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Situational leadership theory: a test from three perspectives

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Situational leadership theory: a test from three perspectives

Situational
leadership
theory

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527

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Abstract

Purpose – Ambiguity surrounding “follower competence and commitment” of Hersey and Blanchard’s situational leadership theory (SLT) has rendered validation difficult. The purpose of this paper is to address this difficulty by presenting different perspectives for determining follower development level and applies these perspectives for testing the validity of SLT.

Design/methodology/approach – The study population was drawn from 80 supervisors and 357 followers. Financial organizations were chosen because much of the existing research on SLT has so far focussed on service-oriented organizations in education, healthcare, and armed services.

Findings – Measuring the degree of agreement between leader rating of follower competence and commitment and follower self-rating was found to be a core issue for determining follower competence and commitment. SLT predictions are more likely to hold when leader rating and follower self-rating are congruent, rather than using leader rating alone, which has been applied in previous studies.

Practical implications – Both leader and follower need to diagnose follower competence and commitment, first individually and then together, to discuss similarities and differences and attempt to agree upon the determination of follower competence and commitment. If the rating is based on some mutual agreement, then it is assumed in accordance with SLT that the leader can provide the follower with an appropriate amount of direction and support.

Originality/value – The findings in the present study are of great importance for future research on SLT. It may change the approach for testing the validity of the theory. A leader-follower congruence approach will, in the authors view, constitute the future research avenue for research on SLT.

Keywords Job level, Leader-follower congruence, Objective indices, Situational Leadership Theory

Paper type Research paper

Hersey and Blanchard’s situational leadership theory (SLT) proposes a taxonomy consisting of four leadership styles, ranging from directing to delegating, and a framework for matching each style to specific situations. SLT has undergone a number of cosmetic and substantive changes since it was first introduced as the “Life Cycle of Leadership” (Hersey and Blanchard, 1969), and has emerged most recently as a restated set of prescriptive principles (Blanchard, 2010). Blanchard (2010) has identified four levels of follower development and their corresponding alternate optimal styles of leadership. For the enthusiastic beginner, characterized as low on competence but high on commitment, a directive style of leadership would be appropriate (directive defined as low-supportive behavior in conjunction with high-directive behavior). The disillusioned learner, characterized as being low on competence to having some competence in combination with low commitment, should benefit from a coaching style of leadership (coaching defined as high-supportive behavior in conjunction with high-directive behavior). The capable but cautious performer, who is moderate to high on competence but has variable commitment, should benefit from a supportive style of leadership (supportive defined as high-supportive behavior in conjunction with low-directive behavior). The self-reliant achiever, who is high on both competence and commitment, responds best to a delegating style of leadership (delegating defined as low-supportive behavior in conjunction with low-directive behavior).



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However, SLT has been tested several times and researchers have identified difficulties in terms of measurement, content, and research design (Thompson and Vecchio, 2009; Vroom and Jago, 2007). In particular, follower competence and commitment pose several problems for testing the validity of the theory. A key premise underlying SLT is the appropriate calibrated applied leader style in response to follower/subordinate need for leadership. While leader styles seem fairly well understood, establishing follower need for a specific style of leadership has proven to be more difficult. This study seeks to quantify follower need from three perspectives: first, measuring subordinate competence by objectively quantifying experience; second, examining the leader-follower dynamic along a continuum of job levels; finally, comparing degree of self-other agreement in follower competence and commitment ratings to identify whether higher correlation more adequately validates the SLT model.

Subjective and objective indices

The first research topic is measurement of follower competence and commitment. A number of studies have used subjective measures such as supervisor rating (Fernandez and Vecchio, 1997; Norris and Vecchio, 1992; Thompson and Vecchio, 2009; Vecchio, 1987; Vecchio *et al.*, 2006). Results from testing of SLT suggest that rating of competence and commitment may not be an identifiable and distinct construct, but rather an attribution made by leaders based on interpersonal attraction or projected performance (Thompson, 2008; Vecchio *et al.*, 2006). Attribution bias entering judgments is a problem that arises when there are no objective indices for certain constructs. Variance may occur because of rater idiosyncratic error (Deniz *et al.*, 2008; Murphy, 2008). Leaders may be inclined to make assumptions about one attribute based on judgments about other attributes. For example, a competent follower may also be assumed to be committed (Thompson, 2008).

Furthermore, using follower self-rating of competence and commitment may be biased by the tendency to present oneself in a socially desirable manner when asked to self-describe (Schriesheim *et al.*, 2011). However, independent measures of predictors, like education level, years of experience in one's current position, job-relevant tests of knowledge that are required for promotion to a higher job level, and age, may serve as surrogates of development level and as an index of follower competence. Vecchio and Boatwright (2002), for example, used objective indices such as age, job longevity and education to test predictions derived from SLT. In their study SLT received support for its prediction that job-relevant aspects of follower competence, like years in current position, would correlate inversely with preference for structuring. Vecchio and Boatwright (2002) argue that this finding seems reasonable, as experience in one's current position provides an acceptable indication of task-relevant knowledge. Also the accuracy of this index may be more defensible than self-report and supervisor rating. This statement seems consistent with Blanchard's view, as experience is used as an indicator to diagnose follower competence (Blanchard, 1988).

Even though the Vecchio/Boatwright (2002) study is not an empirical test of the interaction hypothesis of SLT, the results are enticing enough to motivate further research. In addition, Franklin (2009) found partial support for applying years of experience and age as indices for follower competence. These examples show that some progress has been made when applying objective indices for follower development level, which should motivate further research. However, measurement of experience poses a unique problem for testing SLT. Certainly long-tenured employees may on average be more competent than more recently hired individuals. However, the quality

of experience of long-tenured employees can still be quite variable. Years of experience and job-relevant competence are not likely to be highly correlated across situations (Fernandez and Vecchio, 1997). Thus, using years of experience in current position as an index of follower competence level may not serve as a reasonable surrogate for task-relevant knowledge. Employing years of experience as indicia makes more sense for mastering a job or a managerial position in an organization (Mumford *et al.*, 2000) than for specific task proficiency.

Experience as an index of follower competence must be related to the four development levels of SLT, as demonstrated by Blanchard (2010), where experience measured in months was connected to the four levels of development, from enthusiastic beginner to self-reliant achiever, for a specific task. Blanchard (2010) used sales figures as an example of the competence development process, which was assumed to last for approximately nine months. This approach is consistent with Thompson and Vecchio's (2009) research, showing that SLT's promised dynamics may occur quite rapidly, with followers gaining task competence fairly quickly when employers act to bring their new hires up to speed. However, the time required to bring followers from a low to a high development level will depend on the complexity of the task. Blanchard (2010), who uses sales as an example, is relevant here for study of the banking industry.

The present study follows along this line of research by applying objective indices (i.e. experience) for follower competence. While experience does not provide a measure of follower commitment, a partial test of SLT is possible by investigating the relationship between follower experience and leader directiveness, and its impact on follower performance, as suggested in the theory. Regarding the dimension of leader directiveness, SLT suggests an inverse association between indices of follower competence and leader directiveness: leaders should provide greater directiveness for inexperienced followers. As followers become knowledgeable, leaders should provide less directiveness to followers who have become highly competent. Accordingly our first hypothesis is developed:

- H1.* Job performance will be greater for followers whose job experience matches leader directiveness as suggested in SLT, compared to followers with the same experience who do not match leadership style as suggested in SLT.

Job level

Fernandez and Vecchio (1997) assume that specific jobs may require specific norms or expectations for leader behavior. Due to ambiguity regarding the conceptual definition of follower competence and commitment, Fernandez and Vecchio (1997) suggest a modification of the term competence and commitment, where it is to be replaced with a level appropriate concept such as normative expectations. For example, members of a top management team in an organization might expect to receive little direct supervision, as experience and knowledge make supervisor's influence less important (Kerr and Jermier, 1978). Employees lower in the organizational hierarchy might expect their leaders to train them to master the job, let them know where they stand on matters that concern them, and execute a fair degree of monitoring of their behavior. To be effective, leaders should be conscious of and responsive to such norms, and tailor leadership style to employee expectations for leader behavior, rather than to follower competence and commitment. They also suggest, in their across-jobs approach, that jobs should be sorted into three categories based on job content: those that require low, moderate, and high self-directedness. For example, a high-self-directedness job would be a top management team in an organization, which has a considerable degree of

latitude for independent action. Fernandez and Vecchio (1997) assumed that leader behavior would have a varying impact on follower performance as a function of job level. In accordance with SLT, it would be reasonable to assume that greater directiveness and lower supportiveness would be beneficial, even appreciated, by employees at lower level positions, compared to employees in high-self-directed jobs, where freedom from direction and support seems to receive a favorable response. Moderate self-directed jobs would respond to some direction and greater supportiveness.

However, to our knowledge, only one study has tested the validity of SLT by applying job level as a key contextual construct, using data from a public university organization (Fernandez and Vecchio, 1997). Support for the theory's prediction was obtained for moderate self-directed jobs. Even though mixed results were obtained, job level may be a useful device for testing SLT principles, because the alternative follower construct, competence and commitment, may not be identifiable and distinct. Furthermore, Thompson (2008) found that leaders used less structure and less consideration behavior for jobs at higher levels compared to jobs at lower levels. The present study aims at extending prior research by applying data from private business organizations, to see whether the across-jobs approach holds for this type of organization. Evidence in support for the across-jobs suggestion would substantiate a revised form of SLT as being valid. Our second hypothesis therefore is the following:

- H2.* Job performance will be greater for followers whose job level matches leader style as suggested in SLT, compared to followers at the same job level who do not match leader style as suggested in SLT.

Congruence in leader rating and follower self-rating

The third and final area of concern is the assessment of the follower by means of a rating system. Previous studies have used only one source for assessing follower competence and commitment, such as either peer rating, leader rating, or self-report. Blank *et al.* (1990) used peers to contribute data on follower development level. When testing SLT's assumption that the interplay of task behavior, relationship behavior, and follower competence and commitment moderate leader effectiveness, their results were not supportive of the theory. This may have been caused by the use of peer ratings, which can reflect popularity rather than task orientation (Thompson, 2008).

Goodson *et al.* (1989), who used follower self-report to gather data on follower development level, failed to find support for a three-way interaction between direction, support, and competence and commitment, as proposed by SLT. These results may reflect the problematic nature of self-ratings. Research has demonstrated that self-rating may suffer from inflation, unreliability, and bias. In general, self-ratings are inaccurate when compared with ratings provided by others, or with objective measures (Atwater *et al.*, 2009).

A number of studies have employed leader evaluation of follower competence and commitment (Fernandez and Vecchio, 1997; Norris and Vecchio, 1992; Thompson and Vecchio, 2009; Vecchio, 1987; Vecchio *et al.*, 2006). These studies, which applied data from public and private organizations, found some evidence to support the theory's prescriptions for dealing with recent hires with greater directiveness, and then substituting directiveness with supportiveness as employee seniority increased. However, using superiors' ratings of followers also has limitations. Ratings provided by superiors should not necessarily be considered as "true scores" of follower competence and commitment (Atwater and Yammarino, 1997). Clearly there is need for a new approach to rating competence

and commitment in terms of a juxtaposition of different rating sources. Blanchard (2010) has introduced "Partnering for performance," as an integral component of SLT, where both leader and follower need to come to some agreement on the determination of subordinate competence and commitment. If leader and follower share some agreement in rating of follower competence and commitment, then the leader can provide the follower with an appropriate amount of direction and support. However, if significant deviation exists between leader's rating of follower competence and commitment, and the follower's self-rating, an unfortunate state of misinterpretation may occur, where leaders may either over- or under-supervise their followers. Measuring the degree of agreement between leader rating of follower competence and commitment and follower self-rating might be a core issue for determining this variable. Hence, the present study will extend previous research by investigating whether SLT's predictions are more likely to hold when leader rating and follower self-rating of competence and commitment are congruent. Our final hypothesis is as follows:

H3. SLT's predictions are more likely to hold when leader rating and follower self-rating of competence and commitment are congruent.

For more than 25 years one approach has dominated the research on SLT. The research of Vecchio and his associates from 1987 to 2009 has used leader rating of follower competence and commitment. Vecchio (1997) has also suggested two alternative approaches (objective indices and job level). However, only one study has tested hypotheses derived from SLT using objective indices, and one study has tested SLT from a job-level approach. Hence, more studies are needed to evaluate these two research avenues, and the present study attempts to test both research lines. Further, we think introducing a new "congruence approach," where we compare leaders' and followers' ratings, is a promising avenue.

Method

Participants

The study population was drawn from 80 supervisors and 357 followers. Ten Norwegian financial organizations were chosen because much of the existing research on SLT has so far focussed on service-oriented organizations in education, healthcare, and armed services. By selecting profit-oriented firms, the present data sites have the potential to increase our knowledge of whether SLT principles are demonstrably valid in a for profit setting. The response rate was 91.6 percent based on 477 contacted individuals. Questionnaires were distributed to leaders and followers while at work. The leaders and followers were predominantly male (55 and 56 percent, respectively). The leaders' average age was 44.6 years, with an average education of 15.5 years. Average age and education of the follower group was 44.3 and 14.2 years, respectively. The respondents also provided descriptive demographic information about how long (to the nearest month) they had been employed in their current job, as well as job title.

Instruments

The instruments used in this study were originally developed in the English language. Because they were to be used in a Norwegian context, the instruments were put through a back translation conversion process to ensure equivalence of item meaning (Cavusgil and Das, 1997; Nachmais and Nachmais, 1992). A pilot study further tested the instruments, distribution of questionnaires, and data collection procedure before it

was finally administered, in order to detect possible shortcomings in the design and administration of the questionnaire.

Each supervisor rated followers by completing a packet that contained the following instruments.

Performance rating

A five-item performance rating scale developed by Liden and Graen (1980) (sample items: "Overall Present Performance"; "Expected Future Performance"; anchors: 1 = Unsatisfactory, 7 = Outstanding). Responses to these five items were then summed to provide a measure of performance for each subordinate. The Performance Rating questionnaire has been used by Vecchio *et al.* (2006) and Fernandez and Vecchio (1997). The use of this measure has shown consistent criterion-related validity, and internal consistency reliability estimates have ranged from 0.83 to 0.88 (Scandura and Graen, 1984; Scandura *et al.*, 1986; Thompson and Vecchio, 2009).

Employee Readiness Scale

Supervisors also conducted an assessment of follower competence and commitment on a modified ten-item Employee Readiness Scale that was previously developed by Fernandez and Vecchio (1997) from an earlier (Blanchard, 1988) Employee Readiness Questionnaire. Follower competence was measured with five items (sample items: "Past job experience"; "Understanding of job requirements"). Follower commitment was measured with five items (sample items: "Willingness to take responsibility"; "Positive work attitude"; anchors: 1 = Low, 7 = High). Several instruments have been used to measure follower competence and commitment. Hambleton and Gumpert (1982) used a Professional Maturity Scale. No internal consistency coefficient was reported in the study. Goodson *et al.* (1989) used Sense of Competence Scale, which did not adequately capture the dual emphases on follower competence and commitment. Blank *et al.* (1990) used the Psychological Maturity Scale for assessing psychological maturity where peer ratings were used, contrary to Hersey and Blanchard's advice. The Readiness Questionnaire has been chosen for this study. It has been used by Vecchio and his associates in a number of studies. Fernandez and Vecchio (1997) reported internal consistency coefficient (α) to be 0.87.

LBDQ-XII

Each subordinate provided ratings of their supervisor by applying LBDQ-XII (Stogdill *et al.*, 1963), which was used for measuring supervisor supportiveness and directiveness. Leader supportiveness was measured with a four-item scale composed of items taken from the LBDQ-XII instrument (sample items: "My supervisor's relations with me can be described as friendly and approachable"; "My supervisor is concerned for my welfare"; anchors: 1 = Never, 2 = Seldom, 3 = Occasionally, 4 = Often, 5 = Always). Leader directiveness was measured with four items taken from the LBDQ-XII, using the same five-point response scale for each item (sample items: "My supervisor schedules for me the work to be done"; "My supervisor makes his/her attitudes clear to me"). Hersey and Blanchard (1974) developed the LEAD instrument for measuring leader behavior. According to Graeff (1983) and Vecchio (1987), the reliability and validity of LEAD has not been established. Many researchers have therefor used LBDQ-XII because it has shown strong psychometric properties, high stability, and consistency reliabilities in descriptions of initiating structure and consideration (Bass, 1990; Blank *et al.*, 1990;

Fernandez and Vecchio, 1997; Norris and Vecchio, 1992; Vecchio, 1987). According to Judge *et al.* (2004), LBDQ-XII has the highest validities averaged across directive and supportive behavior. Thompson and Vecchio (2009) reported internal consistency coefficient (α) to be 0.73 for leader supportiveness and 0.84 for leader structuring.

Employee Readiness Scale

Subordinate self-assessment of competence and commitment was measured on a modified ten-item Employee Readiness Scale (Fernandez and Vecchio, 1997) described above. Internal consistency coefficient (α) in this study is 0.61 for follower competence and 0.84 for follower commitment.

Job level

Finally, job level was sorted into three categories (those that require low, moderate, and high self-directedness) (Fernandez and Vecchio, 1997). High-self-directed jobs in financial organizations included Executive President, Executive Vice President, Head of Banking, Deputy Head of Banking, Marketing Director, and all other jobs in the top management team. Low-self-directed jobs included all jobs at Head of Customer Centre, Head of Corporate Customer Centre, Head of Corporate Customers, and Senior Relationship Manager. Remaining job categories were classified as moderate job level if they were neither top management jobs nor classified as low on self-directedness. This classification was approved by representatives of the participating organizations.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

CFA was conducted using MPlus to test how well the predicted interrelationships between the variables matched the interrelationships between the observed interrelationships. The results of CFA displayed the following results: CFA provided excellent fit to the data (χ^2 (474) = 516.85; $p = 0.09$; RMSEA = 0.036; CFI = 0.95; NNFI/TLI = 0.94). When comparing the results with frequently used rules of thumb, CFA achieved good model fit (Hair *et al.*, 2010). In contrast, CFA results for a one-factor solution provided poor fit to the data (χ^2 (495) = 875.75; $p < 0.001$; RMSEA = 0.010; CFI = 0.53; NNFI/TLI = 0.50).

Results

Table I provides descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among the independent and the dependent variables. Cronbach's α for the multi-item scales are listed on the primary diagonal of the correlation matrix. The α coefficients were in an acceptable range for all the variables of interest (0.61-0.92). Performance was significantly and positively correlated with leader supportiveness, job level, supervisor rating of follower competence and commitment, and follower self-rating of competence and commitment. Leader directiveness was inversely associated with experience. Job level was positively correlated to supervisor rating of follower competence and commitment, and follower self-rating of competence and commitment. Leader ratings of follower competence and commitment showed substantial association with job performance, while subordinate self-ratings of competence and commitment were moderately correlated with ratings of job performance. Furthermore, average self-ratings of competence and commitment were higher than leader ratings of follower competence and commitment.

Table I.
Means, standard
deviations,
reliabilities, and
intercorrelations

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Performance	5.46	0.92	(0.89)								
2. Supportiveness	3.96	0.64	0.27**								
3. Directiveness	3.67	0.70	0.02	(0.77)							
4. Job experience (months)	4.75	2.54	0.02	0.36**	(0.84)						
5. Job level	1.32	0.59	0.13*	-0.15	-0.34*	(-)					
6. Supervisor rating of follower competence level	6.37	0.99	0.85**	-0.08	0.05	-0.09	(-)				
7. Supervisor rating of follower commitment level	6.39	1.12	0.81**	0.28**	0.05	-0.01	0.21**	(0.81)			
8. Follower self-rating of competence	6.64	0.79	0.15**	0.27**	0.04	-0.13	0.23**	0.94**	(0.92)		
9. Follower self-rating of commitment	6.99	0.69	0.21**	0.09	0.15**	0.20	0.15**	0.19**	0.10	(0.61)	
				0.23**	0.17**	0.08	0.19**	0.25**	0.27**	0.62**	(0.84)

Notes: ≤ 357 . Cronbach's α on primary diagonal. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Objective indices

The first approach to the moderator variable was to employ an objective index (experience) to determine follower competence. In our sample, 37 followers had from one to nine months' experience. They provided the sample for testing *H1*.

The first approach to testing *H1* was to apply an omnibus test to compare results across conditions in order to have an adequate sample size for conducting the necessary statistical tests. More specifically, cases were identified as representing "low," "low to some," "moderate to high," and "high" competence. Then matches were made within each level by identifying proper combinations of follower competence and leader directiveness. Matches were then contrasted with mismatches across all development levels. The procedure for determining whether a case was a match or a mismatch followed a recommended procedure used in earlier studies (Fernandez and Vecchio, 1997; Thompson and Vecchio, 2009; Vecchio *et al.*, 2006). Based on the Blanchard (2010) categorization, four levels of experience were created: first, low competence was defined as up to two months' experience; second, low to some competence three to four months' experience; third, moderate to high competence five to seven months' experience; and finally, high competence eight to nine months' experience. The number of cases classified as low, low to some, moderate to high, and high were eight (25 percent), nine (28.1 percent), seven (21.9 percent), and eight (25 percent), respectively. For the leader behavior dimension, four levels of directiveness were created at the 25, 50, and 75 percentiles. The cuts for the directiveness dimension were 3.25, 3.75, and 4.25. Quartizing appears reasonable in light of the graphic representation of SLT (Blanchard, 2010), which indicates that the amount of directiveness should be reduced in accordance with increased competence. The result of the omnibus test is presented in Table II, and provides support for SLT principles, in that level of mean match cases significantly exceeded the mean of mismatched cases for the output variable performance. This means that job performance was greater for followers whose job experience matches leader directiveness as suggested in SLT, compared to followers with the same experience who do not match leadership style.

The second approach to testing *H1* was to apply subgrouping analysis, labeled partitioned test, for comparisons of matched and mismatched cases within each development level (i.e. cases where leader and follower attributes were in alignment with the theory's framework, were contrasted with those cases where these attributes were not in alignment). Results of the partitioned test were supportive of the theory's predictions for development levels 3 and 4, where the average value for performance was higher for matched cases than mismatched cases, and the difference was statistically significant (see Table III). This shows that the significant omnibus results were caused by strong difference in the moderate to high and high-development groups. No significant results were obtained for the low and low to some groups (development level 1 and 2). Hence, no clear support was obtained for *H1*.

Table II.

Results of omnibus tests: test of SLT using experience as moderator variable

Group	M	SD	<i>n</i>	<i>t</i>
Dependent variable = performance				
Match	5.72	0.83	15	1.62***
Mismatch	5.23	0.84	17	

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.10$

LODJ
36,5

536

Table III.

Results of partitioned tests: test of SLT using experience as moderator variable

Group	M	SD	<i>n</i>	<i>t</i>
Development level 1				
<i>Dependent variable = performance</i>				
Match	5.10	0.90	6	−0.84
Mismatch	5.50	0.42	2	
Development level 2				
<i>Dependent variable = performance</i>				
Match	5.80	0.20	3	0.51
Mismatch	5.56	1.08	6	
Development level 3				
<i>Dependent variable = performance</i>				
Match	6.46	0.41	3	2.84*
Mismatch	5.20	0.74	4	
Development level 4				
<i>Dependent variable = performance</i>				
Match	6.13	0.64	3	2.85*
Mismatch	4.76	0.68	5	
Notes: * <i>p</i> < 0.05; ** <i>p</i> < 0.01				

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Job level

To conduct an across-jobs test of SLT, wherein job level was used as a predictor of optimal leadership style, the analyses of data followed procedures similar to Fernandez and Vecchio (1997). Job levels were sorted into three categories based on job content: low, moderate, and high self-directedness. Jobs within financial organizations were sorted into three categories. The number of cases classified as low, moderate, and high were 264, 68, and 24, respectively. As suggested by Fernandez and Vecchio (1997), leader supportiveness was dichotomized at the sample median (4.0), and leader directiveness was trichotomized at plus and minus one standard deviation (3.5) and (4.0). Supportiveness should be dichotomized because two levels of leader supportive behavior are outlined in SLT. These steps made it possible to compare cases that matched and mismatched. In accordance with the across-jobs approach, matches were predicted to have higher average values on the outcome variable performance, compared to cases that were mismatched. An across-jobs comparison, which ignores within-development-level differences, was conducted (omnibus test), and was followed by a partitioned test that compared matches and mismatches within a given job level.

The results of omnibus or overall tests for an across-jobs test of SLT are presented in Tables IV and V presents the results for the partitioned tests. The omnibus tests showed that the results of the test for mean differences were in the predicted direction

Table IV.

Results of omnibus test: comparisons of matched cases with mismatched cases

Group	M	SD	<i>n</i>	<i>t</i>
<i>Dependent variable = performance</i>				
Match	5.57	0.78	58	1.09
Mismatch	5.44	0.94	294	

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table V.
Results of
partitioned tests:
across-jobs
test of SLT

Group	M	SD	<i>n</i>	<i>t</i>
Low self-directedness				
<i>Dependent variable = performance</i>				
Match	5.21	0.85	29	-1.17
Mismatch	5.41	0.96	233	
Moderate self-directedness				
<i>Dependent variable = performance</i>				
Match	6.00	0.55	16	2.36*
Mismatch	5.56	0.88	50	
High self-directedness				
<i>Dependent variable = performance</i>				
Match	5.91	0.40	12	1.50***
Mismatch	5.51	0.82	12	
Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.10$				

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.10$

(matches exceeded mismatches), but were non-significant. However, the results of the partitioned tests did provide some support for SLT principles. For moderate and high-self-directed jobs, significant findings were obtained for the output variable performance, and mean differences were in support for predictions of SLT. Hence, some support was obtained for *H2* that job performance will be greater for followers whose job level matches leader style, compared to followers at the same job level who do not match leader style. Especially for moderate self-directed jobs, supportive evidence was obtained.

Leader-follower congruence

H3 states that SLT's predictions are more likely to hold when leader rating and follower self-rating of competence and commitment are congruent. To identify whether leader and self-reports are in agreement regarding competence and commitment, a comparison was conducted between follower self-ratings and their leader's rating (Kwan *et al.*, 2008). Difference scores between follower self-rating and leader ratings were calculated, and subsequently individuals were classified into groups based on the magnitude of their self/leader difference. The group "in agreement raters" was comprised of individuals with difference scores within one standard deviation.

The next step was to identify cases representing the four development levels in accordance with the terms used by Blanchard (2010). More specifically, follower competence was quartized at the sample value of 5.7, 6.5, and 7.1, and follower commitment was trichotomized at the sample value of 6.0 and 7.0. For the leader behavior dimension, four levels of directiveness were quartized at the sample value of 3.25, 3.75, and 4.25, and supportiveness was dichotomized at the sample median value of four. These steps made it possible to compare cases that "matched" and "mismatched." Omnibus tests were provided for more direct comparison of results across conditions, and were applied in order to have an adequate sample size for conducting the necessary statistical tests across the cells.

The result of the omnibus comparison for matches and mismatches across all cases in the four developmental levels of SL II is presented in Table VI. As the statistical values indicate, the level of mean match cases significantly exceeded the mean of

mismatched cases for the output variable performance, which provides support for SLT principles. Also the results of the partitioned tests did provide support for SLT principles. For development level 3 (moderate to high on competence but has variable commitment) and development level 4 (high on both competence and commitment) significant findings were obtained for the output variable performance, as mean differences were in support for predictions of SLT. For development levels 1 and 2 results cannot be provided due to lack of an adequate sample size for conducting the necessary statistical tests. In general, evidence has been obtained to suggest that SLT's predictions are more likely to hold when leader rating and follower self-rating of competence and commitment are congruent, as suggested in *H3* (Table VII).

Discussion

The present study tests the interaction hypothesis of SLT using objective indices for follower competence as a substitute for subjective measures like supervisor perception of competence of the follower. Several interesting patterns were identified concerning the relationship between objective indices and leader structuring, as suggested in SLT. Leader directiveness was inversely associated with experience, indicating that supervisors acted consistently with SLT's recommendation to provide more direction with less competent employees. The partitioned test showed that main differences were in favor of SLT for followers at development levels 3 and 4 when using experience as moderator. The need for specific leader activity seems to be substituted for by expertise. These findings are consistent with the study of Vecchio and Boatwright (2002), where experience was inversely associated with preference for structuring. These findings are also consistent with other studies showing that experienced people who have acquired expertise and become self-reliant benefit from leaders who empower employees, allow them to exercise influence over work processes, and support them in

Table VI.

Results of omnibus test: congruence leader-follower rating comparisons of matched cases with mismatched cases

Group	M	SD	<i>n</i>	<i>t</i>
<i>Dependent variable = performance</i>				
Match	6.15	0.38	20	4.48**
Mismatch	5.57	0.68	53	
Notes: * <i>p</i> < 0.05; ** <i>p</i> < 0.01				

Table VII.

Results of partitioned tests: congruence leader-follower rating comparisons of matched cases with mismatched cases

Group	M	SD	<i>n</i>	<i>t</i>
Development level 3				
<i>Dependent variable = performance</i>				
Match	6.13	0.23	12	2.43*
Mismatch	5.41	1.03	13	
Development level 4				
<i>Dependent variable = performance</i>				
Match	6.44	0.32	5	3.81*
Mismatch	5.64	0.44	9	
Notes: * <i>p</i> < 0.05; ** <i>p</i> < 0.01				

leading themselves (De Vries *et al.*, 1998; Stewart *et al.*, 2011). Followers given greater opportunities for self-direction will manifest superior outcomes, such as higher levels of job performance and job satisfaction (Vecchio *et al.*, 2010).

The work here suggests the possibility that SLT's proposed dynamics may occur quite rapidly, with followers gaining task competence within several months, depending on the complexity of the task. Nevertheless, given the limitation of using a specific time frame for testing the proposed dynamics, consistent with Blanchard's demonstration of competence development (Blanchard, 2010), the present study is a first step to testing the theory's developmental view of leader-follower relations. A more adequate test of such notions of development should incorporate a longitudinal research design.

In the second approach to testing SLT, job level was applied as an index of follower development level. It was assumed that job level would be a better device for studying follower reactions to leader behavior than using an imprecise subjective construct. While the Fernandez/Vecchio study yielded mixed support for SLT principles, stronger support was obtained in the present study. For moderate self-directed jobs, significant findings were obtained for the output variable performance, and mean differences were in support of predictions of SLT. This result is consistent with the Fernandez/Vecchio study. Also for the high-self-directed job level, performance did obtain significant support for SLT. Freedom from direction, as suggested by SLT, seems to have a favorable response for high-self-directed jobs. While contributing to the validity of SLT, this result, however, contradicts findings from previous studies (Fernandez and Vecchio, 1997; Norris and Vecchio, 1992; Thompson and Vecchio, 2009; Vecchio, 1987; Vecchio *et al.*, 2006). This may be due to different research designs and contexts across the studies. Furthermore, the across-jobs concept did not obtain any significant results for low-self-directed jobs. One explanation for this finding may be that this job level contained the majority of respondents (247 respondents), a heterogeneous group, where education level varied from nine months to 21 years, and experience varied from one month to approximately 39 years, indicating competence varying from new beginner to highly educated and experienced follower. The across-jobs concept suggests that leaders ought to use a combination of high directiveness and low supportiveness for this job level. The results of the partitioned test showed that the suggested influence strategy is not an adequate response to this heterogeneous situation. It seems difficult to find clear evidence for the significance of using job level as a moderator variable when applied at low-self-directed jobs in general.

The third approach investigated whether SLT's predictions are more likely to hold when leader and follower ratings are in agreement. An omnibus test yielded a significant result for the output variable performance, in favor of SLT principles. This result contradicts earlier studies that have reported omnibus tests of the data, and where only one source has been applied (Vecchio, 1987; Norris and Vecchio, 1992; Fernandez and Vecchio, 1997; Vecchio *et al.*, 2006; Thompson and Vecchio, 2009). Furthermore, partitioned testing obtained significant findings for the output variable performance, and mean differences were in support of predictions of SLT for development levels 3 and 4. This evidence raises the question as to which rating source is most predictive of follower performance (Fleenor *et al.*, 2010). Several SLT studies have used leader ratings of follower competence and commitment (Fernandez and Vecchio, 1997; Thompson and Vecchio, 2009; Vecchio *et al.*, 2006). In general it has been assumed that leaders are in the best position to assess their followers. Other rating sources have also been suggested, such as peer ratings and self-ratings, but appear to be least predictive (Goodson *et al.*, 1989; Blank *et al.*, 1990). In the present study, where

both leader and self-ratings are used, follower-leader agreement is related to follower performance. Evidence from this study supports the view that congruence in follower self-rating and leader rating is a key to effective functioning. In our study congruence between leader and follower has been operationalized to be within one standard deviation. This interval was chosen in order to have an adequate sample size for conducting the necessary statistical tests across the cells. Of course it may be argued that categorization of "some agreement" may shift the pattern of main differences in favor of SLT. So a re-examination was therefore conducted, applying a half-standard deviation this time (Atwater and Yammarino, 1997). Omnibus testing gave even stronger and significant support for SLT at that level of mean match cases, significantly exceeding the mean of mismatched cases for the output variable performance.

Implications

What do these results mean for research on SLT? Several attempts have been made to address the problems concerning the moderator variable "follower competence and commitment." Previous studies, which have used peers, self-report, and leader assessment in rating follower development level, have made some progress in identifying the strengths and shortcomings of SLT. Even though evidence was obtained for applying objective indices as suggested by Vecchio and Boatwright (2002), this study has not found clear evidence for the suggestion that objective indices may be a superior device for studying follower reactions to leader behavior than using subjective constructs. Also, it has not been confirmed whether SLT constructs are more accurately conceptualized at the level of the job than the competence and commitment of the individual. However, the present study is the first attempt to apply two sources, leader rating and follower self-rating, of competence and commitment, when validating SLT. Evidence from the present study suggests that measuring the degree of agreement between leader assessment and follower self-rating might be a key factor to determine the development level of the follower. By comparing leader rating and follower self-rating a more accurate measurement is available than using only one source. In this respect, future research could extend the present work by testing SLT's predictions in the following four situations: first, when leader and follower are in agreement on individual development level and evaluations are favorable (competence and commitment is high); second, when leader and follower assessments are in agreement but evaluation is poor (competence and commitment are low); third, when leader and follower are not in agreement and follower self-rating is higher than leader rating; and finally, leader and follower are not in agreement and follower self-rating is lower than leader rating.

In practical terms, this study suggests a change in how to diagnose follower development level. Previous studies have suggested using self-appraisals of development level, as it is assumed that followers are capable of providing comments on their own sense of competence and commitment. Peer rating has also been suggested in order to avoid the bias of self-reports, and to ensure independence from leader behavior descriptions. The majority of studies suggest the leader should rate follower development level, as it was assumed that leaders may have the best perspective for assessment. The present study extended previous work by finding evidence for "Partnering for performance" as an integral component of SLT (Blanchard, 2010). During such "partnering" both leader and follower need to diagnose follower development level, first individually and then together, to discuss similarities and differences, and attempt to agree upon the determination of

follower development level. If the rating of development level is based on some mutual agreement, then it is assumed in accordance with SLT that the leader can provide the follower with an appropriate amount of direction and support. However, more research is needed to provide sufficient empirical grounding before advocating close adherence to its prescriptive guidelines for “Partnering for performance.”

Even though “Partnering for performance” has its advantages, it can be challenging to implement this idea in organizations. Situational leadership postulates that it is essential to treat individual subordinates according to the dynamics of the situation, and leaders should be aware of opportunities to build subordinate skills and confidence. However, in large groups leaders may find opportunities for “Partnering for performance” less likely, because they have more constraints on their time than do supervisors of smaller groups. Opportunities for interaction between leader and individual followers are thus less likely to occur, and leaders may experience difficulty adjusting to follower expectations and needs in larger groups than in smaller work groups. This may limit the leader’s ability to provide different kinds of support, such as emotional support (show trust to followers and respond positively when they experience setbacks), instrumental support (help and assistance), appraisal support (advice to overcome setbacks), and informational support (factual advice to help members solve problems). Hence, large groups may represent an obstacle when implementing SLT in organizations. Other limitations may also occur, but fall beyond the scope of this study.

Limitations and future research

In this study, SLT did not provide clear support when employing objective indices for follower development level. Advocates of SLT may argue that objective indices, such as education, age, and experience, do not adequately reflect development level because they are general assessments and do not indicate follower task-specific competence. However, experience, as applied in this study, is more closely connected to task competence and more convincing as an index of follower competence, and should provide some support for the validity of SLT. Experience is also used as an indicator of follower competence in SLT (Blanchard, 2008). Furthermore, proponents of SLT may argue that applying objective indices neglects assessment of follower commitment, which relies more on subjective reports from supervisors. However, as stated by Graeff (1997), competence is given “causal priority” as the first-or-strongest-to-impact influence on performance in SLT. Using objective indices for competence should therefore provide some knowledge about SLT dynamics.

The present study suggests that SLT’s proposed dynamics may occur quite rapidly, with followers gaining task competence within months. Hence, leaders should be aware and sensitive to such changes among their followers, and subsequently adapt to such continuously evolving new situations in their efforts to choose the most effective leadership style. However, further assessment of such developmental notions would require a longitudinal research design. The longitudinal approach appears essential, as leader behavior is often understood as a response to the performance of a follower. A time-lagged view is necessarily implicit. But the theory is silent as to when developmental change is likely to occur. And a longitudinal approach would not be without its own unique limitations.

Finally, the research design chosen in this study and those in previous research have all focussed on testing the dynamics of SLT in field settings, with mixed supportive evidence as a result. Perhaps this reflects the need for an alternative

design. Rigorous experimental studies might be more appropriate for studying different situations suggested by the theory, experimental studies of SLT that can better compare the effects of matches and mismatches, and thus draw stronger causal inferences from those findings.

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