

The Psychological Distance within the Dynamics of the Leader/Follower Relationship

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Abstract

For the last few decades (1980’s through the present), the majority of social psychology research into leadership dynamics of an organization has focused on the management employee, treating the rank and file with cursory interest through studies on productivity, job satisfaction and retention. With the introduction of the terms “Follower” and “Followership” injected into the leadership/management vocabulary, social psychologists and leadership consultants began taking a fresh new look at the human side of work. This new line of inquiry focuses on the follower in the organization, while this paper takes a close look at the leader-follower dynamic in the workplace. The literature review identified eight workforce relationship factors as common themes within the leader-follower relationship. These selected categories identify the multifaceted leader-follower dynamic to working relationships, showing whether leader and the follower have a distal (or psychologically distant), or proximal (or psychologically aligned) relationship, and whether each is comfortable with their working arrangement (positive or negative). To better illuminate this interaction of opposites, a case scenario will be employed to describe how proximal and distal interactions look before and after an upsetting workplace event.

The leader-follower relationship dynamic in the workplace is a difficult factor to measure. Leadership literature instructs managers and leaders to spend the bulk of their time on developing team cohesion, group personality, and foster collective productivity (Baron, Byrne & Branscombe, 2005). This literature teaches that by treating everyone as one singular system,

followers will exhibit job satisfaction and high productivity (Hunter, 2006), even fostering actions that will likely create a positive workplace environment (Brehm, Kassin & Fein, 2002). Yet, these elements, when practiced, produce few if any positive results (Chen, 2006). What makes some leaders and followers get along, while others do not? The answer is the psychological distance initiated and maintained by the follower (Adair, 2008b).

When managers mirror an employee's assessed psychological distance, job satisfaction and productivity improve. Meanwhile, when managers act in opposition to an employee's anticipated psychological distance needs, job satisfaction and productivity decline (Wade & Tavis, 2002). The focal point affecting employee job satisfaction and productivity rests within the realm of interpersonal relationships between the leader and the follower, not the group (Chaleff, 2003). The case scenario at the end of this paper will show how this interaction can be both beneficial and detrimental to team dynamics.

What is Psychological Distance?

Liberian, Trope, and Stephan (2007), have defined four types of psychological distance. The first is Temporal Distance, or time distance. The farther a person lives from an event in the past, the more difficult it is to relate to the emotions that accompanied that event. The second type of psychological distance is Spatial Distance. This form of distance reacts to the information a person possesses. The less information a subject has about a topic, the more distal the psychological distance. The greater the volume of information, the more proximal, or the more the subject accurately knows about a subject (Liberian et al, 2007).

Social Distance is the third of four types of psychological distance. This form of distance refers directly to the relationship between two or more people. These relationships can be either personal, or public in nature. Hypotheticality is the fourth kind of psychological distance recognized. The opposite of temporal distance, Hypotheticality looks into the future and asks "What if..." basing emotions and energy on that thought process as if it could become reality (Liberian et al, 2007).

The type of psychological distance this article focuses on is the social distance, or the relationship dynamic between a leader and a follower within the workplace. Some employees seem to establish relationships and build bonds with coworkers (Harter, Schmidt & Keyes, 2002). These employees appear to exhibit a need for proximal psychological distance, or a need to be socially close to others. Other employees do not want to establish these bonds, and share very little personally at work. These employees seem to exhibit a need for distal psychological distance, or a need to maintain space and distance from others, even if they have previously formed unit relations such as 'belongingness' within the team environment (Livitan, Trope & Liberman, 2008).

Definition of Psychological Distance

A definition of psychological distance provides a baseline for research conducted. Early definitions have guided modern research, while the latest versions have borne the most fruit through research. Paraphrasing Antonakis & Atwater (2002), psychological distance refers to

the psychological effects of real and perceived differences between the leader and the follower.

To add to this definition, psychologically distant things are not present in the direct, subjective, experience of a person's reality (Todorov, Goren & Trope, 2006). This creates a divergence in reality as well as experiences and consequences. Since people believe they experience themselves and their surroundings simultaneously, anything not present in the experience is considered distal. Meanwhile, anything in the direct line of an experience is considered proximal (Liberman et al, 2007).

Literature Review

A thorough literature review revealed some interesting and often hidden dynamics about the leader-follower relationship within the workplace. Much of the research in the field looks at leaders first, with the follower as a cursory part of the process. This article looks at both leader and follower equally through the lens of interpersonal relationships in the workplace. These business relationships can be measured by observing the psychological distance between leaders and followers (Erskine, 2006).

The leader-follower dynamic cannot be separated any more than a coin's head can be parted from its tail. The two must exist together. Without one, the other does not exist. This creates an interdependent dynamic where the leader depends on the follower to get the job done while the follower depends on the leader for direction (Adair, 2008a).

Liberman et al (2007) suggested that when leaders ignore the other side of the coin, psychological distance grows distal. Their research demonstrated that leaders own some of the relationships at work, but the follower owns their own piece. When a follower's survival, status or tenure within an organization are jeopardized, the follower restricts leader access to their part of the leader-follower relationship.

Even through limited relationship access, leaders may profess to own several types of power in the workplace. Followers, however, have the strongest kind of power at their disposal, relationship power. Relationship power determines whether a manager and employee get along well, how much effort will go into a process, and overall job satisfaction in the work-center (Blumen, 2008).

Interpersonal business relationships could be measured by observing the psychological distance between leaders and followers (Collinson, 2005). This distance is common in most interpersonal business relationships, which makes finding subjects to observe easy (Erskine, 2006). Even when nobody has been put in charge of a group, people tend to self-organize. This creates clusters of followers around few leaders. Perceptions about processes also begin diverge at this point as well (Latane, Liu, Nowak, Bonevento & Zheng, 1995).

When followers and leaders view the same performance, they often perceive it differently. This creates psychological distance in both language and social contexts between leaders and followers. At the same time, if non-members of the group criticize the perception of performance, the leader gets the blame. Even if the body of followers within the team or group

are loyal to their leader, or exhibit a proximal psychological distance, the direction of blame rests on the leader's shoulder first (Hollander, 2008).

The probability that a leader thinks a certain way has more impact on a follower than the leader's actual thoughts, suggesting that followers make judgments about leader-follower relations (Avolio & Locke, 2002). The results are typically more pessimistic than when leaders are asked to judge the same leader-follower relationships. Followership behavior can be categorized on two dimensions such as the attractiveness of being part of an in-group that does not include the leader, and the tendency to side with the safer of two social classes. Followers tend to choose the team instead of the leader as a class association (Todorov et al, 2006).

In the landmark book *The Courageous Follower*, the author discusses the psychological and social barriers that exist between a manager and a follower. It can be emotionally draining for a follower to step up and contradict a manager's decision, even when the follower knows the manager is wrong. Once that barrier has been crossed, and a relationship has been established based on the follower's terms, job satisfaction can rise dramatically (Chaleff, 2003).

Hunter, (2006), suggested that the team environment could model the viability of job characteristics. His research pointed to positive and negative follower traits as predictors of job satisfaction as related to productivity. Several dimensions of follower behavior directly affect the leader-follower relationship dynamic in play as business occurs.

In the Leadership Quarterly article, *Leader Distance: A Review and a Proposed theory*, the authors argue that leaders do not have to be emotionally close to followers to foster a highly productive environment. This article discussed key terms that influence the rest of this article. Leaders can be proximal, or desire to maintain strong interpersonal relationships, maintaining contact with followers on a professional as well as a personal level. Leaders can also be distal, or maintain a comfortable distance emotionally from others, creating an environment where leaders and followers rarely mingle (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002).

Antonakis and Atwater (2002) identified eight typologies as other forms of distance as part of psychological distance. They evaluated physical and social distance, including perceived leader-follower interaction frequency. This paper acknowledges those dimensions, but focuses solely on psychological distance in the leader-follower relationship.

The eight leadership typologies identified are: Proximal, Hands-Off, Virtually Close, Socially Distant, Virtually Distant, Avuncular, Manor House, and Distal (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). To some degree, each typology utilizes some element of distal or proximal behavior in the leader-follower dynamic. This warrants a deeper look at these two. Proximal leaders may be charismatic, commanding respect through example. They treat followers as equals, seeking camaraderie and loyalty. Alexander the Great follows this pattern. Mahatma Gandhi also exemplifies the proximal typology. The distal leader type feels both physically and emotionally removed from the day-to-day interactions of the team. Seemingly aloof or uninvolved, this type of leader establishes a leader-follower relationship based on very little interaction. Adolph Hitler was identified specifically as a distal type leader. Duke Ellington was another leader that fit easily into the distal typology of leadership (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002).

What their study did not address was the follower's mindset within the relationship. Followers are often treated as a variable to the leadership style. The ultimate goal of most leadership research focuses on creating positive leader-follower interactions that create sustained productivity. This occurs through an alignment of leader and follower psychological distance needs whether these needs are proximal or distal.

Hypotheses

Managers and leaders typically believe that they are relating to followers by creating a sense of proximal psychological distance that is comfortable from the leader's perspective (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). This may not be true for all employees since leaders and followers perceive work from different paradigms (Coon, 2003). In an interpersonal work relationship followers tend to become distal from leaders more frequently than proximal (Adair, 2008b). To validate this hypothesis the following parameters should be true:

- H1: As a leader seeks to establish a distal work relationship with a distal follower, the tone of the relationship will be distal and positive.
- H2: As a leader seeks to establish a distal work relationship with a proximal follower, the tone of the relationship will be distal and negative.
- H3: As a leader seeks to establish a proximal work relationship with a distal follower, the tone of the relationship will be distal and negative.
- H4: As a leader seeks to establish a proximal work relationship with a proximal follower, the tone of the relationship will be proximal and positive.

Reviewing the graph below, the reader can easily identify the four quadrants that define where the psychological distance within the leader-follower relationship is strongest and weakest. Quadrants related to H1 and H4 are intuitively positive where the business relationship grows and thrives, while quadrants H2 and H3 are areas where the business relationship falters, creating potential dysfunctions that may be detrimental to business success, job satisfaction and productivity.

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|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>H1</p> <p>Distal Leader (D/L) Distal Follower (D/F)</p> <p>= Distal Positive (D/+)</p> | <p>H2</p> <p>Distal Leader (D/L) Proximal Leader (P/F)</p> <p>= Distal Negative (D/-)</p> |
| <p>H3</p> <p>Proximal Leader (P/L) Distal Follower (D/F)</p> <p>= Distal Negative (D/-)</p> | <p>H4</p> <p>Proximal Leader (P/L) Proximal Follower (P/F)</p> <p>= Proximal Positive (P/+)</p> |

Case Scenario

This case scenario is based on real events, though names, titles, and industry have been altered to protect innocent and guilty alike. This scenario began in Arizona on a warm spring day in 2007. The mood at Custom Training Development Group (CTDG) was positive, energizing, and optimistic. Previous quarter numbers were up and the new quarter’s numbers were expected to continue rising with three new clients signed. Times should have been great.

For the last six years this organization ran smoothly with little turnover. Paul Prout was President and owner of CTDG, a small training development organization that specialized in corporate training via interactive live video sessions and streaming prerecorded video. Paul employed eleven people full time with no part timers and no contractors. As a leader, Paul was considered energetic, personable, the type of leader everyone enjoyed being around. His leadership style exuded that of the proximal typology discussed earlier.

Paul’s senior staff consisted of two people, Richard Locke, another proximal minded leader, and Sandra Phillips, a devout distal leader. Over the years, Sandra had become accustomed to Richard’s and Paul’s lively conversations as long as they did not drag her in. She was much more comfortable listening anyway. Richard and Sandra each had their own teams. Sandra had the technology and applications team while Richard had the soft skills and motivational team. Sandra’s team taught classes in Windows applications, assessments, even the hard human resource compliance classes. Richard’s team taught classes that were named, “Speed Bumps of Distrust,” “Leadership is Like a Symphony,” and “Doctor, my Process is Killing Me!”

Sandra and her four direct reports were the quiet team, even though Teresa Roper, Sandra's curriculum developer, was proximal by nature. Teresa enjoyed her quiet team, but would hang out with Richard's team from time to time to get her people-contact quota. Richard had three direct reports, two of whom were proximal by nature (Marshal Silvers and John Ayne), leaving the one distal employee, Anne Roche, who often felt like a fish out of water during team meetings. There were more to this organization, but too many names could become confusing. Besides, the key players in the dramatic upset that nearly closed CTDG down have already been mentioned.

The Problem

Recently, one of CTDG's new clients called Paul with a concern. She wanted to express her reservations about an issue before continuing her relationship with CTDG. The more she talked, the more Paul was stunned, shocked and surprised. Two of his best employees were trying to undercut him and steal business so they could moonlight as quiet and secret competition. Richard and Marshal, half of his soft skills training team, were grooming the new client to take on extra services outside the mission of CTDG, and this concerned the client. She had agreed to specific services, only to receive further solicitations for more money by Paul's enterprise. By the end of the conversation the client had thanked Paul for the work he had done up to this point, but planned to move on to another vendor to avoid any further conflicts.

Paul called both Richard and Marshal into his office. He began by explaining that they have been invaluable members of the team for a long time. They were a family, and families trust each other. He looked at Richard and said, "I have given you a lot of trust over the years." Both Richard and Marshal looked uncomfortable as they sat there being chided. Then Paul told them why they were in his office. "Crystal Sandino just called with a concern. She is under the impression that you two are trying to get her to buy services outside the parameter of our contracted agreement! You are soliciting our clients to take on extra services! Can you explain this to me?"

They spent the next hour arguing about ethics and what services CTDG should be offering. Soon, Paul discovered that Richard and Marshal were moonlighting with most of their clients. Confused, Paul asked why no other clients had stepped forward with similar complaints. Richard admitted that the clients only saw one bill. CTDG received their fee, and then the rest of the money was funneled into a side account to pay Richard and Marshal their share for the extra services they had been providing.

Paul had the firm's accountant review every transaction between CTDG and their clients to find that Richard and Marshal had been siphoning money into their personal accounts. He wanted to keep this whole ordeal silent in an effort to preserve Richard and Marshal's reputations, but he needed to let them go. He felt that he had no choice. He took their access badges and sent them home for the day to consider their options.

Unfortunately, since CTDG was a small organization, the firing of two key employees would not go unnoticed so he had to think of something to maintain the high morale and team cohesiveness

that this organization had enjoyed for years. He was not good at delivering bad news. Later that day he called Sandra into his office.

Now, being the distal minded employee, Sandra felt comfortable keeping a professional distance from her co-workers, but she did enjoy their company. When Paul described what Richard and Marshal had done, she was emotional and upset. She trusted those two as well, and wanted to find a way to make it right for the clients they had deceived. It was at this time she realized that Richard and Marshal set up an expectation in the clients' eyes that CTDG were providing certain services that it really had not agreed to provide. How will the clients react when they learn we can no longer serve them in that capacity? This question stumped Paul. He suggested that they continue providing the services anyway, but he did not know what services Richard and Marshal had been providing their clients.

Sandra agreed to sit with Richard and create a list of services he had promised that went beyond the CTDG Mission. Neither Richard nor Marshal answered their phones. By the end of the day Paul and Sandra had kept this incident quiet, so no one had suspected as of yet. However, both Richard and Marshal were restricted from returning to work until further notice.

The next morning, Marshal met John, his fellow soft skills trainer in the parking lot. Marshal explained that he had left his security badge at home by mistake and needed to get his flight itinerary so he could meet with a potential client. Seeing nothing unusual about this request, John let him in. Marshal disappeared into his office for about five minutes then appeared in John's office doorway with a request, "If anyone asks, you never saw me this morning. Ok?" Marshal had a box filled with what looked like files instead of a flight itinerary. This was odd enough that he told Ann, another soft skills trainer, as soon as she came in and passed his office.

John is proximal by nature, but seems to be the only person in the office who has ever gotten close to Ann, who is quite distal in her nature. Very few know anything about her personal life, and she likes to keep it that way. She segregates work from family very well. When Ann spoke to Paul about Marshal, Paul called John into his office and wanted to know what Marshal had taken. Now Paul was upset. Unfortunately, he took his frustration out on John. From this point on, John became very distal from Paul, which created added stress for both Paul and John. The news spread like fire through the office. That morning both Marshal and Richard called Paul to resign.

New Team Dynamics

By the end of the month CTDG had lost four more clients, including another new one. The next quarter's numbers looked grim. John and Ann were working on twice the accounts as before to fill the void with Marshal and Richard's departure. John was so busy working he did not have time to talk with anyone, which caused stress and frustration. Ann, on the other hand, buried herself in her work and seemed so focused that nothing could distract her. Where John fell short, Ann was strong.

Paul found it difficult to relate with everyone in a distal mode. But, he was still so upset! He tried to create a proximal environment again with miserable results. The team building activity

frustrated Ann and Sandra, who both considered it a waste of time with all of the work still to do. He felt the cold distance between himself and John, and regretted unloading on John after Marshal deceived him to get back into the office.

Sandra's ability to adapt and cope in this now distal environment energized her, however. She seemed to take on a leadership role to steer CTDG out of this quagmire by contacting every client to audit services and contract costs. Any anomalies were recorded, but not addressed at that time. So far, she had discovered contract violations in more than half of their client base.

After the meeting with Paul, John feared for his job. He did not know Marshal was restricted from entering the premises. He missed Richard and Marshal, and wanted to reestablish his proximal ties with them to create a sense of normalcy again. He called Richard at home and they chatted for a while. It felt good to talk to him again, John thought. Richard asked if he could find a list of subjects that they had developed over the years. Richard mentioned creating a portfolio for job interviews. John said he would do his best. After an hour, he had a list compiled and sent an email to Richard from his work computer.

The IT employee saw the email sent to Richard and reported it to Paul. Within fifteen minutes John and Paul were sitting together again. Both Paul and John felt lost and frustrated as they floundered in their responsibilities trying to reestablish the relationship element of their jobs that drove them before. They decided to clear the air. They went to lunch to talk over what had been going on.

Ann took charge of the tasks that needed to get done, requiring little or no 'warm and fuzzy' input as this is what (in her opinion) caused this whole mess in the first place. She watched Paul and John leave for lunch as Sandra approached her office. Ann and Sandra seemed to be running the show now, and that was fine with them. They enjoyed working together, and believed that with Richard and Marshal gone they can finally get some real work done.

Scenario Summary

When the CTDG team was primarily proximal, the distal employees felt separated from the core. Yet, through this trauma nearly everyone became distal. Only the employees who were distal by nature seemed to rise to the occasion. When the team became distal, the proximal employees felt out of place. A balance between distal and proximal seems to be the most productive mixture within a team. What that balance looks like may vary based upon the team itself.

Conclusion

This article suggests that the majority of working relationships will be distal, but many distal relationships can be positive working relationships within the leader-follower relationship dynamic. Some leaders may be dominantly proximal while others are naturally distal. Some followers gravitate to the proximal while other followers are inherently distal. When the leader-follower relationship dynamic is in opposition, or out of alignment, between the proximal and distal, the relationship dynamic will most likely be distal and negative by default.

According to the literature review for this paper, the leader can have a direct impact on how a follower views the leader-follower relationship dynamic. This means that the leader can sway a follower's perception as either positive or negative, putting the weight of creating positive relations between leader and follower on the leader's shoulders. However, the leader has no impact on a follower's tendency to be either distal or proximal in these relationships.

Counter to intuitive thought, the power base that determines leader-follower dynamics in the workplace belongs to the follower, not the leader. Since most working relationships become distal at some point, it is up to the follower to create the long-term positive relationship in the workplace. Note, however, this long-term positive relationship begins when the leader moves first to establish the relationship.

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