



The Impact of Previous Leaders on the Evaluation of New Leaders: An alternative to Prototype Matching

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Barbara A. Ritter

Assistant Professor of Management and Statistics

E. Craig Wall, Sr. College of Business
Coastal Carolina University
E-mail: britter@coastal.edu

Robert G. Lord

The University of Akron

Abstract

In two studies, this research demonstrated the existence of leader transference, a cognitive process whereby mental representations of previous leaders are activated when encountering new, similar leaders. Leader transference is posited as an alternative to prototype matching as the defining mechanism determining follower perceptions and affecting subsequent behavioral decisions. In a laboratory experiment utilizing a working group of undergraduate students, study one demonstrated that exposure to a new leader who is similar to a past leader leads to erroneous generalization of leader characteristics and associated underlying attributions. Study two showed that expectations of just treatment and abuse also are subject to transfer from old to new, similar leaders, although positive and negative affective responses were not. Results suggested that individuals exposed to a leader that is not reminiscent of an old leader may be more likely to use a general leader prototype to form leader expectations; whereas, individuals exposed to a leader who is similar to an old leader activate a significant other mental representation for use in making judgments. These results have implications for individual and relational level processes as characterized by Implicit Leadership Theory and Leader Member Exchange theory as well as macro theories of leader succession and organizational culture change.

Please contact the authors if you have any questions or wish to obtain a copy of the paper.