**Simultaneously Leaders and Followers: A Middle Manager's
Implicit and Explicit Challenge**

Steven Geer
University of Phoenix
Phoenix, Arizona

Abstract

Scholars frequently address the dyadic relationships between leaders and followers without observing the simultaneity of leadership and followership roles, particularly evident in middle managers. Their implicit and explicit challenges are the foci of this paper.

Introduction

The two faces of Janus, the Roman mythological god of gates, can be used to symbolize the manager in the middle of a vertically differentiated organizational structure. Much as Janus evidenced the benevolent image of a protector facing inside the gate and fierce protector facing outward, middle managers also show two different faces as they balance the roles of leader and follower. The difficulty of simultaneously filling the roles of leader and follower has received limited academic attention as most research on middle managers has focused on either leadership or followership (Baerga Cordero, 2009; Maccoby, 2009; Yukl, 2010). This minimal attention emerges as a gap in the literature when considering how the middle manager's leader and follower roles may occur simultaneously, have conflicting expectations, and thereby may induce stress (Baerga Cordero, 2009; Paolillo, 1987; Yukl, 2010). The middle manager's explicit and implicit challenges of maintaining these dual roles are the foci of this paper.

Explicit Challenges

Foundational research by Likert (1961) characterized managers in the middle as linking-pins, conveying information both upward and downward and holding together the top and the bottom levels within an organization. House, Filley, and Gujarati (1971) and Nealey and Fiedler

(1968) described managers in the middle as they performed as leaders, their role satisfaction, and the importance of their personal relationships with followers. Vertical dyad linkage theory proposed a different dyad for each leader and follower pair; it looked at both leaders' and followers' perspectives of one another and provided the foundation for the leader-member-exchange theory (Dansereau, 1975; Graen et al., 1977). As linking pins, middle managers participate in two dyads: one as followers with individuals in the level above them, which will be referred to as follower dyads, and as leaders, with individuals in the level below them, which will be referred to as leader dyads. Even though scholarly attention on the role of middle managers was limited during the 20th century (Nealey & Fiedler, 1968) and the first years of the 21st century (Ornstein, 2008; Vega, 2004), many fundamental concepts were established regarding middle managers' functional importance to organizations.

After the turn of the 21st century, institutional influences created a dynamic business environment for middle managers, thereby extending their influence to include innovation, strategy, and stakeholder interaction (Curie & Procter, 2005; Delmestri, 2006; Willcocks & Griffiths, 2010). Along with these additional middle management roles came an increased responsibility to the corporate level for the success of the company and an increasing emphasis on the well-being of their subordinates (Heames & Harvey, 2006). Rather than merely acting as a linking-pin in a communications chain, the middle managers' role in innovation and value for inspiring a skilled workforce emerged (Ornstein, 2008). As information technology improvements reduced the communications utility of middle managers, they shed their earlier switchboard role and became masters of change, adding value to the organization as transformational leaders (Carney, 2004; Frohman & Johnson, 1992; Huy, 2011; Jackson & Humble, 1994; Kanter, 2004; Spreitzer & Quinn, 1996). These changing expectations of

leadership, innovation, and change management increased middle managers' opportunities for stress from conflicting roles.

As members of a hierarchical organization, middle managers may experience many relationships with other members at senior, peer, or subordinate levels (Hsieh, Ferrer, Chen, & Chow, 2010; Ray, 2006). However, unlike other members in the same hierarchical organization, middle managers experience unique implicit, explicit, and often conflicting expectations for some of the roles they play in these dyads (Hsieh, Ferrer, Chen, & Chow, 2010; Ray, 2006; Vega, 2004). According to Yukl (2010), simultaneous middle management roles of leader and follower are not well researched and potentially conflicting.

Implicit Challenges

In implicit leadership theory (ILT), subordinates' perceptions of the differences between how their leaders are supposed to act and how they actually perform directly affect the subordinates' responsiveness to their leaders (van Gils, van Quaquebeke, & van Knippenberg, 2010). Similarly, a fundamental of implicit followership theory (IFT) is that leaders have preconceived notions or expectations of their followers and these expectations can shape the leaders' relative behavior and effectiveness (Sy, 2010). It appears there is symmetry in the frameworks of ILT and IFT (Shondrick & Lord, 2010). Therefore, middle managers have their own expectations of follower dyads (ILT) and leader dyads (IFT); these expectations may interact with the middle managers' self-concepts (van Gils, van Quaquebeke, & van Knippenberg, 2010). The middle managers' self-concepts may be the basis for their ILT and IFT - derived expectations. Therefore, how the original self-concepts may have been derived, how they influence the middle manager's thought life, and how they enable any resultant behavior are worthy of further investigation.

When experiencing or learning about something new, the individuals' behavior may be influenced by their prior expectations, or what Epitropaki and Martin (2005) refer to as *cognitive prototypes*. Cognitive prototypes or schemas are formed from individuals' previous experiences and interactions within their social environment. Sy (2010) suggested that cognitive prototypes are the association of applicable schema to a specific category. Epitropaki and Martin suggest that cognitive (implicit) and observed (explicit) motivations constitute the framework for the formation of schemas. Everyone will have different schemas and therefore understanding how these schemas interact is important to understanding middle management behavior. Middle managers' self-schemas and the schemas that they develop toward those in leadership and those in followership appear to be critical to understanding how they interact. How individuals use schemas in their lives is studied in schema theory and is well researched and fundamental in cognitive psychology research (Flannery & Walles, 2003; Shea & Wulf, 2005; Trong & Kim, 2010). There is a relationship between schema theory and neuroscience regarding how a schema is activated in the brain and is related to a self-concept (Žvelc, 2010). The middle managers' self-concept may play a critical part in the chain between their sub-conscious processes, cognitive thought life, and their resultant behaviors.

Greenwald and Binaji (1995) discussed self-esteem as an example of an inward-looking schema or self-schema. Over time, these inward-looking self-schemas may induce higher levels of self-confidence and less flexibility (Žvelc, 2010). When combined with a resistance to change, increased self-confidence may prove to be significant in how middle managers choose between leadership and followership behaviors. The complex implicit and explicit expectations of middle managers may reach their pinnacle of interaction when making a decision, where conflict or dissonance must be resolved. This point may also represent a pinnacle for the

associated stress, as the middle manager would then work to reduce the magnitude of cognitive dissonance (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999; Van Veen, 2009).

Cognitive dissonance induced from the process of decision-making has been extensively researched in cognitive psychology (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2003; Wilson & Keil, 2008). Festinger (1962) advanced the fundamental theory of cognitive dissonance; he offers the most prevalent of early interpretations representing the tension between two or more simultaneous schemas and the subsequent action taken to mitigate this tension (Festinger, 1962; Wilson & Keil, 2008). One fundamental observation by Festinger is that two cognitions that are related in some way are either compatible (consonant) or not compatible (dissonant) (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999).

Cummings and Venkatesan (1976) conjectured that if a decision was immediate, non-essential, or made under duress, then the responsibility for the decision could be transferred or rationalized as not important. Transference of responsibility may also help explain situations when the middle manager's follower role was far more dominant and therefore led to less internal role conflict. In Milgram's well-known and controversial experiments (Nissani, 1990, Russell & Gregory, 2010), participants administered shocks to others when directed to do so by the researcher. In each case, immediate and essential decisions were made under duress. Many of those participants transferred responsibility for their actions to the researcher, which may have mitigated their cognitive dissonance. However, considering the importance of self-concepts and accountability, it may not be sufficient to rationalize responsibility for decisions using situational constraints or the actions of others. This may be one of the reasons the self-consistency theory was a favored source of dissonance with the individuals' guilt for their own incompetence, immorality, or irrationality (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2003).

Research by Bem and McConnell (1971) and Bem (1972) discussed self-perception

theory, where the difference between observed action and intent may result in dissonance. Self-

affirmation theory suggests that personal actions found inconsistent with moral self-images are

sources of dissonance (Aronson, Cohen, & Nail, 1999). Self-consistency, self-perception, and

self-affirmation theories are consistent with Greenwald and Binaji's (1995) view of the

importance of self-esteem as one of the fundamental building blocks of social cognition. Thus,

on a cognitive level, middle managers' intentions may be influenced by IFT and ILT - induced

self-concepts and result in dissonance when their self-concepts and their actions conflict.

Unconscious influences may be significant in the concept of self, where middle managers may

not have a predominate schema for resolving particular conflicts (Bargh, 2011). Indeed, Shanks

and Newell (2014) held that decision-making is an unconscious act. Baumeister, Vohs, and

Masicampo (2014) implied that unconscious processes might influence implicit conflicts.

Research also indicates that implicit conflicts are tied to an increase in stress (Baerga Cordero,

2009; Ornstein, 2008). Middle managers' stress gives substance to their cognitive dissonance

and may have unintentional consequences for organizations.

Hammett (2007) discusses how conflicting expectations of managers can result in stress

because constant mental agility is required to compensate for the conflicting expectations.

Tetrick (1991) recognizes that the internalized psychological meaning of multiple roles can also

lead to role stress. Each manager experiences his or her roles differently, resulting in different

amounts of role stress for each manager. Many studies addressing role conflict refer to dyadic

relationships and how these personal relationships may interfere with organizational efficiency

and effectiveness (Baerga Cordero, 2009; Baker and Gerlowski, 2007; Bernerth, Armenakis,

Feild, Giles, & Walker, 2007; Vega, 2004). Enduring these relationships and role stresses may

reduce the middle manager's long-term effectiveness and retention (Baerga Cordero, 2009; Delmestri, 2006; Ornstein, 2008). Furthermore, a contrast between resultant actions and schemas could be an important source of stress if leadership and followership actions are found not to be consistent with their simultaneous leadership and followership self-schemas (Rico, 1965).

Summary

Within any hierarchical organizational structure, the behavioral relationships of middle management relate as much to the internal or cognitive environment of the manager as to the external or explicit environment of the manager. From cognitive psychology literature, the middle managers' implicit and explicit challenges reveal several concepts where simultaneous leader and follower roles may be in conflict. Schemas of middle managers formed subconsciously through their experiences and perceptions can manifest conscious and possibly even unconscious dissonance, which in some cases can be mitigated. From a social cognition perspective, the relative importance of these middle management schemas and roles appear to have direct relationships with their concepts of self and subsequent relationships with others in an organization. Roles, as they are introduced explicitly, are also interpreted implicitly and where there are inconsistencies there is stress. While cognition psychology and neuroscience continue to probe the cognitive boundaries of decision-making, further qualitative investigation into the middle managers' sense-making by exploring their lived experiences may help reveal what it is like to be simultaneously a leader and follower.

References

Aronson, J., Cohen, G., & Nail, P. R. (1999). Self-affirmation theory: An update and appraisal. In E. Harmon-Jones & J. Mills (Eds.), *Cognitive dissonance: Progress on a pivotal theory in social psychology* (pp. 127-147). doi:10.1037/10318-006

Baerga Cordero, J. A. (2009). *The relationship between organizational role stress of project managers and voluntary turnover, job satisfaction and intention to leave* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database. (UMI No. 3354369)

Baker, S., & Gerlowski, D. (2007). Team effectiveness and leader-follower agreement: An empirical study. *Journal of American Academy of Business, 12*(1), 15-23. Retrieved from http://www.jaabc.com/journal.htm

Bargh, J. A. (2011). Unconscious thought theory and its discontents: A critique of the critiques. *Social Cognition, 29*(6), 629-647. doi:101521SOCO2011296629

Baumeister, R. F., Vohs, K. D., & Masicampo, E. J. (2014). Maybe it helps to be conscious, after all. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 37*(1), 20-21. doi:10.1017/S0140525X13000630

Bem, D. J. (1972). Self-perception theory. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*, (Vol. 6; pp. 1-62). New York, NY: Academic Press.

Bem, D. J., & McConnell, H. K. (1971). Testing the self-perception explanation of dissonance phenomena: On the salience of premanipulation attitudes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 14*(1), 23-31. doi:10.1037/h0020916

Bernerth, J. B., Armenakis, A. A., Feild, H. S., Giles, W. F., & Walker, H. J. (2007). Is personality associated with perceptions of LMX? An empirical study. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 28*(7), 613-631. doi:10.1108/ 01437730710823879

Carney, M. (2004). Middle manager involvement in strategy development in not-for profit organizations: The director of nursing perspective-How organizational structure impacts on the role. *Journal of Nursing Management, 12*(1):13-21. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2834.2004.00388.x

Currie, G., & Procter, S. J. (2005). The antecedents of middle managers' strategic contribution: The case of a professional bureaucracy. *Journal of Management Studies*, *42*(7), 1325–1356. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6486.2005.00546.x

Cummings, W. H., & Venkatesan, M. (1976). Cognitive dissonance and consumer behavior: A review of the evidence. *Journal of Marketing, 13*(3), 303-308. Retrieved from https://www.ama.org/publications/JournalOfMarketingResearch/Pages/current-issue.aspx

Dansereau, F. (1995). A dyadic approach to leadership: Creating and nurturing this approach under fire. *Leadership Quarterly, 6*(4), 479-490. doi:10.1016/1048-9843(95)90022-5

Delmestri, G. (2006). Streams of inconsistent institutional influences: Middle managers as carriers of multiple identities. *Human Relations, 59*(11), 1515-1541. doi:10.1177/0018726706072848

Epitropaki, O., & Martin, R. (2005). From ideal to real: A longitudinal study of the role of implicit leadership theories on leader-member exchanges and employee outcomes. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 90*(4), 659-676. doi:10.1037/0021-9010 .90.4.659

Festinger, L. (1962). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Flannery, K., & Walles, R. (2003). How does schema theory apply to real versus virtual memories? *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, *6*(2), 151-159. doi:10.1089/109493103321640347

Frohman, A. E., & Johnson, L. W. (1992). *The middle management challenge: Moving from crisis to empowerment*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Graen, G., Cashman, J. F., Ginsburg, S., & Schiemann, W. (1977). Effects of linking-pin quality on the quality of working life of lower participants. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 22(3)*, 491-504. doi:10.2307/2392185

Greenwald, A. G., & Banaji, M. R. (1995). Implicit social cognition: Attitudes, self-esteem, and stereotypes. *Psychological Review, 102*(1)*,* 4-27. doi:10.1037/0033-295X.102.1.4

Hammett, P. (2007). *Unbalanced influence: Recognizing and resolving the impact of myth and paradox in executive performance*. Mountain View, CA: Davies-Black.

Harmon-Jones, E., & Harmon-Jones, C. (2003). Whatever happened to cognitive dissonance theory? *General Psychologist*, *38*(2), 28–33. Retrieved from http://www.socialemotiveneuroscience.org/pubs/hj_hj2003diss.pdf

Harmon-Jones, E., & Mills, J. (1999). An introduction to cognitive dissonance theory and an overview of current perspectives on the theory. In M. E. Harmon-Jones & J. Mills (Eds.), *Cognitive dissonance—Progress on a pivotal theory in social psychology* (pp. 3-21). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. doi:10.1037/10318-001

Heames, J. T., &. Harvey, M. (2006). The evolution of the concept of the 'executive' from the 20th century manager to the 21st century global leader. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, 13*(2), 29-41. doi:10.1177/10717919070130020301

House, R., Filley, A., & Gujarati, D. (1971). Leadership style, hierarchical influence and the satisfaction of the subordinate role expectations. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 55*(5), 422-432. doi:10.1037/h0031775

Hsieh, F., Ferrer, E., Chen, S., & Chow, S. (2010). Exploring the dynamics of dyadic interactions via hierarchical segmentation. *Psychometrika, 75*(2), 351-372. doi:10.1007/s11336-009-9146-8

Huy, Q. (2011). *How collective emotions and social identities influence strategy execution* (INSEAD Faculty & Research Working Paper 2011/56/ST). Singapore: INSEAD.

Jackson, D., & Humble, J. (1994). Middle managers: New purpose, new directions. *Journal of Management Development, 13*(3), 15-21. doi:10.1108/02621719410051966

Kanter, R. (2004, July-August). The middle manager as innovator. *Harvard Business Review, 82*(7/8), 150-161. Retrieved from http://hbr.org/

Likert, R. (1961). *New patterns of management*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Maccoby, M. (2009). Needed: Managers who are leaders. *Research Technology Management, 52*(2), 58-60. Retrieved from http://www.maccoby.com/Articles/NeededManagers.shtml

Nealey, S. M., & Fiedler, F. E. (1968). Leadership functions of middle managers. *Psychological Bulletin, 70*(5), 313-329. doi:10.1037/h0026505

Nissani, M. (1990). A cognitive reinterpretation of Stanley Milgram's observations on obedience to authority. *American Psychologist, 45*(12), 1384-1385. doi:10.1037/ 0003-066X.45.12.1384

Ornstein, T. (2008). The fluidity of middle management: An embedded intergroup relations perspective on organizational middleness (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database. (UMI No. 3321870)

Paolillo, J. (1987). Role profiles for manager's at different functional areas. *Group & Organization Management, 20*(12)*, 109-118.* doi:10.1177/10596011870120010

Ray, L. K. (2006). *Follow the leader: An investigation of the relationship between hierarchical levels and measures of follower behaviors of selected North Carolina Community College employees* (Doctoral dissertation, East Carolina University). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database. (UMI No. 3239845)

Rico, L. (1965). Managerial schizophrenia: The personnel function in a firm. *Human Resource Management*, *3*(4), 11–23. doi:10.1002/hrm.3930030403

Russell, N. J. C., & Gregory, R. J. (2011). Spinning an organizational "Web of Obligation"? Moral choice in Stanley Milgram's "Obedience" experiments. *The American Review of Public Administration*, *41*(5), 495–518. doi:10.1177/0275074010384129

Shea, C. H., & Wulf, G. (2005). Schema theory: A critical appraisal and reevaluation. *Journal of Motor Behavior, 37*(2), 85-101. doi:10.3200/JMBR.37.2.85-102

Shondrick, S.J., & Dinh, J.E., & Lord, R.G. (2010). Developments in implicit leadership theory and cognitive science: Applications to improving measurement and understanding alternatives to hierarchical leadership. *Leadership Quarterly, 21*(6), 956–978. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2010.10.004

Shanks, D. R., & Newell, B. R. (2014). The primacy of conscious decision making. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 37*(1), 45-61. doi:10.1017/S0140525X13001507.

Spreitzer, G., & Quinn, R. (1996). Empowering middle managers to be transformational leaders. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 32*(3), 237-261. doi:10.1177/0021886396323001

Sy, T. (2010). What do you think of followers? Examining the content, structure, and consequences of implicit followership theories. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *113*(2), 73–84. doi:10.1016/j.obhdp.2010.06.001

Tetrick, L. (1992). Mediating effect of perceived role stress: A confirmatory analysis. In J. C. Quick, L. R. Murphy, & J. J. Hurrell, Jr. (Eds.), *Stress & well-being at work: Assessments and interventions for occupational mental health* (pp. 134-152). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. doi:10.1037/10116-009

Trong, L. T., & Kim, B. T. L. (2010). Schema-building and listening. *Studies in Literature & Language*, *1*(5), 53-64. doi:10.3968%2Fj.sll.1923156320100105.006

van Gils, S., van Quaquebeke, N., & van Knippenberg, D. (2010). The X-factor: On the relevance of implicit leadership and followership theories for leader-member exchange agreement. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 19*(11), 333-363. doi:10.1080/13594320902978458

Vega, R. L. (2004). *The influence of leader-follower relationships on leadership effectiveness within a voluntary organization in Hawaii* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Phoenix). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database. (UMI No. 3202468)

Willcocks, L., & Griffiths, C. (2010). The crucial role of middle management in outsourcing. *MIS Quarterly Executive*, *9*(3), 177-193. Retrieved from http://misqe.org/ojs2/index.php/misqe/article/view/322

Wilson, D., & Keil, R. (2008). The real creative class. *Social & Cultural Geography*, *9*(8), 841-847. doi:10.1080/14649360802441473

Yukl, G. (2010). *Leadership in organizations* (7th ed.).Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Žvelc, G. (2010). Relational Schemas Theory and Transactional Analysis. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, *40*(1), 8-22. doi:10.1177/036215371004000103

Author Biography

Steven Geer graduated from the University of Maryland with a B.S. in Electrical Engineering and earned a M.A. in Procurement Management from Webster University. He retired from the USAF as a Lieutenant Colonel in 2001. Steven is employed as an electrical engineer for a major defense contractor and is currently working on his dissertation as a doctoral student in Business Administration at the University of Phoenix.