

## Recent Research of Note

**'Discrepancies in self/subordinate perceptions of leader behavior: Leader's gender, organizational context and leader's self-monitoring'** by Jeffrey Becker, Roya Ayman and Karen Korabik in *Group and Organization Management*, June 2002, 226-244.

Summarized and Interpreted by  
**JOSEPH SELTZER**  
LaSalle University

While women have increasingly moved into managerial roles in the workforce, there is still evidence of a "glass ceiling" for executive positions. The authors of this article suggest that among the possible causes for this may be subtle impediments based on gender stereotypes and various perceptual processes. In particular, they focus their research on the impact of differences between an individual's self-perceptions of their leadership behaviors and the perceptions of their subordinates. The authors note that previous research<sup>1</sup> suggests that significant differences in these self- and subordinate perceptions may reduce leadership effectiveness and that reducing these discrepancies (e.g. through improved feedback) can lead to positive results such as self-insight, personal development, improved communication between leader and subordinate, and greater leadership effectiveness. In the current research, 'organizational context' and 'self-monitoring' are studied to see how they impact on discrepancies in perceptions of leadership behavior.

**Organizational context** refers to the extent to which a workplace traditionally had significant numbers of women managers. The authors contend that in organizations that have had few women managers, more male role-oriented norms develop. These are slow to change and the "femaleness" of current female leaders would be more noticeable to others in the organization. The authors explain the importance of this with the "actor-observer" model<sup>2</sup> which suggests that individuals (in this case the manager) are strongly influenced by situational factors and cues in the environment. Other peoples' perceptions are less impacted by these factors and more related to characteristics of the manager. Thus, the manager's self-perceptions would be expected to be less closely matched to those of subordinates in industries or companies in which there had been fewer women managers.

**Self-monitoring** refers to the extent to which individuals are sensitive to external cues and norms and adjust their behavior in response. While high self-monitors may be more willing to adapt their behaviors to fit the situation, their greater awareness of external cues and organizational norms, coupled with a tendency to focus more on what their superiors as opposed to subordinates expect, may lead to a disconnect between how they see themselves as behaving and how their subordinates perceive them. Low self-monitors are more focused on internal cues

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<sup>1</sup> Malloy & Janowski, 1992; Carroll & Schneier, 1982; Cummings & Schwab, 1973; Atwater & Yammarino, 1992; Bass & Yammarino, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Jones & Nisbett, 1972

for their behavior. Thus, high self-monitors may have greater discrepancies between their own and others' perceptions of their leadership behaviors.

To investigate leadership behaviors, the task and people aspects of leadership were studied using "initiating structure" and "consideration" scales. **Initiating structure** is a leadership behavior focused on task accomplishment with the leader supplying necessary direction, coordination and control of the task. **Consideration** is focused more on leadership behaviors of encouraging and supporting subordinates and their relationships. Since structure is often perceived to be a more masculine role and consideration more feminine, the authors expected that there will be greater discrepancies in perceptions of initiating structure behaviors.

In this study, subjects were either from education (Vice Principals from a large urban school district) or from industry (managers from banking, accounting, manufacturing organizations). The former was seen as traditionally having more women in managerial roles while the latter was seen as the less traditional managerial role for women. Women were identified and males with comparable jobs were picked. In total there were 31 male and 33 female Vice Principals and 18 male and 16 female managers. Each filled out questionnaires on their own leader behaviors<sup>3</sup> and a self-monitoring scale<sup>4</sup>. Two to four subordinates for each person were identified and filled out the initiating structure and consideration scales about the leader. Discrepancy scores were calculated by taking the absolute difference between the leader's scores and the average of subordinate scores. People were classified as high or low self-monitors using the directions in the self-monitoring scale.

As expected, the authors found from their analysis that there was no relationship between leadership behaviors and organizational context or self-monitoring for men. For women, there were several relationships. Women had greater discrepancies between their perceptions of initiating structure behaviors than those of their subordinates when 1) they were high self-monitoring versus low self-monitoring and 2) when high self-monitors were in industry rather than in education. The later supports Riordan et al's (1994) suggestion that such women were also less effective as leaders. There were greater discrepancies between perceptions of consideration behaviors for 1) women in industry versus education and 2) for women versus men.

There are several important implications of this research for practitioners:

1. A leader may feel that it is appropriate to provide increased structuring in a particular situation and tries to do so, but the subordinates may not experience it that way. The other side of this is that a leader might feel that less structuring would be appropriate, but again the behavior is misperceived. Both of these situations reflect the importance of discrepancies between leader and subordinate perceptions. Increasing the congruence between supervisor and subordinate perceptions is a useful goal.
2. The leadership style of women who are high self-monitors, especially in more traditional organizational cultures, is likely to be significantly misperceived by subordinates. In

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<sup>3</sup> LBDQ, Form XII, Cook et. al. 1981

<sup>4</sup> Gangestad and Snyder, 1985

addition, there is other evidence that with greater discrepancies in perception, subordinates experience the leader as less effective. Thus, women may wish to address these misperceptions. One way might be to behave in even more extreme ways (e.g. even more structuring); however, there are obvious costs to such overcompensation.

3. The authors note that there may be less upward feedback for women (especially in traditional organizations and/or for high self-monitors) that could help reduce the discrepancies between their own and their subordinates' perceptions. Such feedback is important in increasing self-awareness, which is an important leadership skill especially at the executive level of organizations.
4. In training programs on leadership, it may be worthwhile to help women understand that taking on more masculine roles (as may be expected by the norms in the organization) may also increase the salience of gender, which could have an unintended negative consequence on perceptions of her effectiveness as a leader.

A limitation of this particular research noted by the authors is that it was not possible to tell if a greater discrepancy meant that the leader was perceived by subordinates as using more or less initiating structure and consideration than the leader perceived of herself. It is hoped that future research will investigate this interesting question. It would help clarify if a high self-monitor, who by definition is more adaptive to a changing environment, is in fact more or less effective. It would also speak to the implications for practitioners raised above.

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