

ROLE MODELS IN LEADERSHIP AND SELF PSYCHOLOGY ACCORDING TO KOHUT

Jürgen Mühlbacher

Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration, Austria

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to identify attributive constructs of leadership and look at them from a critical perspective. First we will have a look on the self psychology according to Kohut (1996). Then leader role models created by subordinates are examined in detail. The theoretical basis for this empirical study is provided by attribution theory. Empirical role models for leaders are investigated from the perspective of attribution theory, and the relationships between the perceptions of leaders and subordinates – as well as their effects on satisfaction with leadership styles – are examined. Finally, these results are compared with Kohut's findings in order to establish a psychological basis for the leadership role models recorded here and suggestions for a better arrangement of leader-subordinates relationship within companies will be made.

INTRODUCTION

Up to now, work on leadership theory has mostly been subdivided into theories of characteristics and of behavior, with a view to creating contrastive inventories. Depending on whether they took the properties of the situation into account, they have also been divided into universal and situation-based leadership theories (Steyrer 2002). However, little attention has been paid to the relationship between leaders and subordinates, to the psychological bases of acceptance and subordination or to the characteristics attributed to leaders themselves (Neuberger 2002, Staehle 1999, Steyrer 2002). Therefore, with the exception of behavioral approaches or social-cognitive constructs, most leadership theories also forego psychological argumentation for the value of their findings. The stated objective of this paper is to investigate attributive perceptions of leadership and to provide possible explanations based on Kohut's self psychology (1996).

SELF PSYCHOLOGY ACCORDING TO KOHUT

Kohut's self psychology is essentially based on the success and failure of transfers. According to Greenson, psychoanalytical transfers are generally a repetition or renewal of an old object relationship, in other words the projection or shifting of old feelings and communication/perception patterns from a person in one's own past onto another person in the present (Greenson 1995). The best-known type of transfer is probably the projection of the relationship between parents and children onto contact with new people, a transfer which has also established itself in the world of work in the form of transaction analysis (Berne 1967).

Kohut's self psychology is also based on the success and failure of parent-child relationships. Kohut assumes that children vacillate equally between two poles in development: The first is referred to as the “grandiose

self", in which childhood illusions place children in the center of all activity and cause them to wish to be loved and honored by the parents for "grandiose achievements". The other pole is the "idealized parent imago", which is regarded as omnipotent and all-controlling, and the perfection of which the child would like to share by means of merging. In the development process, the child thus always goes back and forth between the desire for acknowledgement and love for his or her own achievements (or his/her personality) and the idealization of the parents by wishing to become exactly as they are (Kohut 1996). It is not until the "optimal failure", in which the parents give only certain measures of acknowledgement in order to encourage the development of a realistic personality image, and point out their own limits and weaknesses to illuminate their limited omnipotence (without causing complete disillusionment), that the child is able to develop a healthy self (Steyrer 1995). Transposed onto the relationship between leaders and subordinates, this principle allows us to construct a relationship of partnership in the workplace.

Naturally, this development can also take paths which deviate from the ideal. It is especially important to present the personality patterns which arise from these deviations, as those patterns will be used later to explain empirical role models. These patterns can be described by the following two character types (Kohut/Wolf 1980):

- The "mirror-hungry personality", which – due to a lack of recognition for the grandiose self in childhood – insatiably seeks confirmation for its own greatness and constantly feels compelled to stand in the spotlight, as the person would otherwise suffer from an inner feeling of worthlessness and an insufficient sense of self-worth
- The "ideal-hungry personality", which – after an excessively early disillusionment in childhood – tends to fill an internal void by merging with other idealized figures and is disappointed again and again by the non-fulfillment of set ideals.

According to Kohut and Wolf, both types described above can definitely still be considered in the range of "normal personality deviations" and are in no way to be considered pathological (Kohut/Wolf 1980). Thus it is possible to assume real "transference errors" (as opposed to unhealthy relationships between leaders and subordinates) in the subsequent arguments of this paper.

STUDY AND ANALYSIS

In this study, the central theoretical basis for content analysis and evaluation is found in the scope of attributive perceptions. Once this scope has been presented in detail, the specific survey and evaluation methods used in this study will be explained. Then the real typical role models used empirically here are presented, and attributive assignments are again examined critically from the perspective of Kohut's self psychology.

Modeling the Scope of Attributive Perception

The model created below is mainly based on the findings of the Ohio State Study, the Managerial Grid approach taken by Blake/Mouton (most recently in 1992) and Bass' (1986) theory of "transformational leadership". In this way, the scope of attributive perceptions can be expanded to include the dimension of "concern for values" (on the basis of "concern for production" and "concern for people" from the Managerial Grid).

Before the Ohio State Study's findings were released, it was widely assumed that leaders can either behave in a task-oriented or people-oriented manner. Thus, for example, increased attention to task orientation (concern for production) would necessarily come at the expense of employee orientation (concern for people) in this bipolar model. The conclusion that these are two independent dimensions made it possible for the first time to view leadership behavior in a more comprehensive manner, an approach which ultimately culminated in Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid Model (most recently in 1992). From that point on, the objective of contemporary leaders was to cover both aspects in their leadership behavior.

Bass' concept of transformational leadership, another bipolar model, is also used in developing our scope of attributive perceptions. This approach distinguishes between transactional and transformational leadership. Transactional leadership is defined here as a process of social exchange limited to conditional reinforcement (i.e., rewards for desirable behavior and punishments for deviations from this desirable behavior) and to management by exception (Avolio/Bass 1995). Ultimately, this leadership style is merely concerned with negotiating and monitoring social contracts. Because these rewards and punishments can be of a material as well as a social nature, this leadership behavior can be considered to represent unclearly delineated forms of task and employee orientation. Therefore, transactional leadership is covered in the synthesis of these two dimensions.

Transformational leadership, on the other hand, can be viewed as a separate pattern of leadership behavior. According to Bass, transformational leadership consists of charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass 1990). Aside from individualized consideration, which is essentially a type of relationship orientation, it is primarily a matter of communicating a vision or mission, creating pride among employees, motivating them, breaking up set patterns of thought, and earning respect and trust (Bass 1990). Such manners of behavior go far beyond concern for production or concern for people, and are indeed taken into account in perceptions of leadership behavior. Burns defines the goal as follows: "that leaders and subordinates mutually raise each other to higher levels of motivation and morality" (Burns 1978). Jointly internalized ideological values are considered to be the basis of morality in the relationship. Under the charismatic leadership approach, such concern for values enables a joint moral distinction of right and wrong, thus making sense and creating intrinsic satisfaction when observed (Klein/House 1995).

These three independent dimensions of concern for production, people, and values are further subdivided in this empirical examination according to the concept of a "continuum of impressions of leadership" according to Steyrer (1995). This approach is based on the idea that the characteristics and behavior types attributed to leaders can not only be seen as representative prototypes but can also lead to hyper- or hypo-representativity, depending on positive or negative reinforcement. Positively reinforced deviations are referred to as "social dramatization", whereas negative reinforcement is defined as "social reversion" (Steyrer 1995). This allows representative characteristics to be categorized; for example, dramatizing attributions of "passionate" to "fanatical" can point to hyper-representative forms, whereas the reversive attributions of "tolerant composure" or "indifference" point to hypo-representativity (Steyrer 1995). This allows the conclusion that judging observers have a continuum of value-based attributes at their disposal in the application of leadership-related representativity heuristics, with intensifying forms occurring in one direction and reversive forms in the other, on the basis of prototypical expectations. Intensifying forms appear as hyper-representativity, reversive forms as hypo-representativity.

On the basis of these considerations, or, more precisely, through this combination of the three dimensions of the leader's scope of behavior (concern for production, people, and values) and the three possible assessment categories (hypo-representativity, representativity and hyper-representativity), nine possible attributive categories of perceptions result for the ways in which employees see their superiors (Table 1). At the same time, this table is also the basis for content analysis and evaluation of the empirical data.

Table 1: Nine categories of attributive perception

hypo-representative concern for production	representative concern for production	hyper-representative concern for production
hypo-representative concern for people	representative concern for people	hyper-representative concern for people
hypo-representative concern for values	representative concern for values	hyper-representative concern for values

Survey and evaluation methods

In line with the primary research question posed in this paper – the search for attributive role models in leadership – I used the "critical incident" method and interview guidelines to question employees about the leadership behavior of their direct superiors over the previous year. In addition to describing strongly motivating or strongly demotivating situations, which were subsequently evaluated using linguistic text analysis, I also asked about the employees' satisfaction with each perceived leadership style.

In order to create a theoretical sample, the interviewees were selected with a view to ensuring the greatest possible heterogeneity. The main selection criteria applied were divergent social factors among the interviewees, such as gender, age, level of education, industry and duration of employment at the particular organization. In accordance with the guidelines of quantitative social research, the size of the theoretical sample was determined by the interest of findings. Thus the investigation is considered to be completed once new surveys stop yielding new findings (Bortz/Döhring 2002). In this case, this was attained at a sample size of $n = 10$ (734 passages of the interviews).

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and then evaluated using linguistic text analysis. The objective of linguistic text analysis (Früh 1991) is to group those terms which correspond to the dimensions of concern for production, concern for people and concern for values, on the basis of the previously developed scope of attributive perceptions. In line with historical leadership research, I used the perceived characteristics and behaviors – in this case verbs, adverbs and adjectives in context – mentioned in the interviews as lexemes. In addition, leadership actions referred to as hypo- and hyper-representative were also contrasted for the sake of differentiation, thus yielding the previously mentioned 9-field matrix of attributive perception (see Table 1).

Once each lexeme was assigned to a category, frequency distributions were calculated for the overall category scheme to mirror the perceptions and attributions of employees regarding their respective superiors. Frequency distributions were calculated by comparing the number of lexemes from one category in a single interview to the total number of lexemes in that interview. These distributions are referred to as empirical role models below, as they reflect the perceived individual leadership style of each superior. Similar role models were clustered in 3 different categories on the basis of satisfaction with leadership styles. It was thus possible to distinguish motivating, indifferent and demotivating role models. Finally, Kohut's self psychology was used to analyze these models from a psychological perspective.

EMPIRICAL ROLE MODELS

Even at the outset, the question arose as to the possible clustering of empirically defined role models. For this reason, I also posed questions regarding satisfaction with leadership styles in addition to asking about critical incidents (which were later used for the analysis of attribution theory role models). This value was then used for clustering as well, which yielded three different categories of empirically verifiable role models: those of motivating, indifferent and demotivating leaders. While motivating leaders were characterized by employee satisfaction levels (with regard to their leadership styles) ranging from 1 to 1.5 (on a 1 to 5 scale), which is also accompanied by increased individual work commitment, indifferent leaders only showed a value of 2 to 3. Employees generally respond neutrally to the latter type. Finally, the subordinates of demotivating leaders rate satisfaction with their leadership styles at only 3.5 to 5, to which employees respond by lowering their level of commitment. The empirically established real types representing each category are presented below. (For a more detailed description of the method and empirical results, see Mühlbacher 2003.)

Motivating leaders

This real type, which is composed of the relative frequencies mentioned above, nearly constitutes an archetype of motivating role models. The peak value of 48.28% in the representative concern for people category, followed by 20.69 % in representative concern for production, reflects the ideal image of motivating leaders. Only in representative concern for values did this category yield a low result of 6.90%. Hypo-representative concern for production showed a fairly high value at 13.79%, and the hyper-representative aspects of concern for people and concern for values were each 5.17%.

Table 2: Real type of a motivating leader

categories	hypo-representative	representative	hyper-representative
concern for production	13.79 %	20.69 %	0.00 %
concern for people	0.00 %	48.28 %	5.17 %
concern for values	0.00 %	6.90 %	5.17 %

The main characteristics of motivating leaders are their interest in and constant encouragement of their employees, a well-developed feedback culture and ongoing sharing and retrieval of current information on "the state of things". Regarding values, these leaders are perceived as open and honest. Their working style is characterized by delegation internally and by strong customer orientation externally. As they have precise knowledge of their employees' individual abilities and skills as well as their current workloads (a result of support and information activities), the behavior of such leaders is characterized as ambitious for the company as well as challenging and motivating for the employees. The only negative category in this profile is the chaotic working style of the leader, which is perceived as hectic, confused, disorderly and superficial. Hyper-representativity in the areas of concern for production and values reflects an amicable professional relationship to employees, which is not regarded as exclusively positive due to social dramatization.

When these results are analyzed on the basis of Kohut's self psychology, it becomes clear that motivating leaders demonstrate behavior similar to an "optimal failure". They support a positive transfer of the anachronistic parent-child relationship by allowing mirroring to a limited extent in the form of high employee motivation, and by reducing idealization by means of error-tolerant concern for production and low concern for values. Employees receive sufficient feedback and acknowledgement to cultivate their self-image. At the same time, these leaders' high level of social competence is a source of high employee satisfaction, while professional competence is pushed into the background. These findings are in no way new and can be found in Schwarz (1974) or Katz (1974), for example. What is new, however, is the explanation of these effects on the basis of a psychoanalytical approach, which also permits the analysis of the following deviating development paths.

Indifferent leaders

Similar to the previous model, this role model also shows nearly ideal typical characteristics of indifferent leaders. These subjects were predominantly perceived to lead with representative concern for production, which manifests itself in their profile with the peak value of 43.90%, followed by representative concern for people at 19.51% and representative concern for values at 14.63% (which was equal to hypo-representative concern for production). The characteristics of hypo-representative concern for people and hyper-representative concern for production and values were only 2.44% each, thus they can generally be neglected in our analysis.

Table 3: Real type of an indifferent leader

categories	hypo-representative	representative	hyper-representative
concern for production	14.63 %	43.90 %	2.44 %
concern for people	2.44 %	19.51 %	0.00 %
concern for values	0.00 %	14.63 %	2.44 %

Indifferent leaders base their behavior mainly on a high level of concern for production. Thus these leaders seem interested in the task at hand and committed to carrying it out, but they do not succeed in closing the gap created by a lack of direct leadership. In the eyes of the employees, all leadership functions (such as motivation, participation, feedback and conflict management) are carried out, but the leaders' high level of concern for production leaves too little time for the ultimate realization of these functions. Accordingly, the values of the leaders in question are described as creative and stimulating with regard to tasks, but only balanced with regard to employees. The category of hypo-representative concern for production also includes a lack of objectives, a lack of delegation, or inadequate delegation.

Here we see a first deviation from the ideal development of the relationship between leaders and subordinates: The leader continues to show a high level of concern for production and neglects concern for people. This reduction in the need for mirroring leads to a hunger for mirroring among employees. This manifests itself in the form of increased efforts to attain recognition, which, however, this type of leader does not provide. Therefore, not only does a neutral attitude arise in respect to the leader, but the employees' energy and activities are also shifted to areas outside of their professions, similar to a "leisure time-oriented attitude of preservation". The development path below, however, appears to be far more problematic.

Demotivating leaders

This final role model shows peak values in hypo-representative areas. The strongest of these is typical for all demotivating leaders – and thus also their dominant leadership style – is hypo-representative concern for people, which stands out in this profile at 44.44% and is followed by hypo-representative concern for values at 27.78%. Concern for production is extremely low at 9.26% on the hypo-representative side and 7.41% on the representative side; it is even exceeded by representative concern for people at 11.11%. Demotivating leaders thus seem to demonstrate a strongly hypo-representative concern for people, coupled with a generally low level of concern for production.

Table 4: Real type of a demotivating leader

categories	hypo-representative	representative	hyper-representative
concern for production	9.26 %	7.41 %	0.00 %
concern for people	44.44 %	11.11 %	0.00 %
concern for values	27.78 %	0.00 %	0.00 %

Let us now examine the leadership behavior of these subjects. The most conspicuous point is their communicative behavior, which is strongly characterized by the withholding of information and by targeted misinformation. In addition, these leaders attempt to create tension among employees or to intimidate them deliberately with false information, which causes anxiety and mistrust especially among young employees. Employees with years of experience in the organization will already know this behavior and respond to it with mere ignorance. When confronted about their behavior, these leaders react dismissively and shy away from conflict. Their behavior relating to the concern for values is labeled as "externally defined" and "focused only on their own benefit". In their behavior, this is all reflected in flimsy rationalizations and the denial or ridiculing of facts. Regarding concern for production, these leaders only concern themselves with what is absolutely necessary and are perceived to be overloaded, uninformed and inactive.

The behavior of demotivating leaders described here, especially their high level of concern for values, completely disillusioned those employees who can not or do not wish to share those values. Thus the conjecture seems reasonable that this brings about a division into an "inside" and an "outside" group: While the former perceives these leaders to be very positive and motivating, the latter assigns their entire behavior spectrum to the hypo-representative area and shows a high level of dissatisfaction with perceived leadership styles. These employees see that their ideals can not be fulfilled in such a context, which leads to the "hunger for ideals" predicted by Kohut; this hunger can only be satisfied by orientation based on people outside the department or by changing jobs.

CONCLUSION

The discussion above shows how attributive role models can be established and thus made accessible for investigations of everyday leadership practice. However, as shown above, this can also be carried out on the basis of a psychologically oriented process. Kohut's school of self psychology enables a well-founded analysis of the relationship between leaders and subordinates by means of a "detour" into the realm of transference. In addition to "optimal failure", the development paths of mirroring transference and idealizing transference were examined. Therefore, role models derived by means of attribution theory not only enable an expansion of our perspective, but also a psychoanalytical basis for the relationships observed. This offers a good opportunity to examine the phenomenon of leadership with increasing attention to its psycho-social roots.

Concerning management in practice, these results offer two suggestions for a better arrangement of the leader-subordinates relationship within companies: Individual goals of employees cannot be reduced to the amount of their salary, their career or job security (Milkovich/Boudreau 1997). Psychological needs for affiliation, acknowledgement, and growth are of higher importance. Therefore leaders have to work on each individual leader-subordinate relationship. They have to show "individualized consideration" (Avolio/Bass 1995) to increase satisfaction and performance of their subordinates. This can be attained by two means: (1) Management development tools have to be used in regular time intervals to improve social and communicative competences of managers. Expert knowledge and technical competence are not sufficient to perform well as a leader. (2) Communication tools on a personal level – like MBO or individual career talks – have to be institutionalized to improve the information flow between management and employees. This will lead to higher identification, realistic estimates of individual capabilities, and acknowledgement of personal achievements, which allows building a partnership in the workplace, ensuring the improvement of satisfaction and performance within any company.

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