Being at one with each other: Leader-follower (in)congruence in transformational leadership and team performance

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of the (in)congruence between team leader self-evaluation and follower evaluation about the leader's transformation leadership (TL) on team performance as well as the conditions under which the impact can be strengthened or weakened.

Design/methodology/approach –This study adopts a survey method to collect data from matched sales team leaders and sales team members in 81 teams. Multi-level polynomial regression analysis was conducted.

Findings – Team performance was higher in the teams with balanced/high TL than with balanced/low TL. Among the teams with incongruence, no difference was found between leader underestimation and leader overestimation. TL congruence plays the moderating role on the relationship between team follower evaluation of TL and team performance such that the relationship is stronger when team leader self-evaluation and follower evaluation is congruent than incongruent.

Originality/value – This study extends our current understanding of TL literature by combining and contrasting the different perceptions on TL from both the leaders themselves and the followers towards leaders. The findings highlight the importance of the congruence versus incongruence rather than just the high or low levels of follower TL evaluation. It provides a more complete understanding of the TL and team performance relationship than the traditional view that promotes the linear relationship between TL and performance.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, (In)Congruence, Team Performance, Sales Teams, Multi-level Polynomial Regression Analysis

Introduction

Transformational leadership (TL) is an approach to leadership that is focused on inspiring followers to believe in or identify with the leader's vision beyond their own self-interest (Bass and Avolio, 1993). A transformational leader engenders higher levels of commitment among followers, with an emphasis on communicating a vision for the organization (Amor *et al.*, 2020). Evidence has been found to support the linear relationship between TL and follower performance including in-role performance such as task performance (Liaw *et al.*, 2010) and extra-role performance such as organizational citizenship behavior (Hackett *et al.*, 2018; Saboe *et al.*, 2015). Such effects are evident at the individual (Al-Ghazali, 2020), team/group (Van Dijk *et al.*, 2021), and firm level (Puni *et al.*, 2022).

While there is a body of work on the impact of TL on performance, the prevailing approach is to use *either* leader self-evaluation (Dong *et al.*, 2017) or follower evaluation (Amor *et al.*, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2021), rather than a combination of the two. Though using either leader self-evaluation or follower evaluation on TL is commonly used, such approach overlooks the important issue that leaders and followers do not always agree on their evaluations (Loignon *et al.*, 2019). Incongruence or disagreement between leaders and followers in general has a negative impact on follower job performance (Bao *et al.*, 2019), and team performance (Gibson *et al.*, 2009). In the existing research, to what extent and how the (in)congruence between leaders and followers in leader's TL influences performance is unknown.

In order to address the complexity of the potential influence of (in)congruence between leader and follower evaluations of the leader's TL on performance, this study identifies four

combinations based on the leader self-evaluation and follower evaluation of team leader's TL. They are: balanced/low TL (low in both leader self-evaluation and follower evaluation), balanced/high TL (high in both leader self-evaluation and follower evaluation), leader overestimation, and leader underestimation. Figure 1 presents a two-by-two matrix which juxtaposes the leader-follower (in)congruence in TL. By exploring the impact of the (in)congruence between leader and follower in leader's TL, this study focuses on team performance which is an important outcome of TL (Braun *et al.*, 2013) and tries to answer a number of key questions related to the influence of (in)congruence between leader and follower evaluations of the leader's TL on team performance. First, is there a differential impact on team performance where similar, favourable views of TL are held by the leader and follower compared to where similar, unfavourable views are held by the leader and follower? Second, what are the implications for team performance when the leader's self-evaluation is higher than follower evaluation of leader's TL or when the leader evaluates him/herself less favourably compared to his/her followers' ratings? Thus, it is the impact of the congruence (or incongruence) of TL perceptions between leaders and followers on team performance that distinguishes the focus of this research from other studies linking TL to team performance.

Insert Figure 1 about here

By investigating the (in)congruence of team leader and member in TL and its impact on team performance, this study will make contributions to both the leadership literature and team management practice. First, by investigating the complexity in leader-follower (in)congruence

regarding TL and team performance relationships, this study contributes to the existing research in leadership in terms of extending the current understanding of the linear TL-performance relationship. While scholars have long accepted the positive and linear effect of TL on performance, we identify a critical boundary condition to the relationship, where positive effects exist under the condition of leader-follower perception congruence rather than universally under higher levels of TL.

Second, our study contributes to the leadership literature by expanding our knowledge of the role that TL plays in a team context, which has been relied on one-sided rating of TL almost exclusively. Prior studies have combined team members' evaluations into the team level, without considering differences between various team members. We adopt an alternative approach - the multi-level polynomial regression with response surface analysis and matched leader-follower data to examine the effects of in(congruence) on team performance.

Literature review and hypotheses development

Leader-follower (in)congruence in TL

Team leaders and followers do not always hold the same views (Loignon *et al.*, 2019). However, the differences between leader and followers' views have not received sufficient research attention as they have typically been dismissed as statistical "error" (Bliese, 2000). Some studies propose the differences between leader and follower are more than a methodological artefact and have a significant negative impact on team performance (Ayoko and Callan, 2010). Existing research on leader-follower (in)congruence has examined the concepts of leader-member exchange (LMX, Lai *et al.*, 2018) and social stimuli such as goal accomplishment (Gibson *et al.*, 2009). This research can also be applied to leadership in the team context where

team leader's leadership significantly influences his/her followers' work experience, attitudes and behaviours.

One predominantly studied style of leadership, i.e. transformational leadership (TL), has been found to be significantly associated with team performance (Han *et al.*, 2018). As developed by Bass (1985), a transformational leader's behaviors include inspirational motivation, idealized influence, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. Thus, a transformational leader can articulate a compelling vision for the team, earn respect and cultivate pride through charismatic behaviors, challenge team followers to think differently and provide personalized coaching or mentoring to team followers. By engaging these behaviors, transformational leaders motivate team followers to work towards a team vision (Bass 1985) and achieve high performance through team followers' collaboration. The majority of empirical studies of TL use the followers' evaluations on their leader's TL (Amor *et al.*, 2020). Other studies use the leader self-evaluation (Dong *et al.*, 2017).

In practice, leaders and followers would hold different views of leader's TL. The team leader-follower congruence in TL is a kind of subordinate-supervisor perceptual similarity (Schaubroeck and Lam, 2002). Perceptual similarity is the similarity between a team member's description of leader and leader self-description (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Johnson, 2005). The guiding theory to explain this phenomenon is the similarity–attraction theory (Byrne, 1971; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

The issue of leader-follower (in)congruence in TL is particularly important for sales teams. This is because in sales teams, team leaders and followers jointly work closely together with customers. They work for long hours (Arnold et al. 2009) and have frequent interactions with

each other. According to the similarity–attraction theory, the leader-follower similar perception in TL would be more likely to develop positive feelings about each other and engage in constructive interactions (Byrne, 1971). Further, the shared evaluation would help team members to better predict leader' behaviors, build accurate expectations for leader and reduce conflicts in their daily interactions. Hence, the shared evaluation between leader and follower of the leader's leadership becomes very important for building their work relationships and team success (Atwater et al. 1998).

This study uses "leader-follower (in)congruence in TL" to describe how a leader and his/her followers hold different views of the leader's TL, and explores the impact of these combinations of leader-follower (in)congruence in TL on team performance in the sales teams.

Leader-follower (in)congruence in TL and team performance

Prior research has suggested a close relationship between TL and customer service performance (Weller *et al.*, 2020). We expect that leader-follower (in)congruence in TL affects team performance in two ways. First, the transformational leader, whose followers hold the same perception of high levels of TL, has more confidence in achieving team goals (Liu and Li, 2018). Second, shared evaluations are associated with superior team performance due to the positive interpersonal working relationship in sales teams. The high level of agreement between the team leader and his/her follower provides a sense of stability and certainty for team followers (Ahearne *et al.,* 2010). As the team leader and followers work closely together and have frequent interactions, the positive interpersonal relationships and team stability is crucial for team success.

The TL literature suggests that higher levels of TL are positively associated with higher levels of team performance (Han *et al.*, 2018). Under the congruence in leader-follower TL, the team follower holds consistent views with their leader regarding the leader's TL. Compare to the congruence in low level TL, the follower will be more respectful of his/her leader, follow the leader's instructions, and strive toward team goals, under situation of congruence in high level TL. Therefore, team performance is expected to be higher when team followers and leaders agree that the leader demonstrates TL than when team followers and leaders agree that the leader fails to demonstrate TL. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1. Team performance is higher when a leader is aligned with his/her follower at a high level of TL rather than when a leader is aligned with his/her follower at a low level of TL.

As shown in Figure 1, Quadrants 1 and 4 represent leader underestimation and leader overestimation respectively. The question is which scenario will lead to higher team performance.

In Quadrant 1 (leader underestimation), the team follower evaluates his/her leader as a transformational leader even the leaders do not think they are transformational. In this case, followers are more likely to trust the leader, respect him/her, and strive for team goals. Thus, the leader is better positioned to enable high team performance by inspiring team followers' joint effort. This logic is aligned with the findings that followers' evaluations of leaders' behaviour is positively related to the leader's success (Atwater *et al.*, 1995).

In Quadrant 4 (leader overestimation), the team leader views him/herself as a transformational leader. Under this self-viewed condition, leaders *believe* that they have

engaged in visionary behaviours and view their work as meaningful (Pradhan and Jena, 2019). This self-claimed "transformational leader" assumes that his/her leading behaviour has a significant, positive impact on the followers' attitudes and behaviours. However, if the team followers fail to agree with these beliefs, all the assumed positive consequences of TL are substantially curtailed. In fact, it may mean that the leader is oblivious to any staff concerns that my go unresolved. Furthermore, one of the most important potential mechanisms of the positive TL-performance linkage is by acting as a role model for employees (Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2007). However, in Quadrant 4, the self-claimed transformational leader, is not viewed as transformational by his followers and, therefore, is not aware of his/her shortcomings as a leader. In fact, having a leader that views themselves as transformational when they are not is likely to be very frustrating for followers. Therefore, we anticipate hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 2. Team performance is higher when the leader self-evaluation is lower than his/her follower evaluation than it is when the leader self-evaluation is higher than follower evaluation on TL.

The moderating role of Leader-follower (in)congruence regarding TL in the relationship of follower evaluated TL and team performance

In order to further examine the importance of leader-follower congruence regarding TL in promoting team performance, we suggest that leader–follower congruence regarding TL act as a boundary condition of the relationship between follower evaluated TL and team performance.

As mentioned before, a lot of prior research have confirmed that follower evaluated TL positively increase performance (e.g. Liaw et al., 2010). It does work well in team context.

Therefore, we suggest that follower evaluated TL leads to a higher level of team performance, which have been confirmed in prior studies, such as Han et al. (2018).

In the team context, the shared evaluations between team member and leader is crucial for the team success. The high level of agreement between the team leader and his/her follower provides a sense of stability and certainty for team follower (Swann *e*t al. 2004), which bring a sense of security to team members and provide psychological support for them to devote themselves to the work of the team. Thus, the leader-follower congruence in TL works as a boundary condition for the team operation. Meanwhile, as a kind of subordinate-supervisor perceptual similarity, it is the deep-level similarity in team (Huang and Iun, 2006). Rooted in similarity-attraction theory, when team leader and members work closely in their daily work in sales team, the deep-level similarity will have a strong positive impact on group cohesiveness (Harrison et al., 2002). Therefore, it will strengthen the positive relationship between TL and team performance. Further, when leader and follower agree with each other, they share common ideas, opinion, resulting in smoother communication between each other (Meglino and Ravlin, 1998). The follower would trust and respect the leader more. As a result, the followers will be more effectively inspired by leader to achieve team goals jointly, which in turn result higher team performance.

On the contrary, the incongruence between a leader and his/her follower in TL produces team tension (Kahn *et al.* 1964), misunderstanding, task delay and non-supportive behaviors. These negative effects aroused by in incongruence will hamper provision of effective customer service (Liao and Chuang 2004; Rucci, Kirn, and Quinn 1998). Thus, leader-follower

incongruence regarding TL will obstruct the positive effects of TL on followers' attitude and behaviours. Therefore, we anticipate hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 3. Leader-follower congruence regarding TL strengthens the relationship between follower evaluated TL and team performance.

Research methodology

Sampling procedure and sample profile

In order to test the hypotheses, we need the context of teams involving interactions between team leader and his/her follower. In this study, we chose to focus on sales teams who share the same goals, i.e. providing customers with high quality of service and products. A large electronics appliances company based in China agreed to participate in this study. This company operates an electric appliances chain with more than 1,700 stores in over 400 cities in China. Given the large size of China and cultural differences among different regions, the approach of data collection at regional level rather than national level has been adopted by many studies (e.g. Liao, Liu, and Loi 2010; Sun et al. 2007; Zhao *et al.*, 2020). We adopted a similar approach by targeting all stores in a city with over 8 million people. In the sample organization, sales teams are used based on specific product category sales. The product categories include TVs, refrigerators and washing machines, air-conditioners, small appliances, computers/OA, digital, communications-equipment, kitchens and toilets. There are teams working together following a team leader to provide full-process service for the customers for each product category. Different from other categories, such as supermarkets, staff working in this electronics appliances company have specialised knowledge about their products and need to provide customers with detailed information about their products. There are a lot of

interactions between staff and customers during the selling process. To build the company's reputation in high-quality service, staffs need to work together in teams where team leader's leadership is very important. Team leaders are responsible for completing team target sales and team followers' development. Transformational leaders would positively influence team followers via role models (e.g. good communication with customers), inspire and stimulate team followers to better perform their job, as well as consider team followers individual differences. Such leadership is needed in the context in sales. Therefore, choosing sales teams in this sample organization is appropriate for our study.

The sample organization provided us with contact information for 89 sales teams. The team sizes ranged from 3 to 6 with an average size of 4.16 and standard deviation of .48. Data were collected from team leaders and followers using hard-copy surveys. Both team leader and follower surveys were prepared in English. We followed Brislin (1980)'s recommendation and adopted the back-translation procedure. Minor disagreements were resolved through discussion. The surveys were also reviewed by the HR manager and two marketing managers and then pilot tested among team followers and leaders in the sample organization. The feedback from them was positive, suggesting good face validity.

In the team follower survey, a total of 270 team follower responses were received with a response rate of 95%. After deleting incomplete and invalid responses, there were 263 team follower responses (92%), nested in 88 sales teams. Among these teams, 14% had two follower responses, 74% had three follower responses, and 10% had 4 or 5 follower responses. The within team response rate ranged from 50% to 83% with a mean response rate of 72% (SD = .08). Among the team followers, 64% were female; 34% had education of secondary school,

53% had a diploma, and 14% had a bachelor's degree. Followers' average work tenure was 4.01 years (SD = 3.35).

In the team leader survey, a total of 85 team leader responses were received with a response rate of 94%. After deleting incomplete and invalid responses, there were 82 team leader responses (91%). Among the team leaders, 36% were female; 11% had education of secondary school, 51% had a diploma, and 38% had a bachelor's degree. Leaders' average work tenure was 7.32 years (SD = 3.34).

After matching the team leaders and followers, data from 81 team leaders and 245 followers nested in 81 sales teams were used in the subsequent analysis.

Measures

All constructs were adopted from published studies. In this study, we chose a five-point Likert scale in our study from (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Team performance. Aligning with the service feature of the sales teamwork, we adopted Liao and Chuang's (2004) measure of service team performance, which was adapted from Borucki and Burke (1999). In our research context, both team leaders and followers served customers on the floor and were actively involved in these service-based behaviours. Therefore, we asked both team leaders and followers to evaluate their team performance. The reliability coefficient was .93.

The performance data aggregation from team leader and members was based on two tests, The mean value of *Rwg* for team performance in our study was .97 which was much higher than the threshold of .60 (James, 1982). The high *Rwg* value indicated that team leader and members in each team agreed highly about their team performance. We then used intra-class

correlations to assess both inter-rater agreement and inter-rater reliability. The ICC (1) value for team performance was .21, which is higher than the threshold of .12 (James, 1982), inferring that 21% of the variance in team performance can be attributed to the team membership. The ICC (2) value was . 50, which is lower than the cut-off point of .60 recommended by Glick (1985) but comparable to the values in other studies (e.g., .28 in Liao *et al.*, 2009). The above results of *Rwg* and ICCs supported the aggregation of team leader and members' data to the team level to form the team performance data for all teams.

Follower evaluated TL. For TL, we used Podsakoff *et al.*'s (1990) measure. The 12-item measure has multi-item subscales corresponding to four dimensions: (1) idealized influence, (2) inspirational motivation, (3) intellectual stimulation and (4) individualized consideration (α's = .79, .76, .81, and .83, respectively). We asked team followers to evaluate their team leader's leadership behaviours. To examine the convergent and discrimination validity, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted with four first-order factors (the four dimensions) plus one second-order factor.

To evaluate the model fit, we ran CFA with four first-order factors (the four dimensions) plus one second-order factor and the model indicated very good model-fit (χ^2/df = 101.09/50 = 2.02, $p < .001$; CFI = .97, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .03). The factor loadings were all above .70 and significant at .001 level. As TL has been conceptualised as one construct in theory, which has been used in a number of empirical studies (e.g., Liao and Chuang, 2007; Grant, 2012), we treated leader self-evaluated TL as an overall construct by averaging the four dimensions. In terms of inter-rater analysis, the mean of *Rwg, ICCs* for follower evaluated TL was .92, .27 for

ICC(1) and .53 for ICC(2), indicating the group variance among team members in rating team leader's TL.

Leader self-evaluated TL. The same measure from Podsakoff *et al.* (1990) was used. The referent was changed to the leaders themselves. The reliability was .77 for idealized influence, .71 for inspirational motivation, .72 for intellectual stimulation, and .74 for individualized consideration. CFA was conducted with four first-order factors plus one second-order factor fell within an acceptable range (χ^2/df = 89.02/45 = 1.98, $p < .001$; CFI = .88, RMSEA = .10, SRMR = .07). The low CFI could be due to the very small sample size. Based on the overall model fit index, we treated leader self-evaluated TL as an overall construct by averaging the four dimensions.

Control variables: As team size could influence the follower evaluation of leadership, we controlled for it. The organization provided the data. The natural log algorithm was used. Another control variable is the proportion of female workers in the team, which has been found to be a critical factor influencing team performance (Inesi and Cable, 2015). The team leader provided data on the percentage of female membership, which is accounted for in the analysis. In addition, individual level variables including age, gender, education and work tenure were controlled for as they may influence team performance.

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the key studied variables about their means, standard deviations, and correlations between them.

Insert Table 1 about here

Hypotheses testing

We carried out the four-step procedure polynomial regression model by Shanock *et al.* (2010).

Step 1. Descriptive information for leader-follower evaluation (in)congruence. This step required us to check the participant distribution in the four quadrants in Figure 1. Following the procedure by Fleenor *et al.* (1996), we standardized the scores for each predictor variable (leader self-evaluation and follower evaluation for leader's TL), and use half a standard deviation as the benchmark. For example, if the standardized score of leader self-evaluation was within half a standard deviation of the standardized follower evaluation score (above or below), such cases fell into balanced TL (Quadrants 2 and 3) or agreement. The results in Table 2 revealed that half the sample (51%) had different values of leader self-evaluation and follower evaluation.

Insert Table 2 about here

Step 2. Polynomial regression analysis with surface values calculation. As our data were nested in teams, we adopted multi-level polynomial regression by following the procedure outlined in Atwater *et al.* (2005). We first centered the predictors by using the grand mean-centered approach (Aguinis *et al.*, 2013). We then calculated three new variables: (a) the square of the centered leader self-evaluation variable (X^2); (b) the cross-product of the centered leader self-evaluation and follower evaluation variable (XY); and (c) the square of the centered

follower evaluation variable (Y^2). Lastly, we ran multi-level polynomial regression model as below.

$$Z = b_0 + b_1X + b_2Y + b_3X^2 + b_4XY + b_5Y^2 + e \qquad \text{(Model 1)}$$

We examined the model improvement between the model with two predictor variables ($Z = b_0 + b_1X + b_2Y + e$, Model 0) and the above Model 1 with all five variables. The R^2 for team performance was .79 in Model 3.1 and .91 in Model 3.2. The increment of R^2 was .12.

We then evaluated the results of the multi-level polynomial regression with regard to four surface test values: a_1, a_2, a_3, and a_4. The slope of the line of perfect congruence (leader evaluation and follower evaluation) as related to team performance was given by $a_1 = (b_1 + b_2)$. Curvature along the line of perfect congruence as related to team performance was assessed by calculating $a_2 = (b_3 + b_4 + b_5)$. The curvature of the line of incongruence as related to team performance, indicating the degree of incongruence between leader self-evaluation, follower evaluation, and the team performance, was assessed by calculating $a_4 = (b_3 - b_4 + b_5)$. The slope of the line of incongruence as related to team performance, indicating the direction of the incongruence (leader overestimation where leader self-evaluation higher than follower or vice versa), was assessed by calculating $a_3 = (b_1 - b_2)$. The results for our data are shown in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 and 4 about here

Step 3. Graphing the results in Excel. To illustrate the above results, we plotted the 3-dimensional response surface using Edwards' excel file. Figure 2 presents the 3-dimension

chart of both leader self-evaluation and follower evaluation for leader's TL on team performance.

Insert Figures 2 and 3 about here

Step 4. Interpreting the surface values and the above 3D graph. In this step, we interpreted the graph (Figure 2) and calculated surface values. In our study, a_1 was positive and significant ($a_1 = .48$, $p < .01$) and a_2 was not significant ($a_2 = -.09$, *n.s.*), indicating that there was a linear (additive) relationship along the line of perfect congruence which was related to team performance. Team performance would increase when both leader self-evaluation and follower evaluation increased, when the leader and followers agreed. As shown in Figure 2, the highest level of team performance was at the back corner of the graph, where both leader self-evaluation and follower evaluation were high, while the lowest level of team performance was at the front of the graph, where both leader self-evaluation and follower evaluation were low. Figure 3 (on the left-hand side) confirmed our result, whereby a linear slope was revealed along the line of congruence ($Y = X$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported

We then interpreted how the degree of incongruence between leader self-evaluation and follower evaluation related to the outcome variable - team performance. In order to do so, we assessed the curvature along the line of incongruence ($Y = -X$) related to team performance with a_4. The a_4 was negative but not significant ($a_4 = -.25$, *n.s.*), which indicated that team performance did not decrease as the degree of incongruence increase. In terms of how the direction of the incongruence was related to the team performance, we assessed with a_3, the

slope of the $Y = -X$ line (line of incongruence). The a_3 was negative but not significant (a_3 = -.17, *n.s.*), which indicated that there was not difference for team performance when leader self-evaluation was higher than follower evaluation (leader overestimation) than when leader self-evaluation was lower than follower evaluation (leader underestimation). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

In order to test for the moderating role of the congruence between leader self-evaluation and follower evaluation of leader's TL in the relationship between follower evaluation of leader's TL and team performance, we firstly computed a new variable that captures the absolute difference between the follower evaluation and leader self-evaluation of leader's TL (i.e. subtracting the leader self-evaluation from the follower evaluation). We then multiplied it by -1. On 5-point Likert type scales, the resulting congruences scores ranges from -4 to 0; a score of -4 indicates that followers and leaders have completely different (opposite) evaluations, and a score of 0 indicates perfect congruence. Next, we tested whether this new leader-follower congruence variable would moderate the relationship between follower evaluation of leader's TL and team performance using the multi-level modelling where X was the follower-rated TL (Level 1), Y was the team performance (Level 2) and the M was the follower-leader congruence score (Level 1). A moderation effect was found, where the coefficient for the interaction term of X and M was significant ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$). We then plotted the interaction effect in Figure 4. We plotted two regressions of the relationship between follower evaluation and team performance at 1 SD below the mean, and at 1 SD above the mean of the congruence between follower evaluation and leader self-evaluation of leader's TL.

Insert Figure 4 about here

As shown in Figure 4, the positive relationship between follower evaluation of leader's TL and team performance is stronger under congruence than incongruence. We conducted simple slope analysis. The slope for the follower evaluation of leader's TL and team performance in the congruence was .87 ($t = 30.33$, $p < .001$). The slope for the follower evaluation of leader's TL and team performance in the incongruence was .17 ($t = 8.47$, $p < .001$). The results of moderation and simple slope analysis reveal that congruence between leader self-evaluation and follower evaluation in leader's TL moderates the relationship between team follower evaluation of TL and team performance such that the relationship is stronger when team leader self-evaluation and follower evaluation is congruent than incongruent. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Discussion

Incongruence regarding to employees' and leaders' evaluation seem to be a very common thing. However, if such differences are reflected in the evaluation of a leader's leadership, it will be a topic well worth further exploration as we are not sure whether it affects the positive effects of leadership. This issue is particularly important in team context, where team leader and team members are in close contact and interaction on a daily basis. If incongruence views affect the performance of leadership, it will have a strong impact on the overall operation of the teams. The leadership literature has identified the disagreements in leadership evaluations between leaders and subordinates early on (Atwater and Yammarino, 1992), but has overlooked its impact in the subsequent leadership research. To this end, this paper addresses the potential

influence of (in)congruence between leader and follower evaluations of the leader's TL on performance in team context.

Our study revealed that (in)congruence between leader and followers regarding the leader's TL had an impact on team performance. Specifically, our results reveal that TL exert a linear effect on team performance in congruence situation of team leader and member in TL, where team performance is higher when both team leader self-evaluation and followers' evaluation in TL increase concurrently from low to high levels. However, when incongruence was in place, no difference emerged for team performance in leader underestimation compared to leader overestimation. The TL congruence was found to strengthen the relationship between follower evaluation of leader's TL and team performance.

*Theoretical implication*s

First, our study extends extant research on team leadership by introducing a new angle, i.e. the role of leader-follower (in)congruence in TL in promoting team performance. We strongly suggest that promotion of TL must not be unconditional, which ignores the significant role that TL incongruence between team leaders and followers plays in the process. The hypothesis was upheld, lending further support to the importance of converging evaluations of TL in teams. Our findings support the existence and importance of TL (in)congruence between team leaders and followers, aligning with other studies in LMX (Lai *et al.*, 2018) and social stimuli such as goal accomplishment (Gibson *et al.*, 2009). The finding that leader-follower congruence regarding TL matters, and that it has complex effects on team performance, is a significant contribution in providing a more nuanced understanding of leadership-related determinants of team performance. Given the impact of the incongruence, the study further highlights that

research on the underlying mechanisms that yield congruent or incongruent perceptions regarding TL is certainly warranted to further develop theory in the TL (in)congruent area.

Second, we offer a new path for sales team management research, which highlights the importance of shared perceptions of TL across the sales teams. In our study, we found that TL exert positive linear effect along the congruent line of leader-followers evaluation in TL in relation to team performance. Although one-side highly recognize leader's TL, incongruent evaluations, on the other hand, yield a below-middle effect on team performance as showed in figure 2. These findings suggest that increasing leader's TL alone is insufficient in supporting team performance (Jiang *et al.*, 2015); fostering shared high level of TL is another critical issue for sales team management. This has not been sufficiently captured to date by researchers in both the sales team management literature and the TL literature.

What is more, our findings also suggest that the congruence of leader self-evaluation and follower's evaluation in leader TL moderates the positive relationship between team follower's evaluation of TL and team performance. Therefore, our findings emphasize the importance of simultaneously valuing and enhancing leadership and leadership-followers congruent evaluation of TL when managers want to increase team performance via enhanced TL.

Finally, our study contributes to the leader-follower(s) and leader-team agreement literature through the use of multi-level polynomial analysis. For leader-follower(s) agreement research, much research only considers the team level. However, there are two assumptions if we aggregate individual level data to team level. One is that the team members agree with each other (which is not always the case). The other is that team members react in the same way

(again not always the case). Therefore, our study circumvents this issue by examining differences at both the individual and team level.

Practical implications

Our study offers important implications for store managers, sales executives as well as human resource managers. Given our research setting with relatively independent branch stores, each led by a store manager, the implications of our findings with regards to the effect of TL (in)congruence on team performance is relevant to similar settings with relatively independent branch stores (e.g. car retailers, clothing retailers, pharmacies).

First, managers should develop strategies to foster high-level agreement on TL as well as design training plans for both team leaders and followers. For instance, drawing on socialization processes to show that new followers are more likely to adopt shared views and increase value congruence (Benzinger, 2016). HR managers and marketing managers should communicate TL behaviours with new employees through the socialization process to enable a unified cognition regarding TL behaviours, thereby reducing the potential for leader-follower TL incongruence.

Second, team building for leaders and followers may help in fostering shared views. Drawing on relational coordination theory (Gittell, 2006), which focuses on shared goals, shared knowledge and mutual respect between members, to guide such training may support congruent views of leaders. The findings highlight the need to uncover the reasons behind inaccurate self-evaluation as this is central to congruent perceptions and, ultimately, for team building. Effective self-awareness training and confidence building for leaders with low confidence is necessary and important. Compared with asking leaders to be humble, it is more

important to improve non-humble leaders' intrinsic motivations (Yang *et al.*, 2019). Simply emphasizing to leaders, the need to express humility may lead to leaders' inaccurate self-evaluations. Over time, this inaccurate self-evaluation may provide negative psychological hints to the leaders, hindering effective leadership.

Limitations and Further Research

Our study is subject to a number of limitations that point toward avenues for future research. Firstly, our study focuses on sales teams and discusses the impact of TL (in)congruence between team leader and followers on team performance. Whether these results can generalize to higher-level management teams is uncertain. Future research can focus on middle management or top management teams to establish if the pattern of results is consistent in such contexts. Meanwhile, in our study, the respondent sales teams size in our study is 3 to 6, and the result of hypothesis 2 is not supported. Future research should also investigate it by using larger groups.

In addition, testing more complex mechanisms between TL (dis)agreement and performance would be a fruitful direction. The mediators as well as the moderators between such (in)congruence between leader and follower on team performance are worthy investigating. Those will enrich our understanding and provide more actionable points to organizations to further promote congruence between leader and follower on TL and/or other work experience and attitudes.

Thirdly, in terms of our findings, we can conclude that TL is not just an actual behaviour, but also a subjective perception. Our findings indicate that the individual perceptions of TL varied from person to person. Hence, exploring the factors that affect how these perceptions

are formed and why these (in)congruences exist in the first place could be an avenue for future research.

We see our study as a starting point for a new debate on what types of leaders are needed for sales teams. We encourage more research into the leader-follower(s) (in)congruence in TL in the context of sales teams in order to advance our knowledge of leadership and sales team management.

Conclusion

A leader and his/her follower do not necessarily share exactly the same views on the leader's TL. Ultimately, our research highlights the importance of team members evaluating their leader in a way that is congruent with the leader's self-evaluation. We further suggest that TL (dis)agreement is a common phenomenon between leaders and subordinates. Discussing its effect on organizational outcomes is meaningful for the TL literature and organizational management. Hence, it deserves more attention from researchers and practitioners alike.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1 Descriptive statistics

Variables	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Team level (Level 2)										
1. Team performance	4.35	.33								
2. Team leader self-evaluated TL	4.25	.44	.46**							
3. % of female workers	.69	.40	.10	.04						
4. Team size	1.42	.10	.08	.08	.02					
Individual level (Level 1)										
5. Team follower rated TL	4.13	.59	.35**	.21**	.10	-.06				
6. Age	1.89	.50	.07	.03	.14	-.13	-.07			
7. Gender	.33	.47	.15	.03	-.22**	.27**	-.09	-.23**		
8. Education	1.84	.71	.15	.07	.03	.19	.01	-.30**	.14	
9. Tenure	14.63	14.42	-.02	.04	-.02	-.04	-.08	.21**	-.08	-.16*

Note: The team level variables were disaggregated before calculating individual level correlations. N= 236 at individual level; = 78 at team level (listwise). * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 2 Frequencies of TLL levels over, under, and in-agreement with TLF levels

	%	Mean TLL	Mean TLF
Leader underestimation	19%	4.04	3.97
Balanced/high TL	24%	4.43	4.91
Balanced/low TL	25%	4.02	4.27
Leader overestimation	32%	4.52	3.63

Note: TLL = team leader self-evaluation TL; TLF = team follower evaluation of leader's TL

Table 3 Slopes and curvatures for (in)congruence lines

	Direct effects
a1 (slope for congruence line)	.48**
a2 (curvature for congruence line)	.09
a3 (slope for incongruence line)	.17
a4 (curvature for congruence line)	.25

Note: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Table 4 Polynomial regression results

Variables	TLF	TLL	Team performance	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3.1	Model 3.2
Level 1				
Age	-.05	.14	.44	.51
Gender	-.21*	.32	.26	.10
Education	-.22*	.10	.54	.21
Tenure	-.17*	-.04	-.21	-.22
TLF			.	.43***
TLL * TLF				.07
TLF squared				.10
Level 2				
Team size	.19	-.10	-.73**	-.47*
% of female workers	-.09	.36*	.51**	.37*
TLL				.21
TLL squared				-.20
R^2	.09	.13	.79	.91
ΔR^2			-	.12

Note: Standardized coefficients were reported.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, † $p < .10$.

Fig.1. Two-by-two matrix juxtaposing transformational leadership with evaluation sources

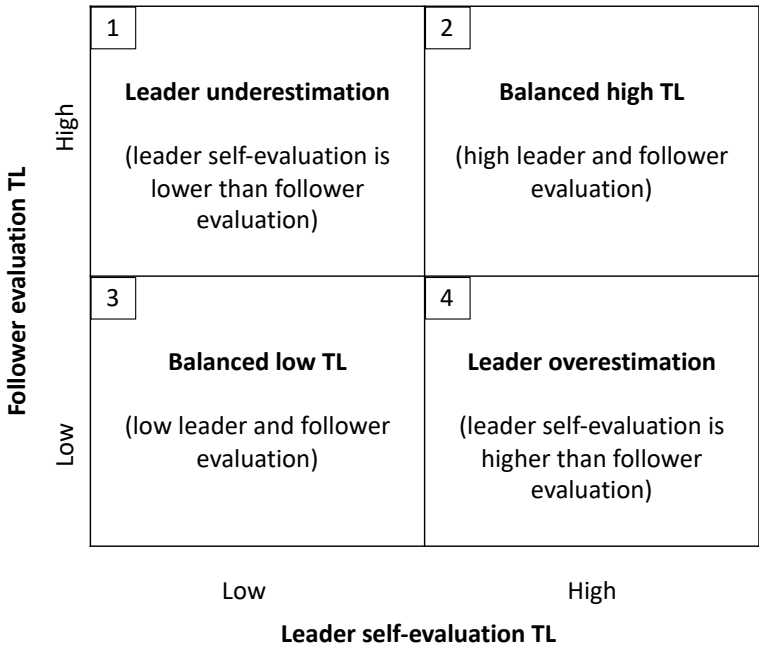
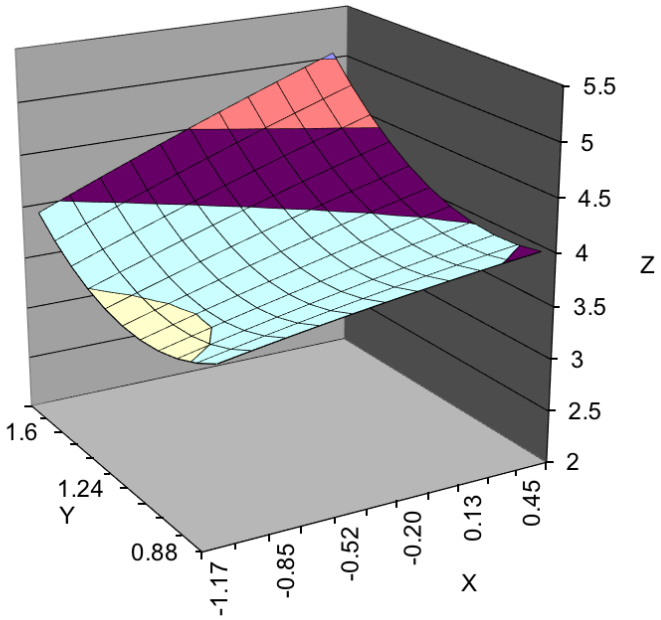
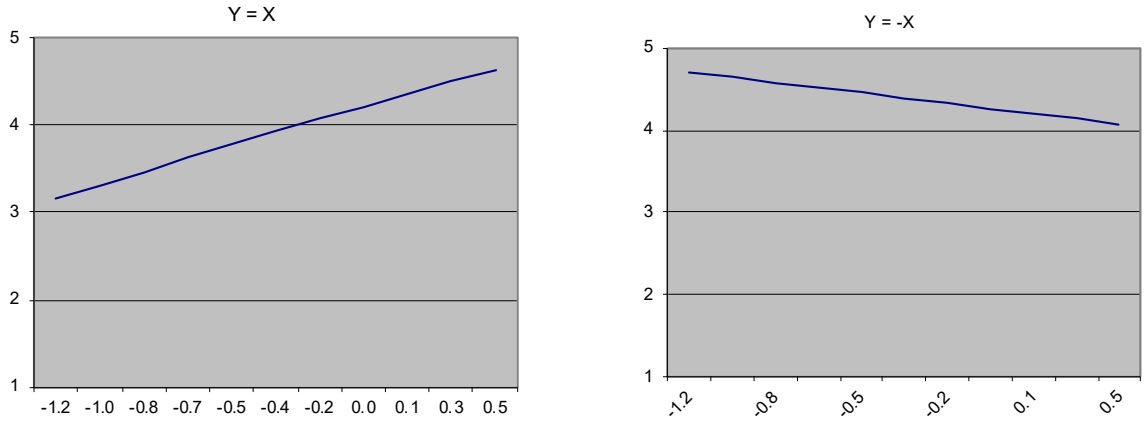


Fig.2. Response surface relating leader self-evaluation and follower evaluation with team performance



Note: X = TLL; Y = TLF; Z = team performance

Fig.3. Congruence and incongruence between leader self-evaluation and follower evaluation with team performance



Note: X = TLL; Y = TLF; Z = team performance. The plot on the left-hand side indicates the congruence between team leader self-evaluation and team follower evaluation with team performance. The plot on the right-hand side indicates the incongruence between team leader self-evaluation and team follower evaluation with team performance.

Fig.4. The Moderating effect of (in)congruence in the follower evaluation of leader's TL and team performance link