3 Implicit leadership theory

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Chapter topics

- Development of the implicit leadership theory concept
- The perceptual mechanism of implicit leadership theories
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- Context: does it matter?
- Implications of implicit leadership theories in leadership practice
- Trends emerging from implicit leadership theories

Introduction

For over a hundred years, leadership has been an interesting topic for scholars and practitioners who have tried to understand what makes a good leader and effective leadership. Even today, the word 'leadership' appears in the media almost every day and seems likely to remain the centre of attention, at least for the foreseeable future. This is due to the inherent belief that leadership is important for organisations and individuals to overcome challenges and make positive outcomes materialise. However, at the same time, leadership continues to be a fuzzy term which most people find difficult to define, and hence the nature of leadership and what makes good leaders are still hugely disputed. Therefore, it is this importance and ambiguity of leadership that probably will make curious researchers study it for years to come.

The traditional literature shows that the early endeavours at leadership research focused on finding lists of traits that defined good leaders, assuming that effective results would automatically be guaranteed if a leader possessed those traits. Stogdill (1948) reviewed more than 124 studies in this stream, published between 1904 and 1947, and found that the potential lists of leader traits seemed endless, and he asserted that any set of traits could be effective in one situation but not necessarily in others. Consequently, the following waves of leadership studies provided theories that linked leadership behaviours and leadership situations, arguing that a leadership style should be relevant to the situation to ensure effectiveness (Kerr and Jermier 1978; Hersey and Blanchard 1982; Vroom and Jago 1988) and at the same time acknowledging that leadership is a trainable behaviour. However, all these studies focused heavily on leaders and viewed leadership as a static objective reality. The contemporary approach in leadership research has overcome these limitations. Two main aspects in this approach mark a departure from the traditional leader-centric approach: it is recognised,
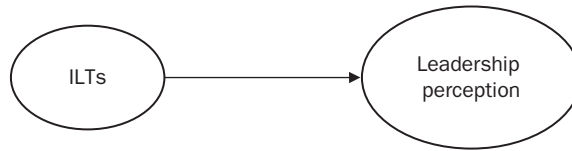
Figure 3.1 Leadership is a socially constructed process. People's ILTs shape the way they see leaders

first, that leaders do not equate to leadership, and, second, that leadership is a dynamic process that cannot be fully understood without studying the other side of the coin – followers.

Calder (1977) pointed to the dynamism of leadership by arguing that it is not an objective reality that exists out there but a conception that resides in people's minds. In light of this conceptual theorisation, leadership is a socially constructed process which can be defined as 'the process of being perceived as a leader' (Lord and Maher 1993: 11). All individuals, including both followers and leaders, have their own images about leaders and what leaders are like (see Figure 3.1). These subjective images of leaders are known in the literature as implicit leadership theories (ILTs). ILTs can be defined as 'the image that a person has of a leader in general or of an effective leader' (Schyns and Meindl 2005: 21). This chapter aims to explain the ILT concept as well as the underlying cognitive processes of leadership perception and provide an answer to important questions, such as 'What is the role of ILTs in producing positive leadership outcomes?' And 'What are the practical implications of ILTs?'

Development of the implicit leadership theory concept

The concept of implicit leadership theories was introduced in the literature by Eden and Leviatan in 1975 to describe individuals' internal beliefs and expectations of leaders (Eden and Leviatan 1975; Eden, Leviatan, Schyns, et al. 2005). The concept developed following a study that Eden and Leviatan (1975) conducted on a sample of students. The participants were asked to rate a fictitious leader of 'plant X' about whom they were given little information. The results showed that almost exactly the same factor structure emerged even in conditions in which participants claimed that they had responded at random. Consequently, Eden and Leviatan concluded that people have implicit leadership theories that they use to describe leaders. That is, people have certain traits and behaviours they associate with leaders which they use whenever they interact with others to decide whether they are leader-like or not. In this way, people can understand social processes such as leadership based on internal representations they hold. Thus, it is the individual's interpretation of traits and behaviours, rather than the objective reality, that influences leadership (Lord and Maher 1990). If a person is not categorised as leader-like by others, that person will not be regarded as equally effective as a person who is perceived as leader-like. In this case, a leader will not be able to exert the necessary influence on followers to fulfil wanted

goals (Lord and Maher 1993; DeRue and Ashford 2010). For example, if people have an image of a leader as being extravert, and their leader is an introvert, they will likely regard that person as less leader-like and will grant them less influence over them as followers. In the following section, we illustrate the underlying mechanism of ILTs and how the cognitive process works in the followers' minds when perceiving potential leaders.

The perceptual mechanism of implicit leadership theories

Implicit leadership theories are based on the fundamental notion that leadership operates within constraints offered by followers. One constraint is the followers' expectations that can affect leaders' effectiveness (Lord and Maher 1993). That is, when leaders are not meeting their followers' expectations, they will find it harder to be accepted as leaders (DeRue and Ashford 2010). There are two types of processes which shape leadership perception: *recognition-based* processes and *inferential* processes (Lord, Foti and De Vader 1984). Recognition-based processes are used to interpret incoming social information through *categorisation* while inferential processes are used to reflect on salient events (e.g. success or failure) through *attribution*. We will explain these processes in more detail in the following sections.

Recognition-based processes: categorisation

The first process, categorisation, is based on the cognitive concepts of schemas and prototypes. Schemas are the pre-existing cognitive models which individuals use to interpret incoming information about stimuli (including objects and people). Individuals' subsequent judgements about the stimuli are then affected by the schema (Rosch 1999). To go back to the example from above, if a person does not meet the leader-schema (here: being an extravert), others are less likely to categorise this person as leader. Prototypes are commonly used forms of schemas which summarise the most salient characteristics of members in some category (e.g. leaders). In other words, prototypes summarise the most common features or attributes of a category, whether that category concerns objects or people (Phillips and Lord 1982). Again, based on this prototype, people make a judgement about whether or not a person introduced as 'leader' is prototypical for this category, with possibly negative implications if the person is not considered prototypical.

Lord et al. (1982) proposed that people use the same cognitive categorisation process discussed above when processing information about leader behaviour. Therefore, when a behaviour is shown by a leader, people refer to their existing schema and prototype of leaders to assess whether that behaviour is matching before the categorisation is made, depending on the outcome of this comparison process. This process is known in the literature as *leadership categorisation*. To keep the same example, if they see a leader talking to others, they might then assume – based on their prototype of leaders in general – that this person is extravert and therefore a typical leader. It has to be noted that this process is very quick and does not require a lot of cognitive effort. Indeed, it mostly happens unconsciously.

Table 3.1 ILTs on different levels

ILT Level	Aspect	Example
Superordinate level	Leaders vs. non-leaders	Is he/she a leader at all?
Basic level	Leaders in different domains	Business, sport, politics; different aspects are important for different types of leaders
Subordinate level	Further differentiations	Gender, hierarchy; female football coach, male nurse manager

ILT can be differentiated on different levels (Lord, Foti and De Vader 1984), summarised in Table 3.1. On the highest, most abstract level (i.e. superordinate level), leaders are differentiated from non-leaders, that is, the aim is to find characteristics that most people consider relevant for leaders and that make them distinct from people who are not considered leader-like. However, people also hold more specific implicit leadership theories about leaders in different contexts, such as business or sport, and so on (i.e. basic level). For example, people might consider attributes such as being diplomatic, communicative, and formal as characteristic of political leaders but will find different attributes characteristic of a leader of surgeons or nurses in healthcare. Based on the authors' implicit leadership theories, maybe politicians will be considered less caring towards others than leaders in a hospital environment. Implicit leadership theories can also exist at a lower (i.e. subordinate) level, in which gender and hierarchy are used, for example, to further differentiate between leaders. The more the target leader shows prototypical characteristics (characteristics positively associated with leaders), the more he or she is perceived as a leader and consequently gains the support of his or her followers (DeRue and Ashford 2010; Haslam, Reicher and Platow 2011). Interestingly, once a person is perceived and categorised as a leader, followers' memory may become biased and selectively focus on schema-consistent information (Phillips and Lord 1982). In other words, followers may perceive some attributes in the categorised leader because they are consistent with the leader category, even if they are not specifically shown by that leader. To continue and refine the example above, if a person's implicit leadership theories about a nurse leader are as extravert and caring, then they are likely to derive from observing their nurse leader talking to a patient not only that he/she is extravert but also that he/she is caring without actually having observed that specific behaviour.
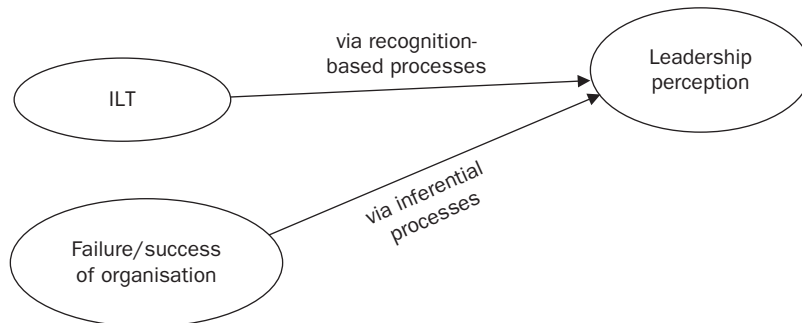
Inferential processes: attribution

In the second type of process, the inferential process, an individual attributes leadership to an observed person depending on how a causal judgement has been made to a salient event such as organisational success or failure. Generally, people can either make environmental or personal attributions to success (or failure). If a personal attribution is made, the leader is considered the origin of that success (or failure). Lord and colleagues (1984) asserted that individuals tend to

view the prototypical leader as the cause of organisational success. Reciprocally, success may also enhance the perception of a leader's prototypicality. Relevant to the inferential process, Meindl and colleagues (1985) found that in the case of extremely high or low performance (even more so when this performance is unexpected and therefore needs an explanation), people tend to attribute success or failure to leaders while ignoring other influencing factors, such as environmental factors or followers. For example, when an unpredictable crisis hits a business and swallows huge profits, the CEO often leaves because people find that leader responsible for such failure. Or in an NHS context, we often see that leaders of NHS Trusts are under pressure to resign after a major failure. This phenomenon, according to Meindl, is called the *romance of leadership* and describes people's rosy view and exaggeration of a leader's role in salient events (see Figure 3.2). The biggest issue here is that this might prevent a closer look at more system-immanent reasons for failure, thus making it more likely that another failure will happen.

It is important to note that perceiving leaders is a repetitive process that could occur in people's minds many times across situations. DeRue and Ashford (2010) explained this dynamic nature by proposing that leader and follower identities are not static cognitions that reside within individuals' self-concept. Rather, they suggest that granting leader identity to someone initiates follower identities for others, and conversely claiming leader identity for oneself results in granting follower identities to others. This constant process of 'claiming' and 'granting' identities which results from the social interaction among individuals means that these identities could shift over time or across situations. For example, in a hospital context, nurses might lead the discussion on hygiene standards, thus claiming leadership, while surgeons might lead the discussion on improvements in intensive care, where nurses might then be granted a follower identity.

DeRue and Ashford also proposed that the implicit theories of leadership held by individuals affect the process of granting/claiming leader identity. The more congruence between the focal leader and a follower's ILT, the more he or she will grant the leader identity to that leader. So, again, a caring and extravert nurse

Figure 3.2 In recognition-based processes, people's leadership perception is based on their schemas or ILTs. Moreover, people tend to attribute extremely high or low performance to leaders via inferential processes

might find it easier to lead when these characteristics chime with the implicit leadership theories of her followers.

Overall, the perceptual process and relational nature of leadership construction show that leadership is an outcome of followers' perception and that followers are equally as important as leaders in creating and developing leadership. If followers refer to their ILTs in categorising (and evaluating) leaders, it is important then to understand what images (ILTs) followers have of leaders. The following section will describe research into the content of ILTs.

The content of implicit leadership theories

The influence of ILTs on the perception of leadership has encouraged many researchers to investigate the content of implicit leadership theories (see Table 3.2 for a summary). Lord et al. (1984) examined the structure of the leadership categories by asking a group of undergraduate students in the United States to name attributes that they would use to describe leaders and non-leaders. Another independent group was then asked to rate the prototypicality of those attributes on a 5-point scale. The researchers found a pool of 59 attributes describing leaders (e.g. intelligent, honest, educated, and dedicated) and subsequently distinguished between two main categories of ILT traits: prototypic (i.e. positively associated with leadership) and anti-prototypic (i.e. negatively associated with leadership). The more a leader shows prototypic traits, the more he or she will be perceived as leader-like by their followers.

Another research study conducted by Offermann and colleagues (1994) examined the content of implicit leadership theories by asking undergraduate American students to name up to 25 traits of leaders and direct supervisors (i.e. immediate hierarchical superior). This resulted in a pool of 160 traits with a considerable overlap with the 59 items generated by Lord and colleagues' (1984) study. A different group of students were asked to rate, on a 10-point scale, the 160 traits generated as characteristic or non-characteristic of leaders, effective leaders or supervisors. Based on the analysis, the authors identified eight distinct dimensions underlying implicit leadership theories. These dimensions are: sensitivity, dedication, tyranny, charisma, attractiveness, masculinity, intelligence and strength. They differentiated between prototypic and anti-prototypic dimensions. The study also generated a 41-item scale which was validated using a sample of full-time employees. This scale was later refined by Epitropaki and Martin (2004) who found six dimensions are the most representative of ILTs in UK organisational settings: sensitivity, dedication, intelligence, and dynamism (prototypic), tyranny and masculinity (anti-prototypic).

Schyns and Schilling (2011) challenged the assumption in the majority of previous studies that implicit leadership theories are about describing the attributes of *effective* leaders. They suggested that the perceptions of leaders in general, unlike effective leaders, may contain negative as well as positive attributes. The results indeed supported their claim and showed that implicit leadership theories can be negative as well as positive. Using a Dutch sample of working adults, they found 15 categories that describe leaders in general (e.g. team player, organised,

Table 3.2 Studies addressing the content of ILT

Country	Sample	Key findings	Reference
USA	Total of 263 undergraduate students	59 attributes generated; categorised as: prototypic vs. anti-prototypic attributes	Lord et al. (1984)
USA	Three samples of undergraduate students, and one sample of working adults	Eight dimensions of ILTs: dimensions: sensitivity, dedication, intelligence, strength, charisma, and attractiveness (prototypic), masculinity and tyranny (anti-prototypic); developed a 41-item scale measuring ILT	Offermann et al. (1994)
UK	Two independent samples of British employees	Six dimensions of ILT: sensitivity, dedication, intelligence, and dynamism (prototypic), and tyranny and masculinity (anti-prototypic)	Epitropaki and Martin (2004)
The Netherlands	A sample of 76 working adults	15 categories (effective and ineffective) for leaders in general, e.g. team player, organised, communicative, unpleasant, disinterested, and weak	Schyns and Schilling (2011)
China	Samples of Chinese college students and working adults	Four dimensions of ILT: personal morality, goal efficiency, interpersonal competence, and versatility	Ling et al. (2000)

communicative, unpleasant, disinterested, and weak). Based on the participants' own rating of the effectiveness of the reported attributes, Schyns and Schilling conclude that implicit leadership theories of leaders in general and of effective leaders are not the same. In other words, implicit leadership theories about effective leaders are only a subcategory of implicit leadership theories, rather than reflecting implicit leadership theories as a whole. Knowing that leaders in general can be perceived negatively has important practical implications since negative perceptions may hinder leaders' influence on followers.

It has to be noted that all the above studies have been conducted in a Western cultural context. In contrast, based on a similar approach to Offermann et al. (1994), Ling and colleagues (2000) collected attributes describing leaders from Chinese participants, including employees and college students. Interestingly, the researchers found no correspondence of their findings to the eight dimensions of leadership that Offermann et al. (1994) found for the US participants. The study revealed four dimensions describing Chinese implicit leadership theories: personal morality, goal efficiency, interpersonal competence, and versatility. The highest ratings were given to the interpersonal competence dimension which the researchers find consistent with the Chinese cultural value of collectivism. Therefore, they

suggested that the difference found in the Chinese ILT is due to culture. The Chinese study indicates that ILTs can show differences in different contexts.

The next section will explain in more detail how context is important in explaining differences in ILTs. The societal, organisational, and individual contexts will be discussed respectively. Taking into account cultural differences in implicit leadership theories is hugely relevant in contexts such as the NHS where people from different cultures work together. Based on some of what we highlighted above, different implicit leadership theories can lead to differences in who is granted leadership – and that can be different within the same team.

Context: does it matter?

Research has shown that implicit leadership theories are contingent upon context (Lord 2005). That is, ILTs may be different across societies, organisations, and even individuals. So, a careful understanding of implicit leadership theories cannot be assured without considering the context in which ILTs operate.

Differences across societies

Cross-cultural research has demonstrated how societies differ in perceptions of leaders and leadership (House, Hanges, Javidan, et al. 2004). A major cross-cultural research project investigating how people from different cultures viewed leadership, is the GLOBE project (House, Hanges, Javidan, et al. 2004). The project studied 62 nations to examine the relationship between societal culture, organisational practices, and leadership. The study empirically divided those 62 societies into ten clusters, based on several factors such as geography, language, religion, and historical accounts. The primary aim of the study was to explore the intersection of culture and perception of leadership, and to find which ILTs (in terms of 21 leadership attributes) might be shared across the countries under study. GLOBE researchers used a standard questionnaire to measure the implicit theories of *effective* leadership to form what they called culturally endorsed leadership theory (CLT). This theory basically describes the common beliefs about leaders across specific societal cultures. The results revealed six dimensions of these implicit leadership theories about effective leaders: charismatic, team-oriented, self-protective, participative, human-oriented, and autonomous. Interestingly, the results have shown that while charismatic leadership attributes are perceived as important in all cultures, other attributes are perceived to be of different importance between cultures (House, Hanges, Javidan, et al. 2004). For example, the Nordic European countries view charismatic, participative, and team-oriented behaviours as the most important for effective leadership, while the Middle East profile shows that self-protective, humane-oriented, and autonomous behaviours are the most essential for effective leadership.

In the same vein, research by Gerstner and Day (1994) looked at the prototypical image of business leaders across eight cultures. The participants were students from eight different countries, namely, France, Germany, Honduras, India, the United States, Taiwan, China, and Japan. The participants were presented with a questionnaire consisting of a list of 59 attributes of leaders that had been

identified previously by Lord and colleagues (1984). For each attribute, participants were asked to assign a prototypicality rating for a business leader. The results showed that not a single leadership attribute appeared in the top five attributes across all eight cultures. It is noteworthy here that neither this study nor the GLOBE could capture all the idiosyncrasies across cultures due to the quantitative nature of the research (Dastmalchian, Javidan and Alam 2001). Nevertheless, they confirm that people in different cultures perceive leadership differently.

Applying this research to the UK health sector, for example, we can imagine that with its huge diversity of employees from different cultural backgrounds, it is important to consider how these cultures may differ in their expectations of the same leader. Statistics from 2014 show that the NHS and community health services in England employ people from more than 200 countries. In the NHS, 26% of doctors are foreign nationals. India provided the highest number after Britain and the Philippines provided the third highest number of NHS staff. Staff are also employed from other countries such as Poland, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Portugal, Pakistan, and Spain (Siddique 2014). We may find in such diverse contexts that, for example, a German nurse might expect his/her nurse leader to be participative and expects to be consulted in decision-making while a nurse with a Middle Eastern background might not expect this at all.[1] This can lead to some confusion or even frustration in the first few months until both the nurse and the nurse leader have found a way to effectively communicate their expectations to each other.

Differences across organisations

With respect to the organisational context, Lord and colleagues (1984) argued that implicit leadership theories differ across contexts (i.e. basic level). That is, followers may expect certain attributes and behaviours from business leaders, while expecting other kinds of behaviour from military, political or sport leaders, for example. Therefore, leaders working in one specific business context should be aware that they are expected to behave differently from those in a different organisational context. The same notion can be applied to various industries, departments and hierarchies inside an organisation. For example, it has been found that employees working in different professions (service versus manufacturing) hold different ILTs (Epitropaki and Martin 2004; see also Paris, Howell, Dorfman, et al. 2009, for another example). Consequently, in our hospital example, nurses and surgeons might differ considerably in their expectations of leaders, thus possibly leading to conflicting expectations and problems in the claiming and granting process that characterises leadership.

Differences across individuals

Although a group of people might share a common prototype of leadership, there are many factors contributing to individual variations within this prototype. Keller (1999, 2003) studied individual differences in developing ILTs and found that parental traits and prior interaction with parents, as early leadership figures, influence the perception of *ideal* leaders. Moreover, she found that personality

traits such as agreeableness, extraversion, conscientiousness, openness, and self-monitoring influence ideal implicit leadership theories as individuals tend to project their own traits onto idealised leadership images.

Gender is another factor that explains ILT differences held by individuals. Epitropaki and Martin (2004) found implicit leadership theories held by male employees are different from those of female employees. This is supported by a comparative study conducted in 27 countries which found that the preferred attributes of leaders held by female leaders differed from those held by male leaders (Paris, Howell, Dorfman, et al. 2009). In general, female managers showed more preference for participative, team-oriented, and charismatic leadership behaviours. Thus, in any given team, male and female followers might differ in their expectations of their leaders.

Overall, the above studies show that implicit leadership theories are highly contextual. The fact that ILTs can vary across countries, industries, organisations, departments and even individuals has two important implications. The first is to encourage ILT researchers to add contextual factors in their studies and to be careful about generalising results from one context to another. The second is to warn organisational leaders not to be too confident about their assumptions of their followers' expectations, as differences exist not only between their own implicit leadership theories and those of their followers but also differences among their followers' implicit leadership theories may be substantial. This raises a call for leaders to be curious about their followers' ILTs and to open lines of communication with them to discover their perceptions and expectations of leaders and ultimately for leaders to flexibly react to expectations towards them. This is likely to be an important step towards an improved leadership process (DeRue and Ashford 2010; Schyns, Tymon, Kiefer, et al. 2012).

Implications of implicit leadership theories in leadership practice

Based on our considerations above, we will now outline some of the implications of a match/mismatch of implicit leadership theories within teams or between implicit leadership theories and leader behaviour.

First, it has been argued that leadership effectiveness is contingent upon the quality of the relationship between leaders and followers. This dyadic reciprocal exchange is described in the literature under the label Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), and it is linked to many positive personal and organisational outcomes (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, et al. 2012). Studies found that ILTs are relevant in LMX relationships as followers perceived more quality relationships with leaders who matched their ILTs (Engle and Lord 1997; Epitropaki and Martin 2005). Accordingly, it is important for leaders to fulfil followers' expectations as this will probably be instrumental in establishing good relationships and ultimately in achieving positive work outcomes associated with high-quality relationships. Understanding the effect of ILTs on LMX is especially important in the health sector. This is because good healthcare requires collaboration between individuals with different professional and often cultural backgrounds in order to achieve the best care for the patient. Thus, understanding implicit leadership theories

can help to identify different expectations towards leaders, and consequently improve the quality of communication, cooperation and interaction between all members involved.

A second practical implication is that leaders who match followers' ILTs will receive a positive evaluation and consequently will secure a better chance of being promoted (Schyns 2006). An example of research investigating this issue is research into female leadership. Here, it has been found that, for women, matching followers' ILTs to get promoted can be particularly difficult. This is because in general the image of successful managers overlaps more with male than with stereotypical female characteristics, and thus women receive unfavourable evaluation as potential leaders (Schein 1973, 1975). Consequently, even women leaders eventually find themselves in a 'lose–lose situation', according to Ryan and Haslam (2005). They explained that if a woman leader behaved according to the female stereotype, she would not be seen as acting as leader-like, and if she behaved to conform to the 'leader' stereotype, she would not be perceived as acting like a proper woman. Thus, deviating from either the gender or leader stereotypes will lead to negative evaluations. This might explain why women, in many cases, are markedly under-represented in leadership positions. In the context of the NHS, an example might be that a typical nurse might be expected to be female and a typical surgeon to be male. This has huge implications for interactions between leaders and followers, where expectations are not met. Specifically, diversity of leadership is important in order for the best people to be promoted and not just those who match a stereotype but also for 'untypical' leaders to come forward and claim leadership (Schyns 2006).

Organisations should, therefore, ensure that all qualified staff are offered equal promotion opportunities, independent of prevailing implicit leadership theories. Similarly, organisations should be aware that selecting leaders based on followers' evaluation could be considerably biased, and potentially lead to an under-promotion of 'untypical' leaders who would be equally qualified to lead.

Third, the biases caused by ILT may extend their influence beyond the attribution of leadership into decision-making behaviour. In an experimental study, Felfe and Petersen (2007) tested the effect of romance of leadership on managerial decision-making. As mentioned earlier, the romance of leadership is a specific ILT which refers to an over-emphasis of the leader factor and it de-emphasises all other situational factors in determining the reason for success or failure (Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich 1985). It was found that participants high in the romance of leadership tended to approve of projects if the leader's probability of success was high, even if the situation in which the leader was acting (as described in a scenario) was more unfavourable. Therefore, management should know that romanticisers, whenever involved in decision-making, tend to ignore situational factors and will potentially make uncalculated risky decisions that may lead to failure. Consequently, it could be helpful for organisations to design training programmes to teach those involved in decision-making how to evaluate projects realistically and to minimise interference from their cognitive biases when making critical decisions. Think again about hospital failures where, as a consequence of high romance of leadership, a healthcare trust might vote to select a strong leader, assuming that this will solve all issues, even though many issues might

be system immanent, and therefore to rely too strongly on leadership can mask those issues.

A fourth implication is that organisations may consider interventions which enhance effectiveness by dealing with followers' potentially exaggerated expectations of leaders. For example, offering followership training programmes to train followers to maintain realistic expectations of leaders could be a good strategy to improve effectiveness (Schyns and Schilling 2011). This can reduce the gap between followers' expectations and leaders' actual behaviour and consequently maximise the cooperation among them. Schyns et al. (2012) suggest a drawing exercise to raise awareness of implicit leadership theories in different contexts which could be used as a starting point for follower training or team-building exercises. Here, leaders and followers can be asked to draw a leader and present their drawings to the other group. Differences can be discussed among members of both groups. The idea is that this helps both leaders and followers to understand how expectations towards leaders might be different between leaders and followers, and that discussions can be used to encourage better leadership processes.

Lastly, given that ILTs differ across cultures, it is crucial for expatriate managers who work in global companies to understand that what is considered effective behaviour or an attribute in one culture will probably not be considered so in other cultures. For example, thinking of the GLOBE study and the differences found with regard to expectations to participate in leadership decision-making processes outlined earlier, leaders who show a participative style might be regarded quite differently across cultures. The same notion applies to leaders working in organisations or sectors that have a diverse range of employees. The great diversity found in some sectors (as explained earlier in the UK health sector) illustrates how challenging and important it is for leaders to understand that employees who come from different backgrounds will have different images of leaders and will probably perceive the same leader differently. Imagine, for instance, how careful the leader should be when communicating with team members with very different cultural backgrounds what needs to be done.

Trends emerging from implicit leadership theories

Recent research has extended the notion of implicit leadership theories to other areas, such as implicit followership theories, implicit relationship theories, and *implicit voice theories*. As all are interesting in the context of leadership, we will briefly discuss these concepts here.

De Vries and van Gelder (2005), as well as Sy (2010), have introduced the term *implicit followership theories* (IFT), arguing that people have images not only of leaders but also of followers. Sy (2010) found six dimensions relating to the content of IFTs: industry, enthusiasm, good citizen, conformity, insubordination and incompetence. Similar to ILTs, it would be important to examine the effect of IFT similarity and discrepancy on organisational outcomes. Since leadership, in most cases, results from the interaction between leaders and followers, both ILTs and IFTs could play an important role in the leadership process. Therefore, looking at

leadership models which integrate both IFTs and ILTs is worth pursuing in future research and could help improve communication and collaboration between leaders and followers.

Another concept introduced by Mary Uhl-Bien (2005) is the concept of *implicit relationship theories* (IRTs). She argued that employees hold assumptions and expectations regarding developing and maintaining work relationships. In the workplace, individuals may hold either *entity* or *incremental* relational theories, and, based on that, they will approach work relationships differently. Those who are entity theorists tend to judge whether a relational partner is compatible based on a quick assessment of the other's traits. Incremental theorists believe that, regardless of a relational partner's compatibility, relationships can be developed over time. In other words, entity theorists will focus more on personal traits and perceived similarity when developing work relationships whereas incremental theorists will focus more on the effort required to grow the relationship itself. The influence of IRTs may not be limited to the dyadic relationship between followers and leaders but rather could have implications for the impressions, interactions, and conflicts among team members. Further research examining this concept could lead to important contributions for relevant leadership theories such as Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), which, as we have shown above, is related to important organisational outcomes.

Relevant to the ILT literature is the concept of *implicit voice theories*, which describe the beliefs individuals have about the appropriateness of speaking up to authorities in hierarchical organisations. In particular, self-protective implicit voice theories could make employees remain silent in order to avoid the risks believed to be associated with speaking up, such as the fear of embarrassment (Detert and Edmondson 2011). Followers' perceptions of their leaders' behaviours may contribute to this silence. That is, understanding that employees might not raise concerns not (only) because of conditions in their particular work environment (e.g. negative leadership) but also because of deep-rooted assumptions they hold can provide another point of intervention to improve climate for voice. Organisations could lose many improvement opportunities because implicit voice theories prevent employees from suggesting new ideas or complaining about job-related problems. Imagine how this becomes even more important in the healthcare sector where speaking up can, directly or indirectly, improve the quality of patient care and save lives.

Conclusion

We have seen that implicit leadership theories influence people's perception of their leaders' behaviours and their attributions of traits to leaders. They are highly contextual and can vary across cultures, organisations, and individuals. Especially in the healthcare sector where teams are often diverse in terms of culture, education, and expertise, leaders should not ignore different implicit leadership theories or expectations of them as they cannot achieve success without the cooperation and support of followers, and that can be gained, in part, through carefully taking into account followers' expectations. Hospitals and trusts should

pay more attention to the pivotal influence of implicit leadership theories on organisational processes such as leaders' evaluation, decision-making, and followers' relationship with leaders.

Key concepts discussed

- 'Leadership', as a socially constructed process by the perceiver, remains a fuzzy term which researchers are still trying to define.
- In this context, implicit leadership theories (ILTs), a concept developed 40 years ago, describes the stereotypes people hold about leaders. ILTs play a vital part if we want to understand how leaders are being perceived.
- A leader might not be categorised as leader-like and regarded as less effective if he or she does not meet a follower's expectations or ILTs.
- Overall, followers' perceptions about leaders are as important as the leaders themselves when it comes to developing leadership. *Recognition-based* processes and *inferential* processes shape people's leadership perceptions.
- The content of ILTs depends on whether the focus is on effective leaders or leaders in general. The following six dimensions are the most representative in UK organisational settings: sensitivity, dedication, intelligence, strength, tyranny, and masculinity.
- The content of ILTs also depends on the societal, organisational, and individual contexts.
- In leadership practice, being aware of the following ILT-related aspects can be helpful: (1) People's ILTs can influence the quality of the relationship between leaders and followers. (2) Matching followers' ILTs can have positive consequences for the leader, such as positive evaluation or higher chances of promotion. (3) Some people might have a tendency to over-emphasise the role of the leader and to de-emphasise all other situational factors when determining the reason for success or failure. (4) Offering followership training programmes to train followers can help to prevent perceptual biases and unrealistic expectations towards leaders. (5) Effective behaviour in one culture might not be perceived as being effective in other cultures.
- Implicit followership theories, implicit relationship theories and implicit voice theories are extensions of ILTs in other areas.

Key readings

DeRue, D.S. and Ashford, S.J. (2010) Who will lead and who will follow? A social process of leadership identity construction in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 35(4): 627–47.
This article talks about the dynamic nature of claiming and granting leader and follower identities as well as relevant antecedents to this process.

Lord, R.G. and Maher, K.J. (1993) *Leadership and Information Processing Linking Perceptions and Performance*. London: Routledge.
This book gives an excellent overview of information processing in relation to leadership, citing primary, often experimental research.

Schyns, B., Tymon, A., Kiefer, T. and Kerschreiter, R. (2012) New ways to leadership development: a picture paints a thousand words. *Management Learning*, 1350507612456499.
In this article, the authors used a drawing exercise as a learning tool to assess leaders' and followers' ILTs (including contextual information) with the aim of widening the scope of leadership development.

Examples of studies

Edmonstone, J. (2011) Developing leaders and leadership in healthcare: a case for rebalancing? *Leadership in Health Services*, 24: 8–18.
  This article describes the emerging critique of leader development in healthcare (as opposed to leadership development) as well as an alternative approach by emphasising the context and relationships within leadership.

West, M., Armit, K., Loewenthal, L., Eckert, R., West, T. and Lee, A. (2015) *Leadership and Leadership Development in Healthcare: The Evidence Base*. London, Faculty of Medical Leadership and Management. Available at: http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/leadership-and-leadership-development-health-care
  This review summarises challenges faced by NHS organisations regarding leadership and describes key messages in relation to leadership at different levels of analysis, such as the leadership task and the most effective leadership behaviours at individual, team, board and national levels.

Wong, C.A., Cummings, G.G. and Ducharme, L. (2013) The relationship between nursing leadership and patient outcomes: a systematic review update. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 21(5): 709–24.
  This systematic review focuses on studies that examine the relationship between nursing leadership practices and patient outcomes.

Useful websites

https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/cutting-edge-leadership
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqyOI4R07Cw

Note

1 This example is based on very broad cultural differences and implicit leadership theories are individually different and thus cultural norms might or might not apply to individuals from each culture.

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