

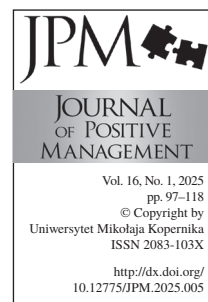
REQUIREMENTS OF FOLLOWERS ON THEIR LEADERS' COMPETENCES

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Abstract

Purpose: The study investigates the bottom-up perspective of followers concerning the competence requirements on their leaders within different contexts. It aims to fill the research gap of the under-explored perspective of the subordinates on leadership.

Design/methodology/approach: The study employs a quantitative approach using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling. The gathered data are analysed using SPSS 28 and AMOS 28. German samples in the profession fields of military, sports and economy rated within a questionnaire their own requirements on their leaders' behaviours and competences.

Findings: Results demonstrate moderate correlations between certain leadership competences and the followers' engagement. They indicate that the "Knowing-Being-Doing" of leaders is highly relevant for their acceptance by the followers. "Being" revealed to be the most decisive factor across all three profession groups. In difficult situations, the followers across the surveyed profession groups expect a leader able to take action, give orientation (vision), and to orchestrate a suitable team.

Implications/limitations: Findings highlight the "inside-out-principle" for acceptance as a leader; they relativate some leadership instruments and stress the need of followers for visions and orientation in situations outside the comfort zone. Limitations include focus on German samples, limiting generalizability, and cross-sectional method which cannot provide 100% causality.

Originality/value of the paper: This research provides novel insights into the followers' requirements on their leaders' competencies. Thus, it advances leadership knowledge with the led perspective and gives new impulses for leadership development.

Keywords: Leadership, competences, engagement, vision, identity, acceptance.

Paper type: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Leadership is a relevant ongoing topic in science and practice with a generally wide range of applications in many walks of life. There is an emerging consensus in the literature that the leadership which a leader applies is important for outcomes. In sports, for example, in soccer teams, the leaders in the role of trainers are decisive for a team's success and they are firstly replaced if the team has not been successful. In economy, good leadership makes a considerable contribution to the engagement of people to a companies' success, to a successful team, or generally to the success of an undertaking (Rosenstiel, 2013). The same is true for the military, and the Army Doctrine Publication, ADP 6/22 (2012) brings it to the point by stating:

Studying leaders in an extreme environment is like using a laboratory centrifuge; great leaders will be separated from the rest of the pack. [...] Soldiers will follow a good leader anywhere and under any conditions of battle. While many factors decide the outcomes of battles, leadership is often the most important.

Literature reveals an overwhelming amount of leadership research and an underdeveloped body of knowledge on followers' requirements. The followers' perspective on their leaders has not been in the focus of quantitative research, yet. While, in some professional fields, the display of obedience for formal reasons may work to a special extent, in elite sports and on military missions out of the comfort zone, it is an indispensable must for a leader to gain the acceptance of those who are being led (De Rue & Ashford, 2010; Weibler, 2023). This acceptance is voluntary and based on what is perceived by the led followers. For this reason, the purpose of the present study was to turn the usual top-down approach upside down and give the led persons a voice to address their requirements towards their leaders. With this approach, a new quantitative research-based piece of knowledge should be achieved that can be used in the development of suitable leader competencies.

2. Methods

Research Idea

The in-depth study was guided by five theory driven hypotheses:

Hypothesis one (H1) postulates that followers claim qualified feedback (honest, transparent, individual, informative) to improve their engagement. The claim is derived from practical experience, where unqualified general symbolic praise for matters of normality does not show any effect. Instead of that, it can even come across as ridiculous or offensive (Malik, 2001). Feedback can also have negative effects on engagement by reducing the experience of autonomy and self-efficacy when it is uninformative (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). On the other hand,

many studies evaluated that the appropriate feedback and the appropriate use of feedback can impact significant and substantial improvements in task engagement (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Robison et al., 2021). Furthermore, genuine feedback from a leader who is respected by the recipient (follower) can arise to an intrinsic reward (Shirky, 2010). In general, psychology provides a vast body of research about feedback (Fishbach & Finkelstein, 2012; Locke & Latham, 2006). The impact of feedback can either be positive or negative (Hattie & Timberlay, 2007). However, according to Fishbach and Finkelstein (2012), there is no consensus whether positive or negative feedback has more benefits, and thus, H1 approaches from the bottom-up perspective of the followers to detect which kind of feedback they require and how this is correlated with their engagement.

Hypothesis two (H2) assumes that followers require a clear articulation from their leaders of what they expect, from whom, in which time, in which quality, and for what greater long-term purpose, and thus, as a result, they engage more actively. The hypothesis is intended to approach the truth from the followers' perspective towards contracts. In general, contracts are used to regulate a wide range of interactions, activities and relationships and thus they have an impact for curbing undesirable behaviors (Eisenhardt, 1989), and they can help to communicate clear expectations (Lumineau & Malhotra, 2011) and hence boost engagement. The theory of expectancy evolves in a similar direction by stating that a contract providing a clear path to a desired goal can increase the performance (Heneman & Schwab, 1972). In contrast, when considering the Self-Determination Theory of Ryan and Deci (2000a), contracts may minimize people's freedom, and then they display less interest or even resist or sabotage the desired behavior and hoped outcome according to the Psychological Reactance Theory of Brehm (1966). H2 thus examines whether a clear contract induces positive or negative affects according to the followers' bottom-up point of view.

Hypothesis three (H3) postulates a positive correlation between the followers' recognition by the leaders and the followers' engagement (Robison et al., 2021). According to the humanistic psychology of Maslow (1943) and Rogers (1959), recognition and appreciation is an existential human need. The use of recognition/appreciation by a leader can be extremely motivating and lead to better performance (Behrendt & Reckert, 2004; Bökenheide, 2007; Heinrich & Schmidt, 2002; Rogers, 2018). According to the insights of Comelli and von Rosenstiel (2003), recognition for well performed work is a decisive factor for enhancing the engagement of followers. According to research findings of Bartscher (2001), followers show a minimized engagement if there is a non-recognitive leadership culture. In such a context, they either do not have the chance to show their potential, or they are not willing to do so (Bartscher, 2001). H3 is intended to detect what is true by the bottom-up perspective of followers.

Hypothesis four (H4) claims that the consistent perception of a leader's identity in "Knowing-Being-Doing" correlates positively with the followers' acceptance (Haslam et al., 2022). The components of a leaders' perceived identity by the followers are rooted in the three traditional domains of psychology: the cognitive (knowing), the behavioral (doing), and the affective/attitudinal (being) component (Field Manual FM 22-11, 1999; Khurana & Snook, 2004; Snook et al., 2012). The knowing is understood as the individual and collective potential to act, to solve problems, to make decision, and to engage with tasks (Geilinger et al., 2016). The doing is understood as the socially contextualized ongoing accomplishment of work (Geilinger et al., 2016). The being is understood as the individuals' personality, the self. Knowing, being, and doing manifests as persons' whole identity. According to current research-findings, the identity, that is how one sees oneself (Day & Harrison, 2007), has positive effects on engagement because people strive to embrace consistent positive identities and avoid negative identities (Epitropaki et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2015). A positive identity thus correlates with leader effectiveness (Day & Sin, 2011) and drives behavior (Brown, 2015). Under this aspect, H4 examines whether this also holds true for the followers' acceptance of their leaders, when the followers' perception of a consistent leader identity, measured by indicators of the constructs knowing, being, and doing reveals positive. H4 thus turns the usual approach where the leaders are investigated concerning who they think they are (Haslam et al., 2022) upside down and examines the requirements of followers on their leaders' in order to accept them (Day & Harrison, 2007; Offermann & Coats, 2018). Leader acceptance in turn is indispensable to exert a positive influence on the followers' performance (De Rue & Ashford, 2010), and thus, it is a basic precondition for a leader's success (Blessing & Wick, 2014; De Rue & Ashford, 2010; Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Weibler, 2016).

Hypothesis five (H5) postulates that the more difficult and/or dangerous a situation is, the more a leader is expected to decide and take action. It claims that with increasing riskiness, difficulty/dangerousness of a mission/task or situation, the followers require their leader to decide and take action, and, as a consequence, they withdraw from their autonomy wishes (cp. Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2000b). The hypothesis is driven by three existing psychological theories:

1. The neo-charismatic theory, which argues that in emergency and open situations the followers are exposed to insecurity and perceived threats, and hence they seek for a leader, who can compensate or at least minimize the associated negative reactions (Bryman, 1996).
2. The theory of psychological regression, which argues that humans strive for simplification and prefer to hand over responsibility in the event of increased stress, in crisis, in unpredictability, in insecurity, and highly complicated situations. In this case, followers search for safety and

connection. Time pressure increases this regression (Thomashoff, 2021). As a consequence, people seek for reducing complexity, and there is a popular reaction to transfer responsibility to someone else; namely followers reduce complexity by following leaders.

3. The "naive psychology" of Fritz Heider (1958) in conjunction with the attributional considerations of Kelley (1973), which postulate that people tend to organize their world towards a predictable by rallying behind an individual leader.

Participants

A total of 742 followers (522 male, 220 female) participated in the study. All participants had German nationality and were comparable in their socialization and age. The participants within the sports group were German athletes from regional level up to the national teams. In the professional field of military, followers and sandwich-leaders from squad up to the company-level of a German combat forces brigade were surveyed. In the economy sector, the investigation was carried out on employees of small and middle-class companies, within the region of the Federal State of Bavaria in South Germany. These three professional fields are selected because there the leader seems to be of utmost importance, especially in situations out of the comfort zone such as "death-or-alive" situations on military missions, relevant "win-or-loose" contexts within the field of professional sports, or unpredictable "hire-or-fire" situations in difficult economy contexts.

Design

The survey was designed as a cross-sectional empirical quantitative Web-Survey using a standardized self-administered Online-Questionnaire (Kromrey, 2001) as measurement instrument.

The study was conducted as an *ex poste facto* research. There was no experimental treatment; instead of that, the belonging to one of these groups was the already existent treatment. Thus, it was a cross-sectional non-experimental design (Gravetter et al., 2012). The questionnaire was created with the SoSci Survey online tool and the questionnaire consisted of 77 items, broken down into subsystems. Many of the Items were taken from existing approved subsystems in Open Access Repositories such as the inventory of the German "Institute for Management Innovation" and the German version of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) validated by Felfe and Goihl (2002). Some items were self-generated. In this case, the validity was based on Subject Matter Experts' (SMEs) knowledge and the professional experience of more than 40 years for each of the authors.

Figure 1. Digital technologies, tools, and methods currently used by organizations

Source: McKinsey and Company, 2018

Procedures

In the time period from October 2021 to October 2022, the hyperlink to the survey questions was directed to the targeted respondents via their email address or their social media accounts. The item format contained in the majority Rating-Scale-Questions with a 5-Point Likert scale (Eid & Schmidt, 2014; Kallus, 2016). The followers were asked to rate each item strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, or strongly agree. Additionally, there were some multiple-choice questions and one item where the participants had the possibility to add their own statement or individual remarks.

3. Statistical Analysis and Results

In order to address the study's purpose, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using AMOS 28, thus validating the posited relations of the observed variables and the underlying constructs in the measurement model and the Structural Equation Models (SEM) for the hypothesis testing of H1 to H4. For these assessments, the recommendations of Bentler (1990), Hair et al. (2009; 2012), Meyers et al. (2005), and McNeish and Wolf (2021) were used, which can be summarized by the following rules of thumb: CFI and TLI .90 equals an acceptable fitting model. CFI and TLI > .95 equals ideally values and thus a good model fit. CFI > .80 to .90 is sometimes permissible. RMSEA < .05 equals a good model fit. RMSEA .05–.08 is acceptable. According to Meyers et al. (2005), RMSEA .05–.10 can be valued as moderate. RMSEA > .10 equals a bad model fit. A CMIN/DF < 3.0 is good and < 5.0 is acceptable. According to Hu and Bentler's rule (1999), two of three fit indices should meet the minimum cut-off values (cf. also McNeish and Wolf (2021)). H5 was approached by a CFA and a frequency analysis.

Measurement Models with Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

A CFA was conducted using AMOS 28 in order to validate the posited relations of the observed variables and the underlying constructs in the measurement models. The relations were correlated between the leaders' feedback and the followers' self-rated engagement, a clear articulated contract and the followers' engagement and the followers' recognition by the leader and their engagement (Model No. 1). The perceived identity of the leader was measured by indicators to the constructs of "Knowing, Being and Doing", and this was correlated with the followers' acceptance (Model No. 2). In model No. 3, the relation between the autonomy wishes of followers and their requirements concerning their leaders' decision making in different contexts was examined. The fit of the models can be seen in Table 1. The fit indices were acceptable so the models fit to the data and thus supported the approach of the hypotheses.

Model No.	χ^2	df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	PCMIN/DF
1. Feedback, Contract & Recognition → Engagement	167.378	48	.058	.91	.85	3.487
2. Leaders' Knowing, Being & Doing → Acceptance	160.440	48	.056	.96	.95	3.342
3. Context → Decision making & autonomy wishes	47.828	7	.087	.93	.86	6.833

Table 1. Model fit indices of the proposed measurement models 1–3

Descriptive statistics (means and standardized deviations) and Cronbach's alpha coefficients of each construct of H1–H4 within the study were calculated and reported using SPSS Version 28. This was done to verify the internal consistency of each measurement scale and can be seen in Table 2.

Construct	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	No. of items	Factor loadings
Recognition	4.24	0.43	.51	3	.35–.66
Feedback	4.63	0.40	.52	3	.32–.60
Contract	3.96	0.49	.64	3	.52–.65
Engagement	3.90	0.75	.71	3	.61–.84
Knowing-Being-Doing	4.14	0.50	.83	9	.38–.80
Acceptance	3.48	0.81	.72	3	.57–.79

Table 2. Descriptive statistics reliabilities and factor loadings on subscale level

Hypothesis Test of H1–H3

After the CFA, AMOS 28 was again employed to conduct the hypothesis tests through SEM. For data analysis, the same fit indices used for CFA (χ^2 /df, RMSEA, TLI, and CFI) were utilized to assess the proposed model. As model, the Full Structural Model was used, which assesses the relationships between the constructs, but also includes the measurement indicators and errors. The standardized regression path coefficients and the proportions explained variance are illustrated in Figure 1.

The study assessed the impact of feedback, contract and recognition on the followers' engagement from the bottom-up perspective. The results of the proposed structural model with the exogenous factors recognition, feedback and contract (independent variables), and the endogenous factor engagement (dependent variable) revealed the fit indices χ^2 (df) = 155.452 (46), χ^2 /df = 3.379, CFI = .92; RMSEA = .057 and demonstrated a good model fit. The squared multiple correlation was .12 for engagement; this shows that 12% variance in engagement is accounted by contract, feedback and recognition. The SEM model reports

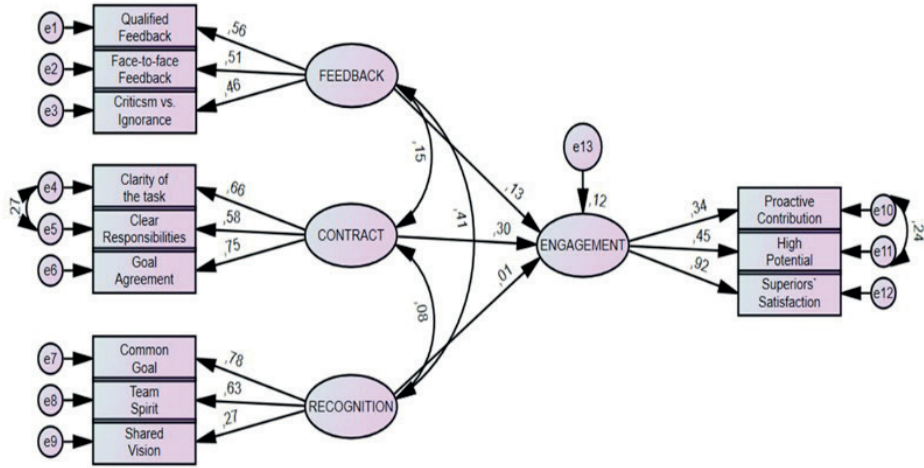


Figure 1. Factor loadings and standardized coefficients in the SEM for testing hypotheses H 1–3.

that feedback, recognition and a clear contract are in general positively related to engagement, a closer look reveals the following: The impact of Feedback on engagement was positive but only almost significant ($b = .118$, $t = .067$, $p = .080$); hence, H1 was only moderately supported. The impact of contract on followers' engagement was positive and significant ($b = .111$, $t = .034$, $p = .001$), supporting H2. The impact of recognition on followers' engagement was positive but not significant ($b = .008$, $t = .066$, $p = .906$); hence, H3 was not supported by the data.

Hypothesis Test of H4

H4 was also tested with the use of a SEM. The standardized regression path coefficients and the proportion explained variance are illustrated in Figure 2.

The SEM with the exogenous factors of the leaders' identity which was measured by the rated indicators for knowing, being, and doing (independent variables), and the endogenous factor acceptance (dependant variable) revealed the fit indices χ^2 (df) = 160.440 (48), χ^2 /df = 3.342, CFI = .97; RMSEA = .056, and thus, they were all acceptable. The squared multiple correlation was .99 for leader acceptance; this shows that 99% variance of the acceptance of a leader is accounted by his perceived knowing, being, and doing. A closer look reveals the following details: the impact of "Knowing" on the acceptance was positive and significant ($b = .208$, $t = 0.64$, $p = .001$); hence, this part of H4 was supported. The impact of "Being" on the acceptance was positive and significant ($b = .572$, $t = .133$, $p < .001$); hence, this part of H4 was strongly supported. The impact of "Doing" on the acceptance was positive but insignificant ($b = .171$, $t = .186$, $p = .359$); hence, this part of H4 was not supported.

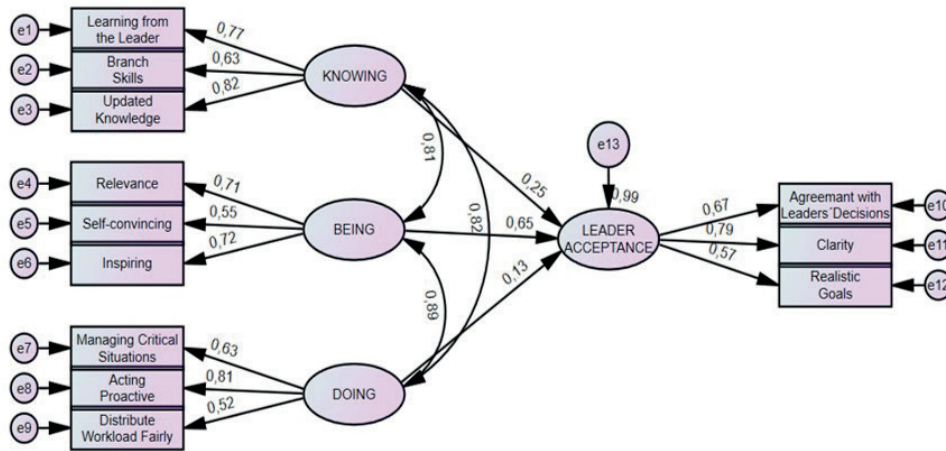


Figure 2. Factor loadings and standardized coefficients testing H4

Hypothesis Test of H5

In the first step of the analysis, a CFA measurement model (No. 3) was created, which showed a significant negative relationship between the followers' requirements for autonomy (cf. Ryan & Deci, 2000a; 2000b) and their requirements on their leaders to make decision (cf. Bryman, 1996; cf. Thomashoff, 2021). In the second step, the frequencies of decision-making requirements concerning different situation levels were analyzed and compared with those of the autonomy wishes. The decision-making requirements, as well as the autonomy requirements, were measured using three levels of situations (routine, critical, emergency). The result,s overall and within the professional groups, can be seen in Figure 3. Considering this, the tendency pattern can be detected that followers across all three professional groups tend to withdraw from their autonomy wishes the more difficult the situation is, and simultaneously, they require their leader to take responsibility and make the decisions.

Additional Findings

Considering the frequencies within the different items, it was obvious that the lack of visions was complained about the most across all three professional groups (cf. Figure 4).

The analysis of further items stressed that followers across all three professional groups show a very high rate of consensus (82%) that controlling does not boost their performance, that they expect to be criticized (96%) when they or the team do not perform in the best way, and that they dislike ignorance. Additionally, followers expect their leaders to have the competence to build suitable teams

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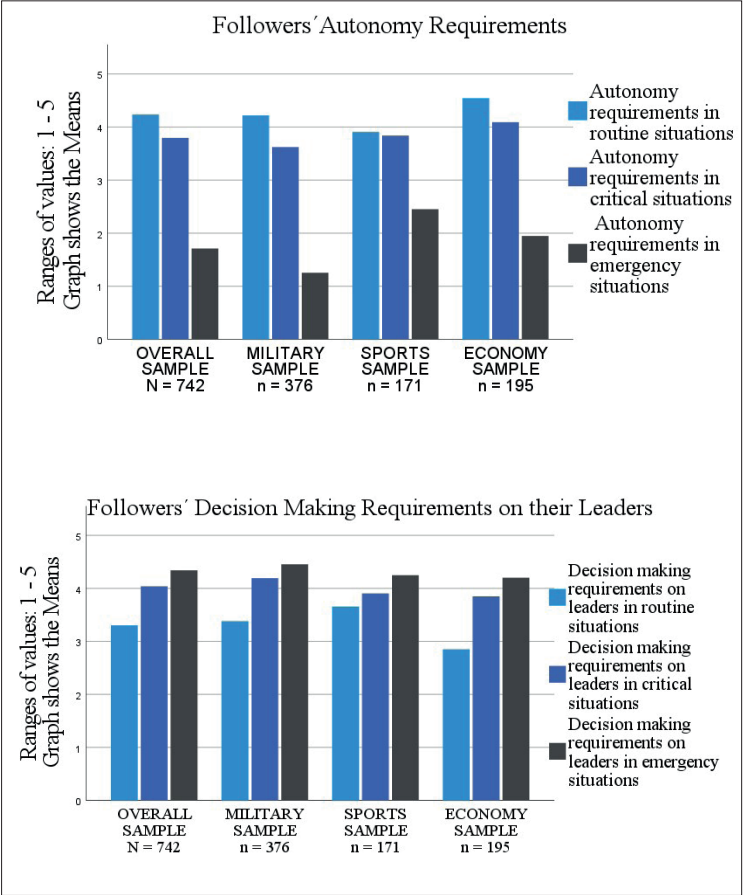


Figure 3. Autonomy wishes and decision-making requirements in different contexts

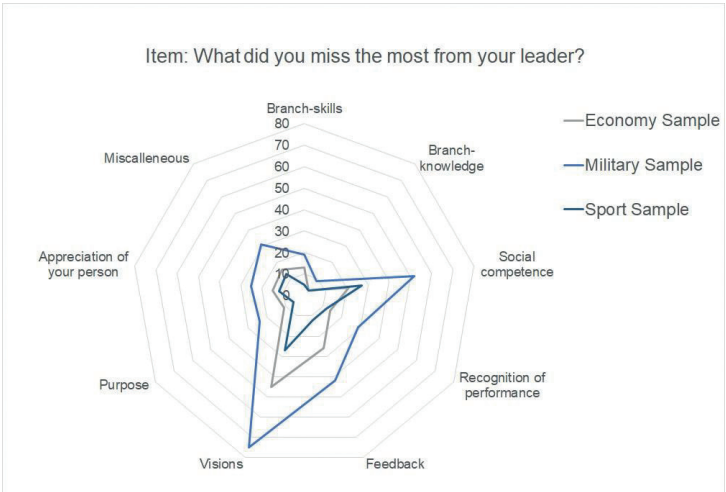


Figure 4. Most noted frequency of complaint

(88%) with a common understanding of a task (95%). Furthermore, the data showed that followers expect their leaders to contribute to projects, and to take the due of responsibility (67%). They expect their leader to be “All-In“ a project/mission or task at their level, which is seen as the coordination of substantive team resources and the overall responsibility for success but also for failure.

The fact that a majority of the followers (63%) rated themselves that they could perform better underlines that unused follower-potential exists in all three professional groups. The overall rating and the differences between the samples can be seen in Figure 5.

4. Interpretation and Discussion

According to the data, the variance of engagement is explained to 12% by the variables feedback, contract, and recognition. The variance of acceptance according to the data of the survey is explained to 99% by the leaders' knowing, being, and doing. The closer look at the data reveals detailed findings which may be interpreted as follows:

The Impact of a Contract on the Engagement of Followers

The results of the research substantiate that, from the followers' point of view, a clear contract positively influences their engagement. This may be explained by reducing uncertainty and providing a clear goal setting in expectation, time,

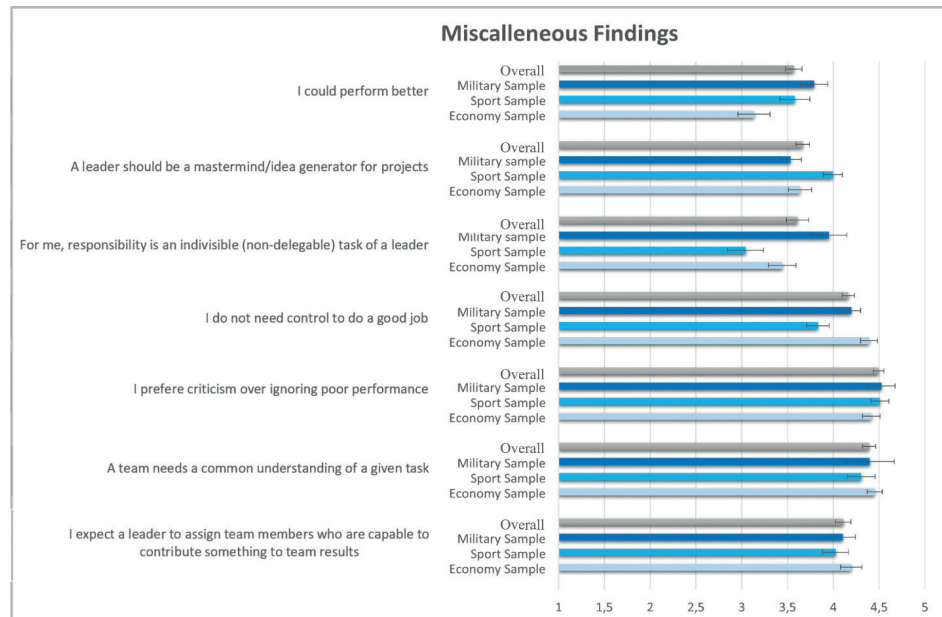


Figure 5.
Miscellaneous
findings – overall
and professional
groups rating

Notes: (1) The graphs show the means and the spread of the data.
(2) Values: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral (neither disagree nor agree), 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

and quality level. This finding corresponds with the findings from Hirsh et al. (2012), saying that a contract reduces anxiety, and thus, as a consequence, uncertainty. A clear contract allows a certain degree of orientation, which is needed in particular in uncertain times. Followers want “expectation clarity” in what is their distinctive and expected contribution to a team result, a given mission or a product, and then, they work on it without the need of being controlled. In this respect, followers prefer performance standards which enable themselves, the colleagues, the teammates, and the superior(s) to evaluate and validate fairly, based on a contract instead of arbitrariness and/or favouritism or injustice. A clear contract regulates interactions, activities, and relationships top-down but also bottom-up; therefore, it has a regulation function, an orientation function, but also a kind of protection function against unpredictable situations and/or dysfunctional leadership. These achieved insights are supported by the “Köhler Effect” (Köhler, 1926; Köhler, 1927; Witte, 1989; Witte, 2001), which states that by making individual performance visible and measurable to others, there can be an enormous improvement. In this respect, an unambiguous contract which makes the followers’ individual performance and contribution clearly measurable, influences the processes of motivation gains. As a conclusion, this study showed that from bottom-up perception, a contract has explanatory power for followers’ engagement and thus H2 is verified and explained.

The Effect of Leaders’ Feedback on the Engagement of Followers

The hypothesis test via SEM revealed a surprisingly weak regression coefficient and a p-value of .08. This is approaching the significance value of .05; thus, the hypothesis was only moderately verified. This result goes along with the meta-analysis from Neubert (1998), which also showed that superiors’ feedback has only an impact of 17% on the performance. This result generally indicates that the leader’s feedback does not have the often-described major impact on the engagement of the followers. As there is consensus in science that feedback has in general impact on engagement (Belschak & den Hartog, 2009; Ilies & Judge, 2005; Robison et al., 2021; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1997; Trope & Neter, 1994), it is apparent that there must be another kind of feedback which motivates and drives the engagement of followers. In this respect, the data showed that the feedback from a work result is scored also very high. Considering the four main functions of feedback, which are the (1) information function, (2) the motivational function, (3) the social function, and (4) the identity formation function (Rettler & Göll, 2010; Weibler, 2020), a possible explanation for the low positive link between the leaders’ feedback and the followers’ engagement can be found in the fact that a working result substitutes to a certain extent the leaders’ feedback. In particular, within the professional groups of economy and sports, the measurable working or competition results show the real and objective visible performance.

Considering this, the low importance of the leaders' feedback can be interpreted in the direction that the objective working results or, in sports, the objective ranking lists of competitions are automatically performance feedbacks, and as such, they have the potential to substitute the feedback of the leader (Weibler, 2020). In this respect, a leader must be aware that their feedback also requires to meet the above-mentioned feedback functions when used as leadership instrument in order to give qualified feedback. Based on the data, it must be noted that followers require an honest individual informative face-to-face feedback instead of general symbolic praise or a superficial feedback ritual with general statements. 95% of the 742 respondents rated to prefer critics over unqualified or no feedback (ignorance). According to previous findings, also repetitive and standardized tasks need less feedback (Weibler, 2023), which could also be a part of the explanation for the low impact of leaders' feedback.

In summary, with the data of this study, a moderate positive relationship of feedback to engagement is approved and followers across all age groups require face-to-face feedback that means the presence of the leader and communication competence and skills. The survey also revealed that the leaders' feedback may be substituted by a task, mission, or competition and its results. From these insights, it can be derived that the engagement of the followers has many reasons and causes, it is multifaceted, and the feedback of the leader is only one facet out of many, and thus, the leaders' power by their feedback should not be overestimated. Maybe, it is more important for a leader not to demotivate. It is more important to provide and communicate a vision, a "what for" as pull-factor instead of well-intended motivational feedback words and speeches. The study also showed that followers across all three investigated professional groups dislike to be controlled; they want to be led but not controlled, and they dislike ignorance. This is in line with the theory of Kälin and Müri (1998) stating that ignorance is the worst kind of behavior that a superior can display, because neither positive nor negative feedback is mentally almost not to be endured by the subordinates and leads to their demotivation and to mental and physical disorders in the long run.

The Effect of Leaders' Recognition on the Engagement of Followers

Recognition shows surprisingly no significance and an extremely low regression weight. Within the professional group of economy, the analysis results can be interpreted in the direction of Rettler and Göll (2010) that the recognition by the teammates and colleagues may be of higher importance for followers than the one of their leaders. Additionally, they do not want to run into danger of liking-based favoritism and thus harm the relatedness to the peer-group or team (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) due to envy or injustice. Also, the self-recognition, which is supported by good working results and the acceptance within a team, may count more for a follower than the superiors' recognition. Apart from that,

followers may have distrust in the leaders' competencies to evaluate fairly the individual performances or their individual contribution to a team result, in particular when a leader is rarely present.

The majority of the respondents in the economy professional group consisted of workers and employees. Thus, it can be assumed that they may do repetitive and/or routine work, which minimizes the expectation or requirement for special recognition by the leader for matters of normality (cf. Malik, 2001).

Within competitive sports, the recognition and the wish to be admired is a significant motivator (Ridder, 2018), but the recognition of the leader is substituted by the official ranking list of a competition, and this goes hand in hand with the recognition by the media, by the fans, by the sponsors, and by the social recognition of the public. The official result in a competition is already the recognition which causes respect or even admiration by rivals, team mates, fans, publicity, media, etc., and thus, the importance of the leaders' recognition is shrunk.

In the professional group of soldiers (within combat forces), it is military education of subordinates to function as a member within a team, and hence, the requirement for individually recognition by the superior (leader) is minimized and less existent.

Considering the reality, it is observable that the strong desire and *thirst* for recognition is more present by superiors, sandwich-leaders, experts, and, in particular, by narcissistic persons who strive for prestige, status, and success (Fischer & Stahl, 2014, Geißler et al., 2007; Ridder, 2018), whereas simple followers at the very end of hierarchies have realized to be replaceable persons, and they are used to simply accomplish their working assignments. Furthermore, special recognition of individuals within a team has an undermining effect to the team performance.

The Effect of Leaders' Knowing, Being, and Doing on Followers' Acceptance

The way to become a superior is, in most cases, determined by other higher superiors in relation with actions, networking, and/or qualifications. That is, a superior or head of an organization is made by other higher superiors. A leader instead is made by the followers through their acceptance and their voluntarily followership (De Rue & Ashford, 2010; Weibler, 2020; Weibler, 2023). A leader is, therefore, less a commander who practices command and control; rather, they are a holder of "following" and loyalty based on acceptance (De Rue & Ashford, 2010; Peters, 2015b; Weibler, 2020). Leaders need acceptance by the followers, otherwise they only practice headship. A component for this acceptance is the perceived leader identity that is the perceivable synopsis of his knowing, being, and doing.

From the analysis of the data, it is evident that the acceptance of a leader by his followers is explained by the variables knowing, being, and doing to 99%, with the highest regression weight on “being”. This is more than two times the second strongest factor “knowing”, and it stresses the dominant influence of “being”. In general, the study presented that followers are not that superficial as it is often assumed. More than that they are able to look behind masks of “posers”, as they frequently work with the or under the control of their superiors. To be fully accepted as a leader, it seems not sufficient to have updated knowledge and apply it when playing the leader role, more than that it is mainly about the “being” of the leaders, which is spotted in their behavior, attitude, principles, remarks, lifestyle, etc., and thus in their self. Obviously, it makes a difference for followers if leaders play only the role of a superior or if they are leaders by their identity given by themselves (Day & Harrison, 2007; Day & Sin, 2011; Dweck, 2017; Epitropaki et al., 2017) but also given by their followers. Especially in times of social media, leaders must be made aware that their “being” can be spotted in all situations, since Google, Facebook, WhatsApp, etc. are omnipresent. Thus, followers are enabled to detect whether a leader is a role-player, a poser, or a real performer. Role playing, posing, or mission statements in organizations/teams have very little meaning when leaders do not embody them. Credibility in being cannot be told, it must be lived. The “being” ultimately answers the questions of the influence of the leader’s attitude on leadership actions. It is about attitude, values, and ultimately about the human image. If a leader believes that the followers are lazy or stupid because their own human image is such, they will use the whip. In the development of leaders, the “how you are is how you lead” and “how you lead is how you are” must be of deeper consideration in self-awareness (self-leadership), but also in the awareness of higher superiors who have the responsibility to select leaders.

The knowing-side also revealed within this study to have the assumed significant impact, whereas the “doing-side” was statistically not significant. This may be interpreted in the direction that it is seen more or less as a normal act that a leader who is assigned for such a position is able to act on this level. In summary, knowing, being, and doing is highly correlated and thus, as an effect structure, it has the potential to improve the acceptance within a leader-follower relationship in particular in difficult and unpredictable contexts. It must be noticed that this works in both directions, positive and negative – it has the potential to enhance the acceptance, but in case it is negative, it leads to rejection and contempt. The knowing, being, and doing of a leader has as well the potential to shape the positive role model, which may be emulated by the followers, but also to create a negative role model. In the event, the leader is achievement motivated. This spirit will be the orientation for the followers; if a leader is avoidance motivated, they will influence in this direction. In other words, the knowing-being-doing of

a leader cultivates an engagement culture or an avoidance culture. In the light of the analysis results of the data and the interpretation and discussion, H4, saying that a leaders' knowing-being-doing impacts the acceptance, is verified, and more than that, the data show that followers evaluate their leaders according to first "who they are", second "what they know", and third "what they do".

Contexts Effects on Followers' Withdrawal from Autonomy Desires and Requirements on Leaders Decision Making

A clear result was the finding that followers withdraw from their autonomy wishes the more difficult or dangerous a context is, and simultaneously, they want their leader to take action and make the decisions. This is explained by some already existent and verified theories such as the theory of psychological regression, the naive psychology, the responsibility diffusion phenomena, and the neo-charismatic theory. In difficult contexts, followers are in dysbalance, and they seek certainty on the emotional level, while ratio stands back, that is, they seek certainty (= good feeling) by following a leader. With this finding, the Self-Determination Theory is expanded with the view on contexts out of the comfort zone and adds that, in such a case, followers show the tendency to withdraw from autonomy wishes.

Followers Requirements for Leaders' Visions

Apart from the five hypotheses, as a key result, a noticeable follower requirement for visions of their leaders was found. It is empirically shown that followers require a leader able to show and share visions. This shed light on the fact that visions in the sense of long-term goals for an individual follower or a team are indispensable to have a kind of orientation and "what for" beyond the daily routine work or training. Today's followers are willing to follow, but they would like to know in what direction. A vision is supposed to target the strategical level and gives orientation for the followers' expected contribution to something bigger and answers in broad terms the "what for?" Obviously, it has an important meaning for followers on what they steer their engagement in the long run, and, obviously, this is a perceived blind spot in the top-down communication from leaders to followers. From this, it can be seen that followers want to understand the wider perspective, their contribution to that, and they need a long-term orientation. In the same direction is pursued the followers' requirement for a common understanding of a task/mission. Today's followers want to know why and where they are heading towards, otherwise they will stop and practice "quiet quitting". Today's followers follow a vision rather than an authority. A vision provides direction and orientation towards something positive in the future; thus, it has a pull-effect (Kriwan, 2023). It creates inspiring images, triggers the psychological achieving-system, and pushes the avoiding-system into

the background (Heimsoeth, 2024). That is, a leader needs the competence to recognize the changes and accordingly develop visions that are adapted to reality.

5. Conclusion

The study used an empirical setting to objectively investigate what followers require and expect from their leaders. Like in every research, some limitations need to be addressed. First, the present study consisted of German respondents in all three professional groups. Hence, it has not been proven whether the results of this study may also hold true in other nations and/or other professional groups. Second, the quantitative data, which show the “explored reality” at a time, are interpreted somehow qualitative, and it must be respected that every researcher interprets data subjectively, according to their background, experience, and knowledge. Third, the use of standardized questionnaires assumes that the direction in which something develops is already known, and there is also potential for self-report bias. Fourth, the study was cross-sectional, and thus, it cannot ensure 100 % causality. The interpretations of causality are based on plausibility and on the confidence in the proposed theoretical foundations.

Although there are some limitations, the following key takeaways for leadership development can be noted (Figure 6):

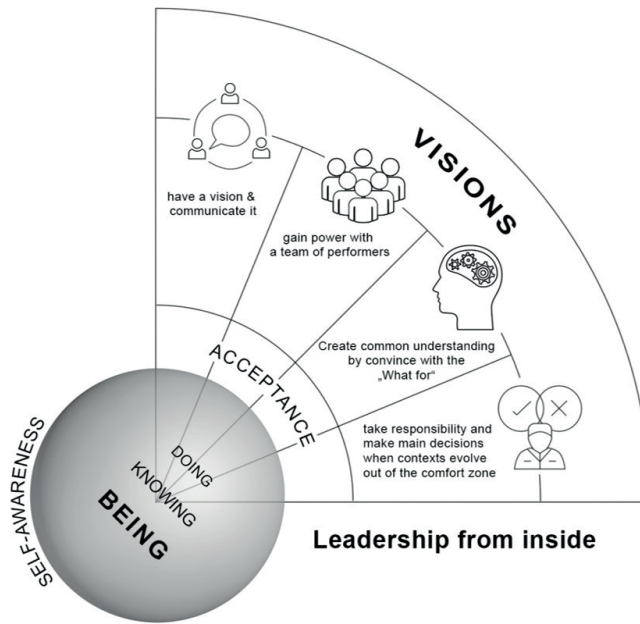
- 1) A basis for success as a leader is acceptance. The key for acceptance is first in line with the being-side, thus leaders must develop self-awareness about their being-side.
- 2) A leader who expects performance must be able to provide and communicate an overarching vision as an orientation towards the way to a long-term goal. It is part of a leaders' job to clarify what to followers seems fuzzy, foggy, and bewildering diffuse.
- 3) A vision should build the basics for a common understanding of a team concerning a task and/or mission. A leader is expected to have the competence to create agreement on the common task and/or mission.
- 4) Leaders today are expected to set up the suitable platform and team for solving problems and achieving something good by creating an engagement culture. Therefore, team-power, together with the followers, is a decisive factor in unpredictable contexts. This means, in substance, leadership beyond the ego by involving followers and an orientation towards the outcome.
- 5) For executing a common task/mission, it was and still is a required competence of leaders to take responsibility for the main decisions, in particular, in contexts out of the comfort zone.

The considerations within the research were conducted via a more holistic approach that goes beyond fragmented theories. Nevertheless, it must be noted that also this explored part is at the end only a part of the whole complex theme, as it is

Table 2. continued

visualized in Figure 7. With the synopsis of knowledge about leadership theories and the explored quests of followers, there is the hope that this study contributes in a tiny way towards improvement of leaders' competencies development. On the point, the winning of "minds and hearts" of the followers and providing a vision as long-term orientation revealed the core factors of leadership in the 21st century.

Figure 6. Insights and derivations of the survey data and their interpretation (Inside-out – principle of leadership)



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