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Seeing and Being a Leader: The Perceptual, Cognitive, and Interpersonal Roots of Conferred Influence

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Are leaders intelligent or unintelligent, outgoing or introverted, understanding or insensitive, cooperative or inflexible, strict or undisciplined? Group members answer these questions by drawing on their beliefs about leaders. These implicit leadership theories, or ILTs, are intuitive assumptions about the naturally occurring relationships among various traits, behaviors, and characteristics associated with leadership, and evidence suggests that they often influence who emerges as a leader and how that leader is perceived and evaluated. Each person's ILT, depending on past experiences and cultural background, may include some idiosyncratic elements, but most people expect leaders to be dynamic, conscientious people with superior intellectual, social, and motivational skills. ILTs generally help followers process information efficiently, but ILTs can distort perceptions and interfere with identification of the best leader for a given situation. Biases against leaders who are women, for example, may be rooted in followers' implicit assumptions about men, women, and leadership. Because leaders' endorsement by followers depends on how followers perceive them, skilled leaders tailor their self-presentations to match their followers' ILT-based expectations.

In 1968 Henry Kissinger did not think that Richard M. Nixon, the newly elected U.S. president, could ever succeed as a world leader. Kissinger was

confident that he knew what it took to be a good leader, and those preconceptions did not mesh with what he knew about Nixon's intellect, skill, and personality (Kissinger, 1979). But when they met in a private conference, Nixon disconfirmed Kissinger's long-held expectations. They discussed trade relations, nuclear weapons, and the war in Vietnam, and by the end of the conference, Kissinger changed the way he thought of Nixon: "I was struck by his perceptiveness and knowledge so at variance with my previous image of him" (1979, p. 12). Later Kissinger would agree to join his staff when Nixon asked him.

This historic encounter highlights the cognitive side of leadership. Leadership is a profoundly interpersonal process whereby cooperating individuals influence and motivate others to promote the attainment of group and individual goals, but perceptual and cognitive processes sustain these social outcomes. A cognitive approach to leadership recognizes that people are active processors of information about the social situations they face. When people meet for the first time, they quickly appraise each others' potential as leaders, and within the first few minutes those with more potential are permitted to exert more influence over the group than others. When viewers watch politicians engage in debate before elections, they intuitively appraise each candidate's strengths and weaknesses. In corporate settings employees take note of their bosses' words and deeds, and over time come to a relatively stable conclusion about their strengths and weaknesses. Few of us ever have the chance to meet a president-elect, but all of us actively seek, process, and store information about the leaders who surround us.

What mental processes lie at the core of people's perceptions of leaders? We explore this question here, with a particular focus on the cognitive mechanisms that perceivers rely on as they formulate their impressions of each leader and potential leader they encounter. As sages have long realized and researchers have recently confirmed empirically, people do not passively absorb information from each new situation they face. They are, instead, mentally prepared for the task of social perception, with each new experience observed and interpreted within a context provided by preexisting expectations, goals, plans, preconceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and so on. Kissinger, for example, gathered information about the president-elect during their conversation, but his previous experiences with leaders had written deeply on his mind's model of leaders and leadership. Here we briefly review the way that intuitive mental models about leaders and leadership work to shape both the way people perceive those who influence them and the way leaders present themselves to those they lead (see, too, Schyns & Meindl, 2005).

SEEING LEADERS: IMPLICIT LEADERSHIP THEORIES (ILTS)

Most people think that they will know a leader when they see one, because they intuitively assume that leaders possess certain qualities. Are leaders intelligent or unintelligent? Outgoing or introverted? Task-oriented or indecisive? Cooperative or Machiavellian? Strong or weak? People readily answer these questions by drawing on their *implicit leadership theories* (ILTs), which are their tacit beliefs about the traits, qualities, and characteristics leaders possess. These beliefs are described as *implicit* because these intuitive assumptions are usually unrecognized rather than stated explicitly. These beliefs are called *theories* because, like theories developed by experts and scientists, these cognitive frameworks include law-like generalities about leadership and more specific hypotheses about the types of qualities that characterize most leaders.

What qualities, skills, and characteristics are part of people's ILTs? When Eden and Leviatan (1975) first examined this question by asking people to describe a leader they had never met, they discovered that people's ratings converged on certain common qualities pertaining to structuring the work to be done (e.g., maintains high standards, offers to solve problems) and consideration for the relations with and between members (e.g., is friendly and easy to approach, encourages teamwork). Lord and his colleagues, across a series of studies, consistently found that people's ratings in a variety of settings coalesce around these same themes of initiating structure for the task and concern for relations (e.g., Rush, Thomas, & Lord, 1977). In our own research (Nye & Forsyth, 1991) we, too, have found that people associate leadership with instrumentality (analytical, task-oriented, problem-solving) and social sensitivity (egalitarian, positive, extroverted).

ILTs also include more specific, trait-level qualities, such as integrity and competence (Chemers, 1997), decisiveness (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005), and willingness to shape group goals and norms (Den Hartog, House, Hanges, Ruiz-Quintanilla, & Dorfman, 1999). Lord, Foti, and De Vader (1984), in their analysis of people's perceptions of leaders in various domains (e.g., military, political, educational, media, minority), identified ten key qualities: dedicated, goal-oriented, informed, charismatic, decisive, responsible, intelligent, determined, organized, and verbally skilled. Offermann, Kennedy, and Wirtz's (1994) research on this issue revealed sensitivity, dedication, tyranny, charisma, attractiveness, masculinity, intelligence, and strength as important qualities in ILTs. Epitropaki and Martin (2004) refined the list of Offerman et al. (1994) through confirmatory factor analysis and structural equations modeling. They identified four key leadership qualities—sensitivity, intelligence, dedication, and dynamism—that were relatively consistent across

time and contexts, as well as some qualities that are associated with poor, ineffective leadership (tyrannical and masculine).

The culture where one lives also influences the kinds of qualities that become embedded in one's ILT, but despite these culture-centered nuances there is a striking degree of agreement across people worldwide. Researchers in the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) Program, for example, asked 15,022 managers in 62 different countries around the world to describe desirable and undesirable characteristics in a leader (House & Javidan, 2004). They then identified those qualities that nearly all of the individuals agreed were critical by calculating indexes of agreement for each country: visionary (foresight, AIplans ahead), inspirational (dynamic, positive, encouraging, confidence builder, motivational), integruous (trustworthy, just, honest), team-focused (informed, communicative, coordinator, team builder), diplomatic (win-win problem solver, effective bargainer), administratively competent, decisive, and performance-oriented.

The GLOBE researchers also identified some qualities that were specific to a particular country or region. For example, whereas most people surveyed expected effective leaders to be charismatic (visionary/inspirational) and team-focused, in some cultures these qualities were stressed more than in others, and these variations reflected broader cultural differences in emphasis on power relations, tolerance of uncertainty, and masculinity (e.g., Hofstede, 1980). Highly collectivistic societies, for example, favored charismatic leaders more so than more individualistic ones. Cultures that displayed higher levels of gender egalitarianism and lower levels of uncertainty avoidance stressed participative, team-focused leadership. Those individuals who lived in cultures marked by hierarchical power structures and greater levels of elitism were more tolerant of self-centered leaders who were status conscious and formalistic. The GLOBE researchers also discovered that certain specific traits were highly valued in some cultures but dismissed as harmful to leadership in others. Risk taking, for example, was considered a quality that enhanced leadership effectiveness in some countries, but in others this quality was viewed as a quality that would disqualify a person from a leadership role. Other culturally contingent ILT traits included ambitious, cunning, elitist, intuitive, micromanaging, procedural, ruling, self-effacing, subdued, and willful (Dorfman, Hanges, & Brodbeck, 2004).

ILTs are also sensitive to the specifics of a given situation. Lord et al. (1984) point out that some leadership traits, such as persistence, likability, and charisma, are considered to be essential qualities only in particular contexts, such as politics, business, or sports. Moreover, people's ILTs appear to augment and discount specific qualities to take into account the kinds of qualities a

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leader will need to deal with a particular leadership setting. When people are asked to describe the qualities a person needed to be successful as a CEO of a large company and those that are needed for skillful management or supervision of a department, their ILTs shift accordingly to take into account these variations in situational demand (Den Hartog & Koopman, 2005). Similarly, different qualities are expected in a newly appointed group leader in comparison to one who has occupied this role for some time (Kenney, Schwartz-Kenney, & Blascovich, 1996).

Finally, evidence suggests that individual differences also play a role in leadership perceptions. Men's and women's ILTs differ to some degree, in that sensitivity is less central and power more central in men's ILTs (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004). Children are more likely to emphasize task-related competences as key determinants of leadership, more so than concern for people (Ayman-Nolley & Ayman, 2005). Individuals who are leaders themselves stress dynamism (dynamic, strong, energetic) in their ILTs more than those who are not leaders of a group or organization (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004). Moreover, our ILTs change over time, as we have more contact with leaders (Lord & Maher, 1991).

These studies suggest that ILTs, like any cognitive process occurring in a complex social situation, are highly sensitive to interpersonal context and the dynamic interplay between participants. However, even though ILTs often shift to fit a particular setting, in most settings members expect that their leaders will have certain qualities that set them apart from others. In general, they expect that leaders will be dynamic people who are conscientious about pursuing group goals by drawing on an ample supply of intellect, enthusiasm, interpersonal skill, and integrity.

ILTS AND LEADERSHIP APPRAISALS

People would have considerable difficulty navigating a range of social settings if they did not have an accurate conception of the qualities to consider when identifying a leader. Without ILTs, followers would be unable to identify whose influence they should accept or situations where *they* should step forward into a leadership role. Asch (1946, p. 258), a pioneer in the field of person perception, explained:

We look at a person and immediately a certain impression of his character forms itself in us. A glance, a few spoken words are sufficient to tell us a story about a highly complex matter. We know that such impressions form with remarkable rapidity and great ease. Subsequent observations may enrich or upset our first view, but we can no more prevent its rapid growth than we can avoid perceiving a given visual object or hearing a melody.

Thus, ILTs are extensions of often-practiced habits of perception that we use, on a daily basis, to make sense of our social world.

In his information processing theory of leadership perceptions, Lord suggests that ILTs provide followers with a psychological standard or *prototype* they can use to distinguish between effective and ineffective leaders and leaders and followers (Lord, 2005; Lord & Maher, 1991). If, for example, a follower's ILT maintains that a prototypical leader should be bold, energetic, and daring, then she will likely rate an enthusiastic leader more positively than a low-key consensus builder. In contrast, if the follower believes that a leader should be considerate and reflective, then he will respond more positively to one who shows concern for others and deliberates extensively before making a decision. As the *prototype-matching hypothesis* suggests, followers evaluate their leaders and potential leaders by noting the actions and characteristics of the individuals in their group, comparing their findings to their implicit leadership theories, and then favoring those individuals who most closely match their intuitive conception of an ideal or prototypical leader (Lord & Maher, 1991).

Researchers have found support for the prototype-matching hypothesis in a number of studies using various methods. Lord et al. (1984), for example, asked people to evaluate one of three hypothetical leaders. One, the prototypical leader, displayed qualities that were congruent with most people's ILTs: he set goals, provided directive information, talked with subordinates a great deal, and identified problems that needed a solution. The second leader displayed qualities that were inconsistent with most ILTs; he admitted mistakes, paid little attention to details, was critical without reason, and withheld rewards. A third leader displayed positive qualities that were neither consistent nor inconsistent with most ILTs. This leader sought out information, clarified his attitudes, and prevented conflicts. As the prototype-matching hypothesis predicts, the prototypical leader was judged to be more effective than the atypical leader, with match to ITL explaining the majority of the variance in leadership evaluations.

We (Nye & Forsyth, 1991) extended these findings by asking followers to judge the leadership effectiveness and collegiality of an administrator with leadership responsibilities during a simulated performance appraisal review. Recognizing that different individuals' ILTs may vary in their inclusion of one trait or another, we first measured followers' beliefs about leaders using a series of adjectives drawn from Bales' Systematic Multiple Level Observation of Groups inventory, or SYMLOG (Bales, Cohen, & Williamson, 1979). Followers used the adjectives from SYMLOG to describe their own personal view of an ideal business or small organization leader, and we determined their relative emphasis on dominance (active, assertive, talkative), social sensitivity (egalitarian, positive, extroverted), and instrumental control

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(analytical, task-oriented, problem-solving). The followers were then given the annual review materials for a leader who was described, by his or her own supervisor, as hardworking, competent, and creative. For some followers these materials suggested that the leader was strong on initiating structure, but for others the review stressed the leader's interpersonal, socioemotional skills.

The prototype-matching hypothesis was supported, particularly for the socioemotional component of followers' ILTs. As shown in [A2](#)Figure 7-1, an outgoing, socioemotional leader was viewed more positively by followers whose ILTs emphasized the importance of people skills, but less positively by those whose intuitive theories did not stress this aspect of leadership. The prototype-matching hypothesis was also supported for the remaining two dimensions—dominance and instrumental control—but only for men in the study. Men who believed that an ideal leader should be dominant and high in instrumental control rated the task-oriented leader more positively than the socioemotional leader. Some of the women, in contrast, rated a leader who disconfirmed their ILTs more positively than those who confirmed their ILTs. Specifically, women who did not emphasize dominance or instrumental control rated the task-oriented leader more positively than a socioemotional one. Because the discrepancy occurred on the two masculine-oriented power dimensions (dominance and instrumental control) and not the interpersonal dimension of friendliness, women may have been reluctant to use their ILTs in these domains as guides for evaluating a relatively successful leader.

Although speculative, this explanation is consistent with other research that suggests that information about a leader's successfulness plays a key role in shaping leadership perceptions. When leaders have been successful in the past, perceivers expect them to always be successful leaders (Nye, 2005). Essentially, performance information is a key perceptual cue that allows

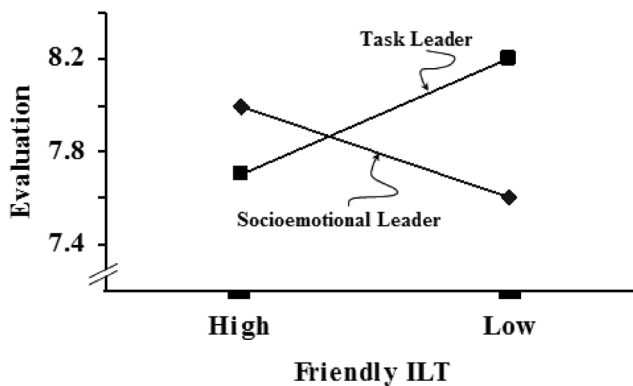


Figure 7-1

perceivers to take an important leap of faith and infer that certain leaders are good. This inference is not surprising, in that we naturally assume that a leader's primary responsibility is to meet group goals. This inferential process is often called the performance cue effect, and it is well documented in leadership research (Lord & Maher, 1991). For example, leaders of successful groups were rated as more effective and collegial than were leaders of unsuccessful groups (Nye & Simonetta, 1996, Study 1), and leaders were judged as being more responsible for group outcomes when the outcomes were positive (Nye, 2002).

ILTS, ACCURACY, AND BIAS

A cognitive approach to leadership assumes that followers are information processors who rationally gather information about leaders by using their existing implicit beliefs about leadership as a helpful guide. Yet, research and everyday experience reveal that people's choices of leaders, and their perceptions of those leaders' effectiveness, often defy logic. Unfortunately, when individuals first meet as a group and must select one individual to act as their leader, they tend to select the talkative one—even if what he or she says is not particularly clever (Mullen, Salas, & Driskell, 1989). When followers judge leaders who are women, they tend to rate them as less effective compared to men who perform the identical types of behaviors (Eagly & Karau, 2002). When voters must select a leader, they sometimes fall prey to the "Warren Harding Effect"—thinking that a handsome candidate has great leadership potential, even when he is thoroughly incompetent (Gladwell, 2005).

Thus, although implicit leadership theories can be quite helpful, allowing followers to sift through and organize a welter of information about current or future leaders, they provide this service at a cost. They can bias followers' perceptions so that they become overly sensitive to information that confirms their initial expectations and ignore information that conflicts with their initial beliefs about leaders. Kissinger, for example, knew that Nixon was a leader, so his ILT about world leaders was primed and ready to be used as a structure for incoming information. Because Kissinger's ILT included patriotism, he was ready to recognize Nixon's strong national pride because it was consistent with his expectations. Conversely, he may have forgotten characteristics that are inconsistent with his ILT; since he did not expect a famous leader to be timid or friendly, he may have forgotten that Nixon displayed these qualities. Kissinger's ILT may have even distorted his memory; as he wrote his memoirs he may have clearly remembered (confabulated) traits, characteristics, and actions that he never even observed (being tough, obsessive).

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Research provides ample evidence of the biasing effects of ILTs on perceptions of leadership. Foti and Lord (1987), for example, arranging for raters to watch a videotape of a group interaction before asking them to identify behaviors that the leader had or had not performed. As would be expected, when the leader acted in ways that matched raters' ILTs (prototypical behaviors were present or antiprototypical behaviors were absent), their accuracy and confidence levels were relatively high. However, when leader behavior violated raters' ILTs (prototypical behaviors were absent or antiprototypical behaviors were present), accuracy suffered. Raters recalled more prototypical behaviors than actually occurred, and did not recall antiprototypical behaviors that occurred. Interestingly, rater confidence was not always a reliable indicator of accuracy, which suggests that biased perceptions may be exacerbated by inflated confidence in them.

The biasing influence of ILTs on followers' perceptions and evaluations of leaders may explain continuing sex differences in leadership. Even though studies of men and women in positions of leadership reveal no convincing evidence of male superiority (Chemers, 1997; Eagly, 2007), evaluative and perceptual biases among group members persist. Both men and women, when surveyed, express a preference for male bosses. When men and women join in so-called leaderless groups, the leader who gradually emerges over time is more often than not a man. When subordinates describe their leaders, they rate leaders who are women as less dominant and less effective than male leaders. Perhaps consequently, women receive lower evaluations and fewer promotions than men even when their performance and behaviors are identical. Eagly's social-role theory suggests that people's leadership prototypes are more congruent with their assumptions about the roles men traditionally occupy (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Because women have traditionally been excluded from leadership positions, group members may be more familiar with men in positions of leadership. In consequence, group members may question the leadership ability of women because they view women "as lacking the stereotypical directive and assertive qualities of good leaders—that is, as not being tough enough or not taking charge" (Eagly, 2007, p. 4).

Do group members' ILTs, coupled with their stereotypes about men and women, contribute to their bias against female leaders? We (Forsyth, Heiney, & Wright, 1997) examined this possibility by exposing individuals with differing views about women's roles to a woman who used either a relationship-oriented leadership style or a task-oriented leadership style. The female leader worked with two men and two women on a series of group and individual tasks in a laboratory setting. The leader, who was selected from among the group members on the basis of her scores on a leadership test, was in actuality a confederate of the experimenter. In some groups she enacted a task-oriented leadership style, but in others she focused on the

socioemotional side of leadership. Each group included two individuals who were conservative in their attitudes toward the role of women in contemporary society and two more liberal-minded individuals.

As the prototype-matching hypothesis would suggest, individuals who possessed more traditional stereotypes about women judged their leader more harshly than individuals whose attitudes were less stereotyped. Conservative participants liked their leaders less than the more liberal group members, and they felt she would be harder to work with. Conservative participants were also more negative than the liberal participants when the leader enacted a relationship-oriented style. They felt such leaders were friendlier, but they nonetheless gave higher effectiveness ratings to the task-oriented leader. Moreover, men exhibited somewhat more prejudice towards the leader.

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Savvy leaders, recognizing the importance of being seen as having the qualities that qualify them to be leaders, carefully manage the impressions they create in others' eyes. They do not simply let their followers draw their own conclusions about their strengths and weaknesses. Instead, they usually regulate their outward actions in order to project a particular image. As Calder (1977, p. 202) wrote, "to teach leadership is to sensitize people to the perceptions of others."

The inconsistency between ILTs and people's stereotypes about men and women, however, suggests that women are caught in a self-presentational bind when they take on the leadership role. For men the leader image-maintenance process is a relatively straightforward one; the skills and qualities that make up most people's ILTs are consistent with their stereotypes about men. Women, in contrast, must choose between enacting behaviors that are consistent with their followers' ILT or their stereotypes about women.

We (Forsyth, Schlenker, Leary, & McCown, 1985) investigated this interpersonal dilemma in a study of ad hoc groups working on a series of problem-solving tasks. The members of these groups first completed a face-valid leadership inventory and learned that they had been selected to be the group's leader on the basis of their responses to the inventory. We told some leaders that their scores indicated they were task-oriented leaders who would be instrumental in helping the group reach its goals. We told others that they were relationship-oriented leaders who were skilled in helping group members work well together. We told still others that they had both of these skill sets. (When subsequently asked if they considered themselves to be task or relational, the leaders' responses indicated that they accepted the feedback as valid.)

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After receiving the feedback about their leadership skills but before actually getting down to work, the leaders were told that to simulate groups that had been working together for a longer period of time they would be given the chance to exchange personal information about themselves with the other members. The exchange of information would be highly structured, however, with leaders using a series of adjectives to describe themselves to their followers. The adjective list paralleled those used to measure ILTs in other research, and included such qualities as powerful, influential, dominant, skilled (dynamism), self-disclosing, open, moving toward others (social sensitivity), and fair, truthful, responsible, and pleasant (social responsibility).

How did these leaders' present themselves to their followers? Unexpectedly, they did not emphasize the strengths that the leadership inventory told them they possessed. Instead, their claims conformed to traditional expectations based on sex roles rather than leadership roles. The men described themselves as task-oriented, even when they were told that they were socially sensitive and responsible. The women, in contrast, described themselves as socially sensitive and responsible, but not as task-oriented (even when they knew that they were, in fact, highly competent task leaders). Moreover, those leaders who were told that they were task-oriented were more confident when evaluating their chances of success as a leader. Those who believed that they were relationship-oriented leaders doubted their ability to lead their groups.

These findings suggest that ILTs and stereotypes about men and women can, in some cases, act as interpersonal self-fulfilling prophecies that guide the self-descriptions and overt self-presentational claims leaders make to their followers. Men, even when they believe they are socially skilled, may nonetheless describe themselves in ways that match the demands of the masculine sex role. Women, in contrast, may discount their task-oriented abilities in their self-presentations by displaying qualities that are more consistent with the feminine sex role. These self-presentations, paired with the prototype-matching process described earlier, result in men being favored as leaders rather than women.

ILTS AND THE EYE OF THE FOLLOWER

The strong impact of ILTs on followers' perceptions raises an intriguing question: Which came first: leaders' traits and actions or followers' beliefs about leaders' traits and actions? For many years researchers who wanted to know how leaders actually behaved did not ask the leaders to describe their own actions; they assumed that the leaders' reports would be too biased and possibly self-aggrandizing. Instead, they turned to those they thought

would be a more objective source of information: followers. In the Ohio State University Leadership Studies, for example, investigators asked members of various groups to indicate how many of these behaviors their leaders displayed. They then narrowed down the original nine types of behaviors to two essential components: consideration and initiating structure (Halpin & Winer, 1952). Other researchers using similar procedures confirmed Ohio State's basic findings, all the while assuming that followers' reports of what their leaders do were excellent proxies for what their leaders actually did. To know what a leader did on a daily basis, one needed only to ask subordinates to describe their leaders' actions, and then tally the results.

Studies of ILTs, however, suggest that leadership may be in the eye of the beholder—the follower—rather than in the actions of the leader. That is, when researchers ask subordinates to describe their leaders, these ratings may reflect the subordinates' implicit leadership theories more than their leaders' actions. Why do individuals, even when judging leaders in remarkably different contexts that should demand widely divergent types of skills, abilities, and actions from leaders, nonetheless tend to report that their leaders are task-focused and relationship-oriented? This is because followers' implicit leadership theories include these two components (Eden & Leviatan, 1975; Schyns & Meindl, 2005). Thus, consistent with the distinction between task and relationship that is revealed in past research, leadership may rest more in group members' minds than in leaders' actual behaviors. Some researchers go so far as to define leadership as a perceptual process rather than a behavioral one; as a social construction, existing solely in the minds of the social thinker. Lord and Maher (1991, p. 11) go so far as to define leadership as a perceptual process rather than a behavioral one: "we define leadership as the process of being perceived by others as a leader."

Do people sometimes see leadership when none actually exists and overlook leadership when they do not expect it? Leadership is, undeniably, partly a perceptual process. People believe in leaders and in leadership, sometimes expressing more faith in the unique qualities of leaders than is warranted by reality. Consider the notion of the charismatic leader. For leaders to be considered charismatic, they must be so recognized by their followers as leaders with unique, almost miraculous, qualities. Charisma, as a concept, originally described a special power given by God to certain individuals. These individuals were capable of performing extraordinary, miraculous feats, and they were regarded as God's representatives on earth (Weber, 1946). Weber argued that charismatic leaders do not have unique, wondrous powers, but they succeed because their followers think they have unique, wondrous powers.

Similarly, Meindl's research on the "romance of leadership" suggests that people believe so strongly in the concept of leadership that they virtually ignore the influence of other potential factors and focus on leaders as causal

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agents. This romantic view of leadership ignores both the limited influence wielded by most leaders and the many other factors that influence a group and its dynamics (Meindl, 1995; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985). In her research, Emrich (1999) found that this faith in leaders applies to potential leaders as well as incumbents. Particularly when they were members of turbulent groups, people saw leadership potential where none existed. They exaggerated the potential of possible leaders, misremembered crucial details, recalled their future leader having performed any number of leader-consistent behaviors, and forgot any past behaviors that conflicted with their image of the person as a suitable leader. Thus, trying situations can conspire with ILTs to create leaders both interpersonally and psychologically.

SEEING LEADERSHIP AND BEING A LEADER

In the years since Eden and Leviatan (1975) coined the term “implicit leadership theory” (apparently by accident; Eden & Leviatan, 2005), the preponderance of evidence suggests that *ILTs matter*. Researchers have known for years that leadership cannot be understood by examining only the qualities and actions of the leader, for followers have a significant say in the leadership process, and their allegiance to their leader can make or break a group. Although few would accept the claim that leadership exists solely as a perception, most researchers would acknowledge the critical role that followers’ perceptions play in the leadership process. If individuals’ ILTs favor individuals who are dynamic, socially sensitive, dedicated, or just highly vocal, then people with these qualities will rise to positions of authority in the group, even when these qualities are not relevant to group needs. People will find that they are led by people they deserve, or, at least, by people they expect.

If ILTs were like actual scientific theories, individuals would discard them when they failed to explain who is and who is not an effective leader. But because they are implicit, ILTs are rarely subjected to scrutiny or revised. At the same time, social thinkers are capable of breaking out of the cognitive miser mode when properly motivated, opening up their implicit theories to revision and engaging in more complex and thorough patterns of thinking. This view explains why Henry Kissinger was able to revise his assessment of Richard Nixon and accept the president’s offer to join his administration. If he had been blinded by his ILT, he would have never been able to see that some of Nixon’s most nonleaderlike qualities were his great strengths. Kissinger’s cognitive transformation provides a standard for followers to emulate. Although they may find that they are drawn to leaders who match their ILTs, they should be aware that their beliefs about their leaders may be based on outmoded ways of thinking about the leadership process, and be

willing to give leaders who do not fit their traditional conception of a leader an opportunity to take on the role.

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