exploration at the beginning, exploitation at the end), thus attributing the behavioral change to the situation, not the person of the leader.

A final concept to look at is supportive-disloyal leadership, which captures leader behavior that is supportive towards followers, but disloyal toward the organization (Einarsen et al., 2007). On the one hand, it seems plausible that followers may notice the discrepancy between the pretended loyalty concerning organizational decisions that the leader shows towards his/her own superiors and his/her true opinions revealed to followers. On the other hand, followers are likely to interpret supportive-disloyal leadership as consistent and adapted towards different stakeholders, namely consistently showing consideration for the welfare of followers, while behaving consistently disloyal towards superiors (Einarsen et al., 2007).

In summary, we contend that inconsistent leadership can be sufficiently differentiated from the leadership conceptualizations discussed above, as these leadership concepts are either narrower in focus, do not relate to follower perceptions, or describe variations of leader behavior that are adaptive to varying situational or stakeholder demands.

## A Sensemaking Approach to Understanding the Black Box between Leader Behavior and Inconsistent Leadership

Novel, ambiguous, and/or confusing organizational events naturally trigger sensemaking in observers (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). As Brown et al. (2015) put it, sensemaking is extracting (i.e., actively searching) and interpreting environmental cues and using these in order to ‘make sense’ of occurrences. Thus, if their leader behaves in an unexpected or surprising manner, followers will necessarily try to understand what happened by extracting and interpreting information from their environment, using this information as the basis

for a plausible explanation. Sensemaking can thus help us to understand the process that happens between a leader's behavior and followers' perception of inconsistent leadership.

Sensemaking includes three sets of interweaving processes (Christianson & Barton, 2021; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Brown et al., 2015), that is, the perception of cues (noticing), making interpretations, and engaging in action (cp. also Weick, 1995; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Hence, on a general level, inconsistent leadership emerges if followers notice discrepancies in the behavior of their supervisor, try to interpret them by analyzing reasons for these discrepancies, and gather more information by interacting with others and their environment. These processes should not be regarded as a strict sequence but rather as intertwined and recursive, a constant striving of followers to make sense of the behavior of their leader. To better understand inconsistent leadership, it seems useful and necessary to execute an in-depth analysis of these processes.

## Noticing Novel, Ambiguous and/or Confusing Leader Behavior

### *General Process*

As stated before, sensemaking is triggered by cues– such as a leader's behavior – for which the meaning is novel, ambiguous or confusing. As Maitlis and Christianson (2014) point out, "such occurrences, when noticed, interrupt people's ongoing flow, disrupting their understanding of the world and creating uncertainty about how to act. This happens when there are discrepancies between expectations and reality" (p. 70). Followers' comparisons between actual and expected behavior of their leader can be understood as a matching between experiences with and mental representations of the respective leader.

If the leader is behaving in a way that does not fit with the representation followers have in their mind, this discrepancy will serve as a starting point for sensemaking activities. However, it seems likely that not just any variation or discrepancy of behavior will result in inconsistent

leadership. We assume that especially salient (i.e., novel, unusual, or figural; Hogg & Vaughan, 2008) and important behavior (e.g., for followers in terms of their achievement of personal needs and goals; cp. Erber & Fiske, 1984) will facilitate followers' sensemaking with regard to inconsistent leadership. This is in line with the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty & Wegener, 1999), which assumes that the personal relevance of a messages should lead to central cognitive processing which makes it unlikely that the discrepancy will go unnoticed or be ignored.

*Proposition 1:* Salient and important leader behavior triggers follower sensemaking when the behavior is noticed to be novel, ambiguous, and/or confusing compared to followers' behavioral expectations for the leaders.

### *Follower Characteristics and Their Influence on Noticing Novel, Ambiguous and/or Confusing Leader Behavior*

We expect follower characteristics to have an important impact on the noticing of novel, ambiguous and/or confusing leader behavior.

**Traits.** Prior research shows that stable observer characteristics influence leadership perceptions (see Hansbrough et al., 2015, for an overview). For example, in the context of transformational leadership, empirical research has shown that *Big Five / Big Six follower personality* traits are related to the perception of transformational leadership (e.g., Felfe & Schyns, 2010; Hansbrough, 2012). Here, we speculate that traits relating to an individual's sensitivity for deviations and discrepancies will be particularly relevant for the sensemaking process involved in inconsistent leadership. Within the framework of the Big Five / Big Six, neuroticism, conscientiousness as well as openness to experience appear to be worth considering. Neuroticism implies

that a person is characterized by anxiety, fear, moodiness, and worry (Lee & Ashton, 2004). It can be expected that followers scoring high on neuroticism should be specifically sensitive to deviations from expected leader behavior as they are easily troubled by unexpected and possibly threatening events. Conscientiousness refers to an individual's degree of organization, diligence, perfectionism, and prudence (Lee & Ashton, 2004), so that followers high in conscientiousness might be especially prone to sense departures of a leader's behavior from their expectations. We expect the opposite effect for openness, as it is characterized by aesthetic appreciation, inquisitiveness, creativity, and unconventionality (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Particularly the latter facet could, in our view, impact inconsistent leadership by influencing the breadth of acceptable variability of leader behavior. It seems likely that followers high in openness would also be less likely to need sensemaking in response to varying behavior.

A narrower trait concept we assume to be relevant for the noticing of novel, ambiguous and/or confusing leader behavior revolves around an individual's *(in-)tolerance for ambiguity*. First introduced by Frenkel-Brunswik (1949), tolerance for ambiguity can be defined as "a range, from rejection to attraction, of reactions to stimuli perceived as unfamiliar, complex, dynamically uncertain, or subject to multiple conflicting interpretations" (McLain, 1993, p. 184). We expect that individuals who are low in ambiguity tolerance should be more sensitive to departures from expected leader behavior, and thus are more prone to noticing such departures.

Moreover, we assume that traits relevant to the *close attention to others' behavior* will be relevant to noticing novel, ambiguous and/or confusing leader behavior. An example is high self-monitoring, which consists of two aspects, namely, sensitivity to others' behavior and the ability to change one's own expressions/behavior in line with perceived situational needs (e.g., Gangestad & Snyder, 2000). Someone who is highly sensitive to others' behavior should sense more discrepancies from expected leader behavior than someone who is not equally sensitive.

Another such characteristic is attachment style (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). More specifically, individuals who have an anxious attachment style are more concerned about relationships, including the relationship to the leader (e.g., Richards & Hackett, 2012) and we, therefore, expect them to be particularly sensitive to departures from expected behavior, simply because they will be attentive to behavioral changes towards them.

*Proposition 2*: Follower traits influence the noticing of novel, ambiguous, and/or confusing leader behavior so that individuals a) high in neuroticism, conscientiousness, and trait self-monitoring, b) low in openness to experience and ambiguity tolerance, and c) with an anxious attachment style are more likely to notice novel, ambiguous, and/or confusing leader behavior.

**States.** Transient states can also be expected to influence followers' sensitivity for novel, ambiguous and/or confusing leader behavior. One of the most fundamental distinctions when it comes to personality states is that between *positive and negative affect*. Linking affect and information processing, research shows that positive affect is often associated with a stronger use of heuristic information processing, whereas negative affect is mainly linked to more elaborate and systematic information processing (cf. Bless & Fiedler, 2006; Bohner et al., 1995; for a leadership example, see Hansbrough et al., , 2021). Based on this finding, we assume that negative affect could lead to a higher degree of noticing, due to closer attention to available information (here: leader behavior). Positive affect, on the other hand, should trigger less detailed information processing or searching for sense, so that behavioral ambiguities might more easily go unnoticed.

*Proposition 3*: Follower states influence the noticing of novel, ambiguous, and/or confusing leader behavior so that individuals with a) high negative affect and b) low positive affect are more likely to notice novel, ambiguous, and/or confusing leader behavior.

## Making Interpretations

### *General Process*

According to Vonk (1994), there are three major strategies to resolve initial perceptions of inconsistency once a novel, ambiguous or confusing behavior has been noticed. First, the follower can try to discount the inconsistency, for example by attributing the behavior in question to salient situational causes (e.g., in the above example the leader might have had a particularly bad day). Second, the follower may increase the breadth of behavioral expectations regarding the leader, concluding that he/she shows different sides of his/her personality depending on specific situations. Finally, the follower may engage in a strategy Vonk (1994) describes as change-of-meaning. This comprises adapting the interpretation of the behavioral information so that it fits with the expectation based on prior experiences with the leader (e.g., maybe the leader is not hostile after all, but assertive), or adjusting the existing expectations to accommodate the new behavioral information (e.g., maybe the leader is not as friendly and agreeable as originally assumed). Hence, the inconsistency is solved and the process of sensemaking can be stopped.

*Proposition 4:* In order to make sense of the novel, ambiguous, and/or confusing leader behavior, followers try to interpret the behavior through either a) discounting the behavior, b) differentiating the existing expectations towards the leader, or c) changing the meaning of the behavior in question. If one of these approaches can sufficiently explain the initial behavioral variation, the sensemaking process ends.

In all of the above cases, the discrepancy between observed behavior and expectation is reconciled in a way that would ultimately eliminate the inconsistency (cp. Harris, 1994). We expect, however, that even in situations where the initial behavioral novelty/ambiguity/confusion can finally be resolved, transient perceptions of inconsistent leadership can arise, depending on how much time it takes for the follower to successfully use one of the above strategies to make sense of the behavior. Especially differentiating or adjusting the expected breadth of expected leader behavior can be assumed to require searching for additional situational information as well as elaborate cognitive processing (Vonk, 1994), during which the initial ascription of inconsistency should persist.

*Proposition 5*: Even if novel, ambiguous, and /or confusing leader behavior can ultimately be made sense of through discounting, differentiation, or change of meaning, transient ascriptions of inconsistent leadership can occur while the interpretation process persists.

### *Situational Characteristics and Their Influence on Making Interpretations*

A major defining element of inconsistent leadership is the *perceived lack of situational explanations* of the leader's behavior. In terms of environmental characteristics, this means that anything that is conducive to followers' lack of understanding of why the leader's behavior varies will contribute to a failure to interpret the leader's behavior satisfactorily and thus to ascriptions of inconsistent leadership. Some examples of conducive environmental factors comprise, first, *lack of transparency* regarding the reasons for decision making, or lack of transparency regarding the decision latitude of the leader (i.e., when a leader's behavior actually is constrained by organ-

izational factors). Balkin (1999) distinguishes between informational transparency (truthful, substantial, and useful information), participatory transparency (participation of stakeholders in identifying the information they need), and accountability transparency (objective, balanced reporting of an organization's activities and policies; Rawlins, 2008). The less these related aspects characterize an organization, the more difficult it will be for followers to resolve the initial ambiguity/confusion about the leader's behavior through making interpretations.

Second, inconsistent leadership is also particularly likely to emerge during *changes* in the organization (e.g., new strategies, changed priorities or goals) which are not obvious to the followers but important for the choice of the leader's action. For example, Rosing et al. (2011) describe innovation processes as complex and often nonlinear, which makes them paradoxical and full of tensions. All of this complicates the leadership task and heightens the probability that followers cannot easily explain their leader's behavior, as complex reasons for behavior variations are less easy to detect.

Third, aspects of the *working relationship* between leader and follower may be relevant, especially relationship tenure (i.e., duration of their collaboration). The longer leader and follower collaborate with each other, the more behavioral variability the follower will have seen, making it less likely that they encounter unexpected behavior resulting in a greater breadth of behavior that is considered consistent with previous experiences. It is thus less likely that sensemaking processes results in ascriptions of inconsistent leadership. But even in a longstanding relationship, the leader might at some point do something unexpected, thus triggering a need for sensemaking.

Finally, the *quality of the relationship* between leader and follower (Leader-Member Exchange; Liden et al., 1997; Schyns & Day, 2010) is likely to influence inconsistent leadership. Sorek et al. (2017) show that the perception of the leader as being generally competent attenuates

the perception of being inconsistent even though the leader did not act on his/her promises. If followers feel that they have a positive relationship with their leader based on liking, trust, and respect, they may be prone to disregard behavioral discrepancies of their leader (cp. Robinson, 2014).

*Proposition 6*: Environmental characteristics influence the interpretation of novel, ambiguous, and/or confusing leader behavior so that under the conditions of a) lack of organizational transparency, b) organizational change, or c) low leader-follower relationship duration/quality followers will be less able to interpret the leader behavior as consistent.

**Engaging in Action**

Beyond transient ascriptions of inconsistent leadership, we expect that more stable experiences develop when the leader's behavior continuously and frequently varies without readily observable situational explanation. In such cases, followers cannot easily discount the behavior by attributing it to situational causes or demands or acquire a greater breadth of expected leader behavior in a situation-contingent manner. Such prolonged experiences of dissonance and insecurity should ultimately encourage followers to act their way into knowing. This means that new cues for sensemaking are created through the interaction with others (Christianson & Barton, 2021). This process resembles the relational constructionist perspective of leadership in which people are engaged in "creating (common) understandings on the basis of language" (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 655). According to Vonk (1994), individuals confronted with strongly varying and unpredictable behavior over time will most likely postpone their inference and try to collect more information about the person. That should also be the case when it comes to inconsistent leadership. Followers will most likely try to make sense by communicating especially with colleagues and trying to

collectively interpret the leader's behavior: "Much human activity in organizations is thus concerned with collective efforts to make sense" (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p. 78). Depending on the relationship between the respective followers and the leader, this collective sensemaking may also include communicating with the leader him-/herself. However, as such inquiry may be conceived as criticism of the leader, followers are likely to shy away from discussing their experiences of inconsistent leadership with their supervisor. Thus, given the delicate nature of the topic, it seems more probable that followers will communicate about inconsistent leadership particularly with colleagues whom they perceive as close and trustworthy as such a discourse on one's leader is often delicate and confidential in nature. In such discourses, followers will try to generate collective narratives about the leader that are able to explain his/her behavior (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

*Proposition 7*: If available information does not suffice to make sense of the novel, ambiguous, and/or confusing leader behavior, followers try to acquire additional information by engaging in communication with colleagues they perceive as close and trustworthy.

Given however that the leader behavior continues to vary unpredictably, followers may be caught in cycle of effortful information processing and discourse about the leader, trying in vain to make sense of her/his behavior. In this situation, the ambiguity/confusion cannot be resolved over time, which will result in sustained interpretations of inconsistent leadership. In line with Behavioral Integrity theory (Simons, 2002; Simons et al., 2022), we assume that in such cases inconsistency itself can become a trait that is attributed to the leader. This would allow the followers to eventually stop searching for explanations for the observed behavioral variation, as unpre-

dictably varying behavior now is part of what is expected from the leader. Thus, this inconsistency-as-a-trait ascription will reduce the follower's cognitive effort in future interactions, helping the follower to find a new equilibrium in his or her relationship to that leader. According to the sensemaking literature, the specific sense produced by the followers does not need to be an accurate account of the leader's behavior, but rather a plausible account that helps the sensemaker to create a fitting narrative (e.g., 'this is just the way he/she is: totally incomprehensible') so that the followers can act accordingly (Weick, 1995; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Based on the fact that this permanent ascription of inconsistent leadership violates the consistency rule (Leventhal, 1980), this narrative will necessarily include negative evaluations of the leader's ethicality based on perceived unfairness and dishonesty. To make things worse, once this image of inconsistent leadership is established, leaders may find it difficult to change this view as people typically try to confirm their beliefs (confirmation bias; Oswald & Grosjean, 2004) and will therefore search for confirming evidence of inconsistent leadership in the future. This underlines the practical problems leaders may face if their followers permanently ascribe inconsistent leadership to their leaders.

*Proposition 8*: If followers continuously fail to make sense of novel, ambiguous, and/or confusing leader behavior through discounting, differentiation, or change of meaning and no helpful additional information can be acquired, they will eventually ascribe trait inconsistency to the leader, resulting in permanent ascriptions of inconsistent leadership.

Figure 1 summarizes our reasoning on the process of sensemaking in the ascription of inconsistent leadership.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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## Theoretical Implications and Agenda for Future Research

In this paper, we introduce the concept of inconsistent leadership as an ethical relevant addition to the leadership space. We argued that inconsistent leadership does not meet the standards of behavioral ethics (Treviño et al., 2014), both from a deontological (violating moral principals) and a consequential (because of the negative consequences for followers) point of view. In doing so, we contribute a concept that has been clearly defined and delineated from other concepts in the leadership area.

We derived a theoretical model and testable propositions based on the sensemaking perspective (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Vonk, 1994; Weick, 1995). Specifically, we used sensemaking to propose a process related to inconsistent leadership and to highlight boundary conditions relating to transient or stable perceptions of inconsistent leadership. While we specifically apply this framework to inconsistent leadership, other areas of leadership perceptions could benefit from considering our framework. We contend that the sensemaking approach chosen here is an interesting alley specifically to better understand other areas of (un)ethical behavior in organizations in which ambiguous, unexpected, and/or confusing organizational events play an important part (e.g., ethical dilemmas) (Trevino et al., 2014).

At the same time, the paper adds to the leadership literature by explicitly addressing the aspect of leader (in-)consistency, which has not been taken into account systematically by other leadership conceptualizations. The model proposed in this paper allows for the integration of different and mainly unrelated streams of research ranging from the display of different leadership

styles (Johnson et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2018; Mullen et al., 2011) and justice variability (De Cremer, 2003; Matta et al., 2017) to research on leaders' behavioral integrity (Simons, 1999, 2002; Simons et al., 2015).

As a wider implication, we assume that inconsistent leadership can be subsumed under the umbrella of negative and destructive forms of leadership. While it does not have to be openly hostile (as for example Abusive Supervision would require; Tepper, 2007), it can certainly hinder followers in their work and comes with mostly negative consequences for followers and the organization, relating it to Einarsen and colleagues' (2007) definition of destructive leadership. Our conceptualization thus contributes to the much-needed differentiation of the field of destructive leadership, which has up to now mostly focused on Abusive Supervision (Schilling & Schyns, 2021).

Five related aspects will be important to address in future research in order to establish inconsistent leadership as a useful construct: (1) an in-depth analysis of lay conceptions of inconsistent leadership (2) the measurement of inconsistent leadership, (3) an analysis of its nomological network, (4) an analysis of potential facets of inconsistent leadership, and (5) multi-methodological designs to enhance construct and criterion validity.

First, as evidence on inconsistent leadership is still scarce, it seems necessary to perform qualitative, inductively-oriented investigations. While not exclusively suited for exploratory phases of researching a topic area (Conger, 1998), qualitative methods are nevertheless especially helpful to explore a rather unknown and complex phenomenon. A fundamental issue concerns the question what aspects form the basis for the lay definition of inconsistent leadership: When do we speak of inconsistent leadership? Therefore, initial studies should investigate the experiences of

leaders and followers concerning the characteristics, antecedents, and consequences of inconsistent leadership. In this way, we would be able to enrich and validate our conceptualization along real-world experiences.

This first step is also necessary to work towards, second, a measurement of inconsistent leadership. Our definition allows for the theory-driven development of a scale capturing inconsistent leadership. Qualitative interviews with followers and leaders could help with the item generation. It should be stressed that the measurement of inconsistent leadership has to reflect its subjective character by investigating if followers engage in sensemaking of a leader's behavior, not if leaders' behavior simply varies over time. Thus, a quantitative study focusing on simple variation of leader behavior would not be sufficient unless it also captured followers' sensemaking of inconsistency with regard to these behavioral variations.

Third, we also introduced a concept space in the sense of a nomological network that needs empirical testing. That is, research is necessary to examine in which ways inconsistent leadership is related to other similar and dissimilar concepts. Particularly important here is the added value of our concept over and above existing leadership conceptualizations (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). We argue that inconsistent leadership should add to the variance explained by a variety of other leadership concepts (e.g., transformational, transactional, laissez-faire, ethical, and destructive) as it captures the behavioral variance while other leadership concepts implicitly assume behavioral consistency (therefore often called leadership styles). In order to fully understand the value of the new concept of inconsistent leadership, it is also important to empirically examine the specific antecedents and determine its outcomes. Testing for specific relationships is important to help researchers and practitioners create interventions around inconsistent leadership as well as predict target specific outcomes of inconsistent leadership (cp. meta-analyses on the added value of authentic leadership, Banks, et al., 2016, and servant leadership,

Hoch et al., 2018). Moreover, analyzing the convergence of self- and other ratings of inconsistent leadership could add to our understanding of the phenomenon, based on the assumption that incongruences between leader self-ratings and follower ratings regarding inconsistency could aggravate potential negative effects of inconsistent leadership as the leader does not even realize the issues he/she creates for followers.

Fourth, we can speculate in how far inconsistent leadership might have different facets. While empirically, we do not yet know which facets we would find, a closer look at attribution theory may provide some leads. Particularly, intentionality is a central and pervasive characteristic in the process of explaining others' behavior (e.g., Malle, 1999; Malle & Knobe, 1997). Following from Weiner's (1995, 2000) argument that ascribed intentionality is an important determinant of judgments of responsibility and reactions to the behavior of others, Dasborough and Ashkanasy (2002) propose that follower attributions regarding leader intentions in organizational settings will determine the followers' perceptions of the leadership behavior and their subsequent classification of leadership. We therefore expect perceived intentionality to be an important aspect in the sensemaking process of inconsistent leadership, in so far as followers will deliberate about whether or not the detected behavioral discrepancy is a) unintentional (i.e., unexpected, but seemingly unplanned) or b) intentional (i.e., seemingly deliberately deviating from former behavior and inferred traits).

Another aspect to consider in terms of potential facets of inconsistent leadership in our view if the differentiation between the fundamental leadership dimensions of person- and task-orientation (e.g., Banks et al., 2018; Behrendt et al., 2017; Judge et al., 2004; Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992). We expect that followers' ascriptions of inconsistent leadership can be differentiated based on of person- and task-orientation. On the one hand, a leader can be considered as behav-

ing in a way that contradicts the follower's impression of the leader's person-orientation. For example, a leader who is high on person-orientation according to the follower's existing expectations of that leader (e.g., friendly, approachable, "soft on the person") and then exceedingly scolds the follower for a relatively minor mistake, would be considered inconsistent on this dimension. On the other hand, a leader who is generally considered high on task-orientation (e.g., focused, strong in project management, clear in his/her messages), but gives out contradictory tasks to his/her followers without conceivable explanation, will equally be considered as inconsistent in terms of task-orientation.

Arguably, these facets have an ethical component as well. Considering Montgomery and Cowen's (2020) differentiation between ethical and competence failures, we speculate, inconsistent leadership relating to person-orientation is likely to be considered more unethical than inconsistent leadership relating to the task-dimension because of its very personal impact for followers. Even more so, inconsistent leadership that is intentional is more unethical than inconsistent leadership that is unintentional. The former is clearly something that the leader actively decides to do, while the latter is outside his/her reflection. Thus, in terms of ethical implication, a hierarchy of unethicality is implied in our facets of inconsistent leadership.

Finally, fifth, with respect to designs there is also a case to be made for future research to conduct experimental studies. Specifically, we argue that because inconsistent leadership is a subjective phenomenon, studies that manipulate objective leader behavior (e.g., by using descriptions of leaders or actors) can be useful to analyze the ascription of inconsistent leadership. Following Peus et al. (2015), it also seems promising to consider how inconsistent leadership spreads from the individual to the group, and thus using multilevel design in future research. This might, on the one hand, refer to actual shared sensemaking, but also, on the other hand, to norms of behavior resulting from shared sensemaking of inconsistent behavior (e.g., increased group-

level counter-productive work behavior). Future theoretical developments and empirical efforts with regard to inconsistent leadership should be particularly directed at identifying and investigating possible mechanisms such as emotional and social contagion (Harvey et al., 2007; Peus et al, 2015) or social learning.

## Practical Implications

As the area of inconsistent leadership is still in its infancy, it is difficult to derive clear-cut practical recommendations. However, it can be stated that leaders should be made aware of the fact that changing their behavior without any explanation could be subject to the sensemaking of inconsistent leadership and thereby lead to negative effects in their followers (cp. De Cremer, 2003; Matta et al., 2017; Sorek et al., 2018). Leadership development programs could be helpful here, especially to point out to leaders the importance of communicating the reasons for changing their behavior or decisions. Avolio et al. (2010) propose to foster leaders' self-awareness by reflecting on positive trigger events (e.g., a situation in which a leader was able to communicate the reasons for his/her behavioral change). Also, leaders could benefit from upward feedback processes to learn about their followers' sensemaking processes to make sure that a permanent ascription of leading inconsistently is avoided. As stated before, inconsistent leadership emerges if followers notice discrepancies in the behavior of their supervisor (noticing), try to interpret them by analyzing reasons for these discrepancies (making interpretations), and gather more information by interacting with others and their environment (engaging in action). These three interweaving processes of noticing, making interpretations, and engaging in action (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014) can be used to derive concrete recommendations for leaders. Besides avoiding factual and sustained departures from prior behavior leaders can influence these three processes of follower sensemaking to prevent the impression of acting inconsistently. Leaders should engage

in *sensegiving* (cp. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), that is, they should try to prospectively communicate on a meta-level to avoid impressions of inconsistent leadership. As sensemaking is triggered by ambiguous or confusing cues, leaders should proactively address behavior and/or decisions that might be discrepant with former action ("giving notice"), explain the reasons for that behavior ("providing interpretations"), and establish a positive communication climate with regard to ambiguous or confusing events in the team ("co-engaging in action"). In this sense, teaching leaders (e.g., in coaching or mentoring programs) how to avoid the ascription of being an inconsistent leader by practicing sensegiving offers new opportunities for leadership development.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have introduced and elaborated the concept of inconsistent leadership. We believe to have created a clear conceptualization and boundary conditions for this phenomenon and thus have provided a solid basis for future research in this area. As leadership research is certainly not characterized by a shortage of different concepts, any researcher introducing a novel one certainly has to make the case for its necessity. As we have argued above, we believe inconsistent leadership fills an important gap in the wider and diverse tapestry of leadership concepts due its potential to integrate and extend previous theorizing and research into inconsistent leader behavior as well as ethical and destructive leadership. Moreover, the sensemaking approach we have used can easily be applied to put other research into leadership perception processes on a more solid theoretical basis.

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FIGURE 1

The process of sensemaking of inconsistent leadership and its antecedents