# The Effect of Followers' Behavior on Leader Efficacy

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*This study tested the effect of followers' behavior on a leader's self-efficacy to lead (leader efficacy). A paired sample T-test and independent sample T-tests were conducted on data collected from 121 MBA students at four different universities in the United States. The results showed that leader efficacy was affected by follower behaviors. The more positive follower behaviors were, the more respondents indicated they would experience an increase in leader efficacy. The more follower behaviors were negative, the more respondents indicated they would experience a decrease in leader efficacy. Moreover, ethnic and gender backgrounds moderated the relationship between follower behaviors and leader efficacy. Specifically, negative follower feedback affected the leader efficacy of Hispanic leaders less than Caucasian leaders. Negative follower feedback also affected the leader efficacy of male leaders less than that of female leaders. In contrast to our predictions, positive follower feedback resulted in no significant differences in leader efficacy between male leaders and female leaders, or between Hispanic leaders and Caucasian leaders. The findings of this study provide evidence of a type of upward influence that has rarely been studied and may have implications for developing competent leaders, building positive leader-follower relationships, and promoting leadership diversity.*

Leadership scholars have traditionally focused on a unilateral leader-follower relationship emphasizing the influence of leaders over followers, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Herold, 1977; Hollander, 1978; Mowday, 1978, 1979; Porter, Allen & Angle, 1981; Wortman & Linsenmeier, 1977). More recently, an increasing number of studies have redirected their research attention toward the upward influence of followers on leaders, explaining upward influence from several different perspectives. For example, Atwater (1988) found that subordinates' trust and loyalty to their leaders induce more supportive leader behaviors. Deluga and Perry (1991) found that subordinates' performance and ingratiation behaviors improve the leader member exchange quality. Dvir and Shamir (2003) examined the influence of follower developmental characteristics on leadership style. Kipnis, Schmidt and Wilkinson (1980) identified some tactics used by subordinates to influence their bosses. Finally, certain other studies addressed factors that predict followers' persistence at upward influence attempts (Maslyn, Farmer & Fedor, 1996; Schilit & Locke, 1982).

An examination of the studies on upward influence reveals that most of them focus on follower influence on leader behavior and attitudes. Few studies address the relationship between follower behavior and leader traits such as self-efficacy to lead or how influence from followers affects a leader's self-efficacy to lead (leader efficacy). Recent work by Hannah et al. (2008) on leader efficacy proposed a model of bidirectional relationships among leader efficacy, follower efficacy, and collective efficacy. However, little discussion was dedicated to the mechanism through which follower's affect leader efficacy.

The topic of self-efficacy is important because studies consistently demonstrate that self-efficacy in performing certain activities correlates with motivation and effort levels in the activity and eventually the outcome of an action (Bandura, 1997). From a leadership perspective, leader efficacy has a significant impact on the focus of a leader's attention, risk taking tendency, goal setting and choice of influence tactics, all of which eventually lead to different group outcomes (Bandura, 1997; Chemers, Watson & May, 2000; Hollenbeck & Hall, 2004; Luthans & Peterson, 2002; Wood & Bandura, 1989). A leader's efficacy level has widely been considered to be one of the traits that distinguishes a leader from a non-leader and an effective leader from an ineffective leader (Hollenbeck & Hall, 2004; Kolb, 1999; Luthans, 2002). Self-efficacy is an important mechanism of the social learning process (Bandura & Cervone, 1983), through which individuals learn behaviors through cues from the environment (Bandura, 1997). Followers make up a large portion of a leader's social environment. The effect of behavioral cues from followers in response to a leader's behavior may be a significant influential force on leader efficacy.

Having recognized the importance of research on followers' impact on leader efficacy, Hannah et al. (2008) called for empirical studies on the topic. In response to that call, the goal of this study is to examine the effect of followers' behavior on leader efficacy. The interaction between leaders and followers varies by gender and among populations with different cultural backgrounds (Antonakis, Avolio & Sivasubramaniam, 2003; Collinson, 2005; Eagly, 2005; Hofstede, 1984; Kets De Vries, Vrignaud & Florent-Treacy, 2004; Kolb, 1999; Mohr & Wolfram, 2007; Rosener, 1990). Therefore, this study will examine how the relationship between followers'

behaviors and leader efficacy is affected by gender and ethnicity.

## Hypotheses Development

*Leader Efficacy*

Perceived self-efficacy is defined as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). People who believe they have the ability to successfully lead others can be said to possess high leader efficacy (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Hannah et al., 2008; Paglis & Green, 2002). Bandura (1997) recognized four sources of self-efficacy: enactive mastery, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and physiological and affective state. Social persuasion is the influence exerted upon individuals by means of verbal comments or behavioral cues. It provides a person with an opportunity to observe his/her own performance or ability through the eyes of others. Mellor et al. (2006) found that leader efficacy is related to encouragement and persuasion from others.

The effectiveness of the social persuasion process depends to a large degree on the expertise and credibility of the sources of the persuasion (Bandura, 1997). Although followers in most cases do not have more expertise than a leader in the latter's task domain, they are one of the most credible sources of social persuasion about their leader's competence. They help define the roles of follower and leader. By accepting or rejecting a leader's influence, they transmit a strong message to the leader about his or her authority (Hollander, 1978) as well as his or her competence as a leader.

Positive verbal comments, as well as compliance and cooperative behaviors from followers, confirm the leader's role as a leader and the followers' role as followers. When these positive verbal or behavioral cues are sensed, leader efficacy improves. On the other hand, when negative attitudes of followers are conveyed by negative comments or non-compliant behaviors and those attitudes are sensed by a leader, leader efficacy will likely falter. These arguments suggest the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1*: Leader efficacy will be higher when follower feedback is perceived as being positive and lower when follower feedback is perceived as being negative.

*Cultural Factors*

As previously mentioned, the interaction between leaders and followers is affected by gender and cultural factors (e.g. Collinson, 2005; Hofstede, 1984; Kolb, 1999). Hofstede (1984) identified four cultural dimensions based on the result of a series of surveys administered to tens of thousands of respondents worldwide: individualism versus collectivism; power distance; uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity versus femininity. Among the four cultural dimensions, the dimension that is directly related to the leader and follower relationship is power distance (Cohen, Pant & Sharp, 1995).

According to Hofstede (1984), "the power distance between a leader (B) and a subordinate (S) in a hierarchy was described as the difference between the extent to which B can determine the behavior of S and the extent to which S can determine the behavior of B" (p. 72). In a high power distance culture, people more readily accept an unequal distribution of power. They believe leaders and followers are fundamentally

different and people with power have the right to enjoy privilege. They believe that power itself precedes good or evil and its legitimacy is irrelevant (Hofstede, 1984). In contrast, in a low power distance culture, people believe inequality in society should be minimized. They view leaders and followers as essentially the same and believe they should have equal rights. From their point of view, the use of power should be legitimate and subject to the judgment between good and evil (Hofstede, 1984). Hofstede's (1984) description of the difference between high power distance cultures and low power distance cultures implies that followers' opinions will be valued more in a low-power distance culture than in a high power distance culture. Consequently, a leader's behavior should be more affected by a follower's behavior in a low-power distance culture than in a high-power distance culture as followers' opinions of leader competency, expressed through their words and behaviors, are valued more by leaders in low-power distance cultures. As a result, followers in low-power distance cultures are likely to have a larger impact on leader efficacy.

Hofstede's (1984) data showed that Mexican culture, as well as the cultures of countries in Latin America and South America, were extremely high in power distance, whereas U.S. and European cultures were relatively low in power distance (Hofstede, 1984). Considering that the family background of a majority of the Hispanic population living in the U.S. has roots in Mexico and other Latin American countries, it can be estimated that the U.S. Hispanic population, particularly in the U.S. Mexico border region, has maintained many elements of Hispanic culture as well as cultural connections to Mexico and the rest of Latin America. Consequently, Hispanic populations living in the U.S. may be higher in power distance than Non-Hispanics living in the U.S. Based on the above arguments, we hypothesize:

> *Hypothesis 2*: The relationship between leader efficacy and follower feedback will be affected by the leader's ethnic background, such that Hispanic leaders will experience less of a change in leader efficacy than Caucasian leaders when receiving positive or negative follower feedback.

*Gender*

There has been a great deal of discussion regarding the effect of gender roles on leadership effectiveness. Gender roles refer to the shared societal expectations of behaviors by males versus females regarding communion and agency (Eagly, 1987). Communion refers to the motivation behind behaviors such as forming social relationships, getting along with others, and maintaining harmony and affiliation. Agency involves the motivation to pursue power and control over others; and emphasizes assertiveness, self-efficacy, and mastery (Bakan, 1966). Social role theory (Eagly, 1987) argues that women tend to carry the communal role, whereas men tend to carry the agentic role. Multiple studies have found that female leaders are more likely to demonstrate democratic, supportive, and gentle behaviors, whereas male leaders are more likely to demonstrate assertive, controlling and confident behaviors (Antonakis et al., 2003; Collinson, 2005; Eagly, 2005; Kets De Vries et al., 2004; Kolb, 1999; Mohr & Wolfram, 2007; Rosener, 1990). The results of these studies indicate that female leaders prioritize building and maintaining harmonious leader-follower

relationships. As a result, they may be more likely to pay attention to followers' verbal or behavioral cues. In contrast, male leaders were found to be more driven by the motive to control and dominate. They may be less concerned with followers' reactions than female leaders. Based on the above argument, we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 3*: The relationship between leader efficacy and follower feedback will be affected by the leader's gender, such that male leaders will experience less of a change in leader efficacy than female leaders when receiving positive or negative follower feedback.

## Methods

*Sample*

A survey was administered to MBA students enrolled in business-related courses at three universities in the Southwest U.S. and one university in the Midwest U.S. Approximately 52%, of the sample (n = 121 students) were female; about 49% were Hispanics and 40% were Caucasians. Their mean age was approximately 32 years. Close to 80% of the respondents reported having leadership experiences in an organizational setting. The average number of years in a leader role was four years. Table 1 demonstrates this data.

**Table 1:** *Moderating Variable Characteristics*

| *Ethnicity* | *Male* | *Female* | *Missing* | *Total* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hispanics | 28 | 31 | 0 | 59 |
| Caucasian | 24 | 24 | 0 | 48 |
| African American | 1 | 3 | 0 | 4 |
| Asian | 1 | 4 | 0 | 5 |
| Other | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| Missing | 2 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| Total | 57 | 63 | 1 | 121 |

*N*=121

*Measures*

All the items in the survey were created specifically for this study. A pilot study was conducted with undergraduate students to examine validity and reliability of the scales and the scales were revised based on the results. Each item describes a situation characterized by a specific follower behavior directed toward a leader. Respondents were asked to indicate how likely their confidence as a leader would change in each of those situations. A seven-point Likert scale was used with responses ranging from "less confident" to "more confident".

The word "confident" rather than "efficacy" was used in the survey. This word choice was based on two considerations: 1) the word "efficacy" is not familiar to people who have not received special training in psychology, and 2) the conceptual meanings of the words "efficacy" and "confidence" are very similar (Hannah et al.,

2008; Yukl, 2002). "Positive Follower Behavior" was measured by 5 items. The internal reliability for these items was .79. "Negative Follower Behavior" was measured by 6 items. The internal reliability for these items was .74. (The survey questions are listed in the appendix.)

*Statistical Methods*

A paired sample T-test was used to compare the means of respondents' opinions on a leader's change in confidence in the situations of positive and negative follower behavioral cues. Independent samples T-tests were used to compare female versus male as well as Caucasian versus Hispanic respondents' opinions on change in leader confidence when receiving positive or negative feedback from followers.

## Results

*Confirmatory Factor Analysis*

A series of factor analyses were conducted to test whether items measured the constructs they were intended to measure. The factor loadings of all the items on the target factors were higher than .50. A factor analysis of all the items showed there were no cross-loading problems. These results showed that the items measured the intended single constructs, meeting the requirement of unidimensionality for creating a summated scale (Hair et al., 2006). The summated scales were created by averaging scores of the items measuring the constructs.

*Hypothesis Testing*

The paired comparison T-test (Table 2) showed that when follower behavior toward the leader was positive, respondents' confidence as a leader was higher (Mean = 6.20) than when follower behavior toward the leader was negative (Mean = 3.24). The mean difference is 2.95 ($p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 1.

**Table 2:** *Change in Leader Efficacy in the Situation of Positive versus Negative Follower Behavioral Feedback*

| *Conditions* | *Mean (Change in Leader Efficacy)* | *Mean Difference* |
|---|---|---|
| Positive Follower Behavioral Feedback | 6.20 | 2.95** |
| Negative Follower Behavioral Feedback | 3.24 | |

$N = 121$, ** $p < .01$.

The result of the independent sample T-test comparing Hispanic and Caucasian respondents (Table 3) showed that compared to Caucasian respondents, Hispanic respondents' confidence as a leader was less affected by negative follower behavior (mean difference = .45, $p < .05$). There was no significant difference between Hispanic and Caucasian respondents' confidence as a leader in situations characterized by positive follower behavioral cues. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was partly supported.

**Table 3:** *Change in Leader Efficacy between Caucasian and Hispanic Respondents*

| *Conditions* | *Mean (Change in Leader Efficacy)* | *Mean Difference* |
|---|---|---|
| Positive Follower Behavioral Feedback | 6.20 | 2.95** |
| Negative Follower Behavioral Feedback | 3.24 | |

*N* = 121, ** $p < .01$.

The result of an independent sample T-test comparing male and female respondents showed that in situations of negative follower feedback (Table 4), male respondents' confidence as a leader was less affected than female respondents' (mean difference = .44, $p < .01$). No significant difference was found for male and female respondents' confidence as a leader in situations characterized by positive follower behavioral cues. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was partially supported.

**Table 4:** *Change in Leader Efficacy between Male and Female Respondents*

| *Condition* | | *Male Respondents (N = 57)* | *Female Respondents (N = 63)* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Positive Follower Behavioral Feedback | Mean (Change Leader Efficacy) | 6.07 | 6.32 |
| | Mean Difference | .25 | |
| Negative Follower Behavioral Feedback | Mean (Change in Leader Efficacy) | 3.46 | 3.02 |
| | Mean Difference | .44** | |

*N* = 121, ** $p < .01$.

## Discussion

*Findings*

The study supported the hypothesis that leader efficacy would fluctuate with followers' behavior. The more followers were cooperative and respectful, the more respondents indicated they would experience an increase in leader efficacy. The more followers were uncooperative and defiant toward a leader, the more respondents indicated they would experience a decrease in leader efficacy. Self-efficacy has been viewed as an important trait for a successful leader (Bandura, 1997; Bass, 1990; Boyatzis, 1982; Howard & Bray, 1988). The findings of this study on the close relationship between leader efficacy and followers' behaviors suggest the importance of the leader-follower interaction on a leader's effectiveness and success.

Of course, this study did not exhaust all the possible factors influencing leader efficacy. An example would be the group's task performance. In addition to social persuasion, another important source of self-efficacy is enactive mastery (Bandura, 1997). As Bandura (1997) discussed, the experience of successfully completing a task

would boost self-efficacy in performing a similar task in the future. In the case of leadership, a high group performance level could be perceived as a mastery experience by a leader which would likely help elevate leader efficacy. Thus, group performance may moderate the relationship between leader efficacy and followers' behaviors toward the leader. However, group performance could also be related to follower behaviors. Cooperative follower behaviors could more likely produce high level group outcomes and vice versa. More studies are needed to reveal the full picture of the effect of follower behaviors on leader efficacy.

The effect of follower behavior on leader efficacy to lead might also vary with the level of leader-member exchange (LMX) in the group (Graen, 1976). According to LMX theory, a leader experiences different kinds of interaction with in-group versus out-group followers (Graen, 1976; Graen & Schiemann, 1978). The relationship between a leader and in-group followers is characterized by mutual trust, support, and formal/informal rewards, whereas the relationship between a leader and out-group followers is characterized by low trust, a lack of support, and an absence of rewards (Graen, 1976). A leader might receive opposite behavioral cues from in-group followers and out-group followers. How a leader would respond to positive and negative feedback at the same time and how leader efficacy would be affected by social persuasion of a mixed nature are questions for future research.

As was predicted, the leader efficacy of Hispanic respondents was affected less by negative behavioral cues from followers than that of Caucasians. This result may be due to cultural differences regarding the power distance dimension. Influenced by a culture that is high in power distance, Hispanics may have a relatively high regard for the authority and power of a leader over followers. From that perspective, they may pay less attention to followers' behavioral cues than would Caucasians, who may be more likely to view leaders and followers as having equal status.

The finding regarding the difference between Hispanic and Caucasian respondents to negative follower behavior contributes to the study of the relationship between leaders and followers with different ethnic backgrounds. Past research on leadership diversity found that race and ethnicity affects followers' expectations and perceptions of leader behaviors, the quality of the leader/follower communication process, as well as job satisfaction, commitment to the group, group cohesiveness, and group evaluation for both leaders and followers (Dorfman, 1996; Riordan & Shore, 1997; Tsui, Egan & O'Reilly, 1992; Wesolowski & Mossholder, 1997; Zenger & Lawrence, 1989). Given that leader efficacy affects the leader's behavior toward followers (Bandura, 1997; Hollenbeck & Hall, 2004), a change in leader efficacy to lead would be expected to play an important role in the interaction process between leaders and followers. Change in leader efficacy in response to negative follower behavior among people with different ethnic backgrounds might be an explanation for the effects of ethnicity on leadership processes and outcomes.

The results of this study also showed that the leader efficacy of females was more affected by negative follower feedback than males, indicating that female leaders may rely more on the people around them for feedback regarding their leadership effectiveness. This finding provided a certain level of support to the argument maintaining the communal role of female leaders (Eagly, 1989; Johnson et al., 2008).

Our study's findings suggest that male and female leaders perceive and respond differently to feedback from their social environment and that female leaders' confidence may correspond more to how they are respected and supported by their followers than male leaders.

The finding regarding the difference between the male and female respondents' reaction to negative follower behavior may have implications concerning the underrepresentation of female leaders in organizations. Any unfavorable societal prejudice against women as leaders may effect a women's' perception of her leader efficacy through followers' behaviors. Since self-efficacy is an important predictor of leader emergence and effectiveness, this could contribute to the rate at which women are given leadership opportunities and their success rate when in a leadership position.

Surprisingly, the results did not show a significant difference in leader efficacy between the Hispanic and Caucasian respondents or between male and female respondents in situations of positive follower feedback. One possible explanation for this result is the self-serving bias. Self-serving bias happens when people attribute failure to external factors and success to internal factors (Kelley, 1972). When people receive positive feedback, they are likely to take credit and experience positive feelings without examining the credibility of the source. Therefore in the situation of positive follower feedback, Hispanic and Caucasians, as well as males and females would experience a similar increase in leader efficacy. However, when people perceive negative feedback, they tend to examine the credibility of the source, thus bringing their cultural and/or gender backgrounds into the judgment process.

*Limitations*

This study focuses on a leader's change in leader efficacy when facing different follower behaviors. As mentioned previously, this change might be affected by group performance outcomes. Future research should incorporate the factor of group performance outcomes into the study design.

This study was survey-based. Respondents were asked to project their change in confidence as a leader given certain hypothetical situations characterized by positive or negative follower behavior. It would be valuable to directly measure leaders' change in leader efficacy after the actual experience of receiving positive or negative follower feedback. Future research should consider utilizing field studies or experimental designs.

*Conclusion*

For years, downward influence from a leader to followers has been the central topic in research on leader-follower relationships. The influence that followers exert on a leader has been neglected or downplayed in comparison. The findings of this study suggest that follower behaviors could affect leader efficacy, which in turn could contribute to a leader's effectiveness. Recognition and understanding of the importance of follower behaviors has significant implications for developing competent leaders, building positive leader-follower relationships, and improving group performance.

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## Appendix: Questionnaire

The following statements describe some situations that are fairly common to leaders. Use the scale provided below to indicate how likely each of the following situations would affect your confidence in your leading ability. (Choices range from 1 – less confident, 4 – no change, to 7 – more confident on a seven-point Likert scale)

I would likely feel _____ about my leading ability when group members show great respect for me.

I would likely feel _____ about my leading ability when group members follow my directions.

I would likely feel _____ about my leading ability when group members cooperate with me.

I would likely feel _____ about my leading ability when group members skip group meetings.

I would likely feel _____ about my leading ability when there are many free riders in the group.

I would likely feel _____ about my leading ability when group members make a strong effort in group work.

I would likely feel _____ about my leading ability when group members voluntarily work overtime on group projects.

I would likely feel _____ about my leading ability when group members show no excitement or enthusiasm for group tasks.

I would likely feel _____ about my leading ability when group members express doubts about my leading ability.

I would likely feel _____ about my leading ability when few group members respond to my invitation for input to help solve a problem.

I would likely feel _____ about my leading ability when my performance as a leader is rated low by group members in a 360 degree performance evaluation.