

On the Importance of the Superior's Interpersonal Sensitivity for Good Leadership

MARIANNE SCHMID MAST¹

*Department of Work and
Organizational Psychology
University of Neuchatel
Neuchatel, Switzerland*

KLAUS JONAS

*University of Zurich
Zurich, Switzerland*

CHRISTINA KLOECKNER CRONAUER AND ANNICK DARIOLY

*University of Neuchatel
Neuchatel, Switzerland*

This research is aimed at showing that interpersonal sensitivity (being attuned to and correctly inferring another person's thoughts and feelings) is an important aspect of what people expect from a good leader and that interpersonally sensitive leaders have more satisfied subordinates. In the first study, participants indicated how much they expected a good superior to be interpersonally sensitive (among other characteristics). People expect leaders to be interpersonally sensitive more so than subordinates. In the second study, participants interacted in same-gender dyads as leaders and subordinates. We measured subordinate satisfaction and leader interpersonal sensitivity. More interpersonally sensitive leaders had more satisfied subordinates. Interpersonal sensitivity is important for good leadership: It is expected from leaders, and it contributes to increased subordinate satisfaction.

The question of what constitutes good leadership has been asked again and again. Depending on the century, the authors involved, and the variables measured, responses have been quite different (McCauley, 2004). In the last decade or so, the way a leader relates to other people and in particular to his or her subordinates has been suggested as an important factor for good leadership. We call superiors who perceive their subordinates as unique individuals and who show an interest in them as a person (e.g., what they think and how they feel) *interpersonally sensitive leaders*. In the present article, we investigate whether such an attunement of the superior to the subordinate is something people expect from a good leader (Study 1) and whether a superior who is particularly skilled at assessing the subordinate's

¹Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Marianne Schmid Mast, University of Neuchatel, Department of Work and Organizational Psychology, Rue Emile-Argand 11, CH-2000 Neuchatel, Switzerland. E-mail: marianne.schmid@unine.ch

thoughts and feelings is a good leader in terms of having satisfied subordinates (Study 2).

Interpersonal Sensitivity

Interpersonal sensitivity or *interpersonal accuracy* is the ability to assess another's states and traits correctly (Hall & Bernieri, 2001; Schmid Mast, Murphy, & Hall, 2006). Hall, Andrzejewski, and Yopchick (2009) distinguished between *attentional accuracy*, which is paying attention to the social interaction partner's cues (i.e., remembering others' verbal, nonverbal, and appearance cues); and *inferential accuracy*, which is the correct interpretation of perceived cues. This distinction corresponds to *detection* and *utilization* in the realistic accuracy model of personality described by Funder (1995).

Attentional accuracy has been operationalized by accurate recall of others' verbal messages (Overbeck & Park, 2001) or of others' nonverbal cues (Hall, Murphy, & Schmid Mast, 2006) and of others' appearance (Horgan, Schmid Mast, Hall, & Carter, 2004; Schmid Mast & Hall, 2006). Research on inferential accuracy has shown that people are able to correctly infer other people's emotions (Ickes, 1997, 2003; Matsumoto et al., 2000), motives (Rosenthal, Hall, DiMatteo, Rogers, & Archer, 1979), and thoughts (Ickes, 1997, 2003); others' personality traits (Ambady, Hallahan, & Rosenthal, 1995; Ambady, LaPlante, & Johnson, 2001; Borkenau & Liebler, 1992; Funder, 1995, 1999; Murphy, Hall, & Colvin, 2003); and the type of interpersonal relationship in which two or more persons are involved (Barnes & Sternberg, 1989; Bernieri, Davis, Rosenthal, & Knee, 1994; Schmid Mast & Hall, 2004).

As in the realistic accuracy model of personality (Funder, 1995), the attentional part of interpersonal sensitivity is a precursor to being able to draw accurate inferences. In the present research, we use interpersonal sensitivity in a broad sense and include both a measure of attentional accuracy (Study 1) and a measure of inferential accuracy (Study 2), both described in more detail in the respective Method sections. Thus, we define *interpersonal sensitivity* as being attuned to and correctly inferring another person's states and traits.

Constructs Related to Interpersonal Sensitivity

To date, the relation of interpersonal sensitivity to other similar concepts, such as emotional intelligence, social skills, and empathy is far from clear. To illustrate, there is some overlap between interpersonal sensitivity and emo-

tional intelligence. Emotion recognition is a part of interpersonal sensitivity, although interpersonal sensitivity encompasses more than just emotions. Likewise, emotion recognition is part of emotional intelligence. One aspect of emotional intelligence is perceiving emotions comprised of being attuned to others' emotions and understanding others' emotions. As a matter of fact, an emotion recognition task is part of the Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2000), the emotional intelligence measure that is used most widely.

Interpersonal sensitivity is also related to social skills. A socially skilled individual possesses verbal and nonverbal social competence, which is understood as interpersonal and emotional expressivity, sensitivity, and control (Riggio, Tucker, & Coffaro, 1989). Note that social skills is a broader concept than interpersonal sensitivity in that it also includes the expression and the control part of interpersonal communication.

Researchers agree that empathy is a multifaceted construct that is composed of cognitive and emotional aspects (Davis, Hull, Young, & Warren, 1987; Lawrence, Shaw, Baker, Baron-Cohen, & David, 2004). *Cognitive empathy* refers to taking the perspective of the other, whereas *emotional empathy* is the emotional reactivity to another person's situation. Interpersonal sensitivity also encompasses the cognitive and emotional aspects of one's attunement to another person. However, interpersonal sensitivity is broader than empathy. The social perception of the other is not limited to the other person's thoughts and feelings, but includes an interest and judgment accuracy in assessing the other's personality traits and their role in social interactions or relationships as described previously.

Meta-analyses show that women, in general, are more interpersonally sensitive than are men (Hall, 1984; McClure, 2000). When investigating how interpersonal sensitivity relates to other variables, therefore, it is important to control for gender.

Interpersonal Sensitivity and Leadership Outcomes

Emotional intelligence, social skills, and empathy are all considered important aspects of leadership (George, 2000; Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004; Palmer, Walls, Burgess, & Stough, 2001; Riggio, Riggio, Salinas, & Cole, 2003; Wolff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002). Along the same lines, it has been shown that empathy is a prerequisite for leadership emergence (Wolff et al., 2002). Moreover, for Katz (1986), a leader with interpersonal skills is able to be aware of the perspective of others, is sensitive to the motives and needs of others, and takes them into account for decision making.

In the same vein, Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, and Fleishman (2000) postulated that the high-performing and effective leader requires three competencies: problem-solving skills, social judgment skills, and knowledge. In Mumford et al.'s model, *social judgment skills* are composed of perspective taking, social perceptiveness, behavioral flexibility, and social performance. Perspective taking enables the leader to understand the other's point of view on a given issue, and to be sensitive to his or her goals and needs in specific situations (Zaccaro, Gilbert, Thor, & Mumford, 1991). *Social perceptiveness* is having insight and awareness into how others function and what is important to them (Zaccaro et al., 1991).

The importance of interpersonal sensitivity for good leadership is also documented in the more recent transformational leadership approach, which emphasizes the importance for the leader to be sensitive to followers' needs and motives (Burns, 1978). In Bass's work (1985) on transformational leadership, one factor is *individual consideration*, which is understood as an attunement to followers' individual needs. This factor has shown positive relations with leader effectiveness (subordinate satisfaction and performance) in different studies (e.g., Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996).

In a vignette study, Byron (2008) found that employees were more satisfied with female (but not with male) managers when they attended to the emotions of their subordinates than when they did not. Moreover, when investigating actual managers and their subordinates, female (but not male) superiors who were more accurate in reading others' nonverbal emotional expressions had more satisfied subordinates (Byron, 2007). These studies show that gender might be an important moderator or a confound of the link between interpersonal sensitivity and leadership outcomes. This is why we included gender in both of our studies.

What Is Good Leadership?

All of the aforementioned studies used different leadership outcome measures. Good leadership can, indeed, be defined in many different ways, such as goal achievement, subordinate satisfaction, team performance, organizational outcomes, or—most often—assessment of leadership effectiveness by peers, superiors, or subordinates (Kaiser, Hogan, & Craig, 2008). In addition, emergent leadership can be seen as an outcome of good leadership behavior.

Group members most likely appoint leadership to the person with whom they are most satisfied in terms of performance or behavior. Although there is no widely accepted definition of good leadership, important decisions are based on judgments of good leadership, such as how to compensate good

leadership with bonuses and salary increases, whether a leader needs to be replaced, whether a leader qualifies for a specific training, or whether he or she is required to develop specific leadership competencies (McCauley, 2004).

In the present research, we focus on one specific aspect of good leadership: subordinate satisfaction. Subordinate satisfaction is relatively easy to assess and has shown to be related to job performance. Judge, Thoresen, Bono, and Patton (2001) reported in their meta-analysis a relation of .30 between job satisfaction and job performance. Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes (2002) reported in their meta-analytic review that employees' satisfaction means satisfaction with their supervisor. They showed that subordinate satisfaction correlates with a composite index of performance including turnover, customer loyalty, and financial performance. Subordinate satisfaction is not only related to better job performance (Judge et al., 2001), but constitutes an important factor for employee health and well-being (Faragher, Cass, & Cooper, 2005), resulting in less absenteeism and lowered health costs.

Expectations About a Good Leader

In the present research, we not only assess how differences in interpersonal sensitivity of the superior relate to differences in subordinate satisfaction (Study 2), we also ask whether interpersonal sensitivity is important for good leadership in people's minds (Study 1). Implicit leadership theory posits that people harbor expectations about what characterizes a leader, usually based on a leader prototype (Nye & Forsyth, 1991). Moreover, under an implicit leadership theory perspective, the evaluation of a leader depends on whether he or she fulfills these expectations.

To date, interpersonal sensitivity has not emerged as an important characteristic of a prototypical leader, perhaps because the leader prototype does not necessarily describe a "good" leader. We are interested in what people expect from a *good* leader. If interpersonal sensitivity is an aspect expected from good leaders and if it increases collaborator satisfaction, this would be strong evidence hinting as to the importance of interpersonal sensitivity training for leaders. There is evidence that interpersonal sensitivity can be improved by training (Costanzo, 1992).

Study 1

When people work together in a hierarchical relationship, most likely the expectations they harbor vis-à-vis the higher power person differ from the ones harbored vis-à-vis the lower power person. Although there is research investigating how leaders are perceived and what people expect their

prototypical behavior to be (Kenney, Blascovich, & Shaver, 1994; Kenney, Schwartz-Kenney, & Blascovich, 1996; Lord, Brown, Harvey, & Hall, 2001), the question as to whether these expectations include interpersonal sensitivity has not yet been explored. Moreover, it remains unclear whether the prototypical behavior expected from a leader would describe a good leader or a bad leader. In the present research, we are interested in aspects of good leadership.

Research has shown that high-power people are more interpersonally sensitive than are low-power people (Hall & Halberstadt, 1994; Overbeck & Park, 2001; Schmid Mast, Jonas, & Hall, 2009). Whether high-power people are also expected to be more interpersonally sensitive than are their subordinates is a question that has not yet been addressed.

We tested whether people's implicit theories about a good leader and a good subordinate differed, not only with respect to interpersonal sensitivity, but also with respect to characteristics such as work investment, loyalty, innovation, interpersonal sensitivity, active criticism, and acceptance of criticism. We chose work investment, loyalty, and innovation because, on the one hand, they have been identified as important aspects for prototypical leaders (Kenney et al., 1994, 1996; Lord et al., 2001). On the other hand, we thought that these aspects might also describe subordinates. Moreover, these characteristics have all been shown to be linked to overall team and organizational behavior and performance. For instance, job investment has been shown to be positively related to work satisfaction (Brown, 1996) and to be positively, though indirectly, linked to performance (Brown & Leigh, 1996). Loyalty and integrity also show positive correlations with job performance (Ones & Viswesvaran, 1998). We added active criticism and acceptance of criticism because they are important aspects of performance feedback and concern both superiors and subordinates in a 360-degree feedback situation.

If we can show that interpersonal sensitivity is a characteristic that is expected from good leaders more so than it is expected from good subordinates, this hints to the importance of interpersonal sensitivity for good leadership. We can then go on and investigate whether differences in interpersonal sensitivity of a leader are related to different outcomes, such as subordinate satisfaction.

Method

Participants

Participants were a convenience sample of 70 women and 71 men (age, $M = 29.4$ years, $SD = 9.3$; range: 18–58) who were recruited by 10 psychology

students on and near the campus. No specific recruitment criteria applied except that the person had to be at least 18 years old and willing to complete the questionnaire. There was no monetary or other compensation for participating. Participants' education was as follows: 66% held a college degree, 11% had higher vocational training, 16% had basic vocational training, and 7% had "other" education.

Procedure

The participants were asked to complete a questionnaire that measured the extent to which they agree that specific qualities are desired from either a good superior or a good subordinate (random assignment to either condition). There were 71 participants (34 females, 37 males) who completed the questionnaire on what characterizes a good superior, and 70 participants (36 females, 34 males) who completed the questionnaire on what characterizes a good subordinate. Both questionnaires contained the same questions, except that they were formulated to refer to a superior or to a subordinate, respectively.

Participants indicated their age and educational level. They rated how much experience they themselves had as a leader (i.e., "Own experience as superior") on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not much*) to 5 (*very much*; $M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.17$), as well as how much experience they had as a subordinate or assistant (i.e., "Own experience as subordinate") on the same 5-point scale ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.10$). Note that the participants' own experience as superior and as subordinate were both assessed in each version of the questionnaire.

Measures

The questionnaires assessing the characteristics of a good superior or a good subordinate, respectively, were developed by the researchers and measured six characteristics: work investment, loyalty, innovation, interpersonal sensitivity, active criticism, and acceptance of criticism. Participants indicated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 5 (*agree very much*) how much they agree with statements phrased in the following manner: "According to you, an ideal superior (subordinate) is a person who. . ."

Work investment. Participants indicated how much they agreed with statements indicating that a good superior (or a good subordinate) should be committed to his or her work and should invest as much as possible. Sample

items are “According to you, an ideal superior (subordinate) is a person who feels responsible for the quality of his or her work,” or “. . . who invests him- or herself into work 200%.” Work investment was measured with six items and showed good reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .78$). Items were averaged, and higher values indicate more work investment.

Loyalty. Participants indicated how much they agreed with statements positing that a good superior (or a good subordinate) should be loyal and trust others. Sample items are “According to you, an ideal superior (subordinate) is a person who is loyal towards the people he or she works with,” or “. . . who trusts the people he or she works with.” Loyalty was measured with four items and showed good reliability ($\alpha = .76$). Items were averaged, and higher values indicate more loyalty.

Innovation. How much participants agreed with statements indicating that a good superior (or a good subordinate) should be innovative was assessed with four items showing good reliability ($\alpha = .83$). Sample items are “According to you, an ideal superior (subordinate) is a person who takes initiative,” or “. . . who is open towards new ideas.” Items were averaged, and higher values indicate more innovation.

Interpersonal sensitivity. Participants indicated how much they agreed with statements saying that a good superior (or a good subordinate) should care about others and be interested in others and their specific personality characteristics. Note that we focus on the attentional part of interpersonal sensitivity. Sample items are “According to you, an ideal superior (subordinate) is a person who takes an interest in others as individuals,” or “. . . who is sensitive to personality differences among co-workers.” Interpersonal sensitivity was measured with five items and showed good reliability ($\alpha = .72$). Items were averaged, and higher values indicate more interpersonal sensitivity.

Active criticism. How much participants agreed with statements positing that a good superior (or a good subordinate) should actively criticize his or her subordinate (superior) was assessed with three items showing satisfactory reliability ($\alpha = .68$). Sample items are “According to you, an ideal superior (subordinate) is a person who does not hesitate to contradict his or her subordinate (superior),” or “. . . who asks critical questions if necessary.” Items were averaged, and higher values indicate more active criticism.

Acceptance of criticism. How much participants agreed with statements indicating that a good superior (or a good subordinate) should accept criticism from his or her subordinate (superior) was assessed with three items showing good reliability ($\alpha = .78$). Sample items are “According to you, an ideal superior (subordinate) is a person who accepts criticism from his or her subordinate (superior)” or “. . . who is ready to improve if criticized by his or her subordinate (superior).” Items were averaged, and higher values indicate more acceptance of criticism.

Results

To test whether participants had similar or different expectations concerning a good superior and a good subordinate on the six characteristics of work investment, loyalty, innovation, interpersonal sensitivity, active criticism, and acceptance of criticism, we calculated a 2 (Hierarchical Position: superior vs. subordinate) \times 2 (Participant Gender) ANOVA for each characteristic separately. Table 1 shows the results of the ANOVAs with respect to the hierarchical position main effects. There was no significant difference in how much people expect superiors and subordinates to invest themselves into work and to be loyal. However, superiors more than subordinates were expected to be innovative, to be interpersonally sensitive, and to criticize actively. Conversely, subordinates more than superiors were expected to accept criticism.

In terms of gender main effects, women more than men expected both superiors and subordinates to be more interpersonally sensitive, $F(1, 137) = 3.90, p = .05$; to show more loyalty, $F(1, 137) = 2.30, p = .088$ (marginally significant effect); and to be more receptive of criticism, $F(1, 137) = 6.12, p = .015$. None of the other gender main effects were significant (all $F_s < 2.34$, all $p_s > .128$). None of the interaction effects were significant (all $F_s < 2.68$, all $p_s > .103$). We repeated the same ANOVAs with the two variables "Own experience as superior" and "Own experience as subordinate" as covariates, but the results remained unchanged, indicating that the expectations were unaffected by one's own experience as a superior or as a subordinate.

Table 1

Mean Main Effects of Expectations Toward Good Superiors and Good Subordinates

Characteristic	Good superiors	Good subordinates	$F(1, 137)$	p
Work investment	3.97	3.84	1.59	.21
Loyalty	4.45	4.35	1.33	.25
Innovation	4.35	4.00	9.80	.002
Interpersonal sensitivity	4.07	3.84	6.40	.013
Active criticism	4.00	3.65	9.06	.003
Acceptance of criticism	4.03	4.39	11.53	.001

Discussion

The goal of Study 1 was to determine whether interpersonal sensitivity is a characteristic expected more from good leaders than from good subordinates. Based on the literature stressing the close link between good leadership and emotional sensitivity (e.g., emotional intelligence, social skills, empathy), we investigated whether this link would also be reflected in people's beliefs about a good leader. Our results confirm that participants saw interpersonal sensitivity as more indicative of good leadership than of good followership.

This result is not simply an effect of people generally harboring more pronounced expectations of any sort toward superiors than toward subordinates (maybe because of the fact that the superior role is more salient than is the subordinate role). We found that for some of the characteristics we measured, there was no difference between the high- and low-power person (work investment and loyalty), and there was even a difference in the opposite direction. The latter indicated that good subordinates were expected to accept criticism more so than were good superiors. Also, the interpersonal sensitivity result cannot be explained by a halo effect of people fashioning more positive expectations about superiors than subordinates across the board (maybe because of the fact that the superior position seems more attractive to people) because, again, on some other positive characteristics there was no difference (i.e., work investment and loyalty).

Note that the present study did not inflate the differences in expectations between superiors and subordinates because we used a between-subjects design. This means that each participant only responded to how he or she sees either a good superior or a good subordinate, but not both. Therefore, the participants' responses most likely did not result from a direct comparison of a good superior with a good subordinate, as would have been the case in a within-subjects design. In a within-subjects design, participants would have responded to the same questionnaires once referring to a good superior and once to a good subordinate. This would have made the hierarchy dimension salient, such that responses concerning the good subordinate might have been given to contrast the responses concerning the good superior and vice versa, thus increasing the effects. Therefore, we suggest that our results do not overestimate the differences in expectations concerning good superiors and good subordinates; they might even be a conservative estimate of the real difference in expectations.

The results we found were independent of the personal experience of our participants as a superior or as a subordinate, and also independent of gender (in that there was no significant interaction effect with gender). This is noteworthy because it shows that the expectations people have toward superiors

and subordinates are relatively stable, at least independent of their own experience and their own gender.

Of course, there are a number of limitations of the present study. Our results are, for instance, based on the relative difference between a good leader and a good subordinate. Therefore, we do not know which of the two is driving the effect. It is thus equivalent to say that good leaders are expected to be more interpersonally sensitive or to say that good subordinates are expected to be less interpersonally sensitive.

Moreover, we assessed only expectations and not whether superiors and subordinates really differ in interpersonal sensitivity. There is research strongly suggesting so. Schmid Mast et al. (2009) found high-power individuals to be more interpersonally sensitive than low-power ones. The goal of the present research was not to replicate these findings, but to show that there is an expected relation between good leadership and interpersonal sensitivity.

We tested the attentional part of the interpersonal sensitivity construct; namely, to pay attention to individual differences in states and traits. Strictly speaking, we do not know whether the participants expect superiors to really perform better when assessing others. Note, however, that attentional accuracy is a precursor of inferential accuracy. Inferential accuracy is addressed in Study 2.

We did not specify to participants what we meant by being a good leader (or by being a good subordinate, for that matter). Participants might have had many different concepts of a good leader or a good subordinate. However, this heterogeneity in the potential concepts would have worked against our finding of a difference between high- and low-power individuals. To demonstrate that the link between good leadership and interpersonal sensitivity exists not only in the eye of the beholder, but that the relation is actually there, we conducted Study 2.

Study 2

One aspect of good leadership is subordinate satisfaction. We hypothesize that the more interpersonally sensitive a leader is, the more satisfied his or her subordinate will be. In Study 2, we focus on the inferential aspect of interpersonal sensitivity, and we use an established measure to operationalize interpersonal sensitivity: the standardized empathic accuracy paradigm (Ickes, 1997, 2003; Schmid Mast & Ickes, 2007). Many of the existing studies on interpersonal sensitivity and leadership have focused on correct emotion recognition (Mayer et al., 2004; Wolff et al., 2002). We are not only interested in assessing how well a superior is able to judge another person's emotions, but also in measuring how well a superior is able to correctly infer another person's thoughts.

The empathic accuracy paradigm measures both thoughts and emotions (Hall & Schmid Mast, 2007). Including this cognitive aspect, in addition to the emotional one, seems important when asking how well a superior can relate to his or her subordinates. The assessment of another person's needs, motives, and intentions not only relies on the accurate assessment of his or her feelings, but also on correctly inferring how others think about the world (Katz, 1986; Mumford et al., 2000; Zaccaro et al., 1991).

Research has shown that interpersonal sensitivity is related to different leadership styles. There are two general kinds of leadership styles: task-oriented and socioemotional leadership, which are also identified, respectively, as *initiating structure* and *initiating consideration* (Stogdill, 1974); as *production orientation* and *employee orientation* (Likert, 1967); or as *concern for production* and *concern for people* in the leadership grid approach (Blake & Mouton, 1985).

Kellett, Humphrey, and Sleeth (2006) found that people who were judged to be better at correctly assessing others' emotions were rated as having more socioemotional leadership qualities, whereas emotion recognition was unrelated to ratings of task leadership. Moreover, different studies have shown that socioemotional leadership is related to higher follower satisfaction (Yukl, 2006). In order to address the role of leadership style when investigating the link between interpersonal sensitivity and subordinate satisfaction, we included a measure of socioemotional and of relationship-oriented leadership in Study 2 (Bales, 1950; Taggar, Hackett, & Saha, 1999).

Method

Participants

Study 2 participants were 76 students who were majoring in different areas and who participated in same-gender dyads (16 female–female dyads, 22 male–male dyads) for 1 hr. Participants were approached on campus and were asked whether they would be willing to participate in a 1-hr study on interpersonal interaction and perception. The participants were run in dyads and did not know each other. Their mean age was 26.3 years ($SD = 4.8$; range = 20–45 years).

Procedure

Upon their arrival, the participants were randomly assigned to be either the leader or the subordinate for a subsequent dyadic interaction. They were informed that their task was to prioritize a list of items needed to survive in

a lifeboat on the open sea and that they had 8 min to do so (Pfeiffer & Jones, 1970). They were told that the leader was responsible for leading the discussion, for the quality of the task solution, and for time management.

After the interaction, the leader completed a questionnaire measuring his or her relationship-oriented and task-oriented leadership. The subordinate reported how satisfied he or she was with the leader and how relationship-oriented and task-oriented he or she perceived the leader to be with the same questionnaire that the leader completed. Also, leaders and subordinates indicated how dominant and competent they felt during the interaction, and how much they liked their assigned role. Leaders then took the Empathic Accuracy Task (described in more detail later) to measure their interpersonal sensitivity.

Measures

Relationship-oriented leadership. The authors developed an 11-item questionnaire to assess the relationship orientation of the superior's leadership style during the face-to-face interaction (5 items were reverse-scored). The items were developed based on existing scales that assess relationship-oriented leadership, but we opted to create our own because the existing items are often phrased with reference to a long-term superior-subordinate relationship. This was not suitable for our purpose because the participants only interacted for 8 min.

Leaders and subordinates completed the same questionnaire. However, for the leader version, the items were phrased as statements about oneself (e.g., "I asked my subordinate for his or her opinion"); whereas for the subordinate version, the items were phrased as statements about the other person (e.g., "The leader asked for my opinion"). Additional sample items are "I took my subordinate seriously," and "I tried to create a comfortable work atmosphere." Participants indicated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 6 (*agree very much*) how much they agreed with each statement. Cronbach's alphas were .86 and .75, respectively, for the scales that were completed by leaders and by subordinates. Item scores were averaged, and higher values indicate more relationship orientation (leaders, $M = 5.24$, $SD = 0.49$; subordinates, $M = 5.17$, $SD = 0.68$).

Task-oriented leadership. A five-item questionnaire was developed by the authors to assess task orientation in leadership style (2 items were reverse-scored). For the same reasons stated previously, we opted to create our own questionnaire instead of using established measures of task-oriented leadership. Leaders and subordinates completed the same questionnaire. However, for the leader version, the items were phrased as statements about oneself

(e.g., “The goal achievement was important to me”); whereas for the subordinate version, the items were phrased as statements about another person (e.g., “The goal achievement was important to the leader”). Additional sample items are “It was important to me to make progress in solving the task,” or “I focused on solving the task.” Participants indicated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 6 (*agree very much*) how much they agreed with each statement. Cronbach’s alphas were .71 and .71, respectively, for the scales that were completed by leaders and by subordinates. Item scores were averaged, and higher values indicate more task orientation (leaders, $M = 4.99$, $SD = 0.63$; subordinates, $M = 5.27$, $SD = 0.51$).

Subordinate satisfaction. A 10-item self-report questionnaire was developed by the authors to measure subordinate satisfaction based on the interaction. Only subordinates completed this questionnaire. Sample items are “All in all, I was satisfied with the leader,” or “The leader was inexperienced” (reverse-scored). On a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 6 (*agree very much*), participants indicated how much they agreed with each statement. Cronbach’s alpha was .81. Item scores were averaged, and higher scores indicate more satisfaction ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.74$).

Manipulation check. We assessed how dominant and how competent each participant felt during the interaction, as well as how much each participant liked the assigned role. On a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 6 (*agree very much*), participants indicated how much they agreed with each statement. We assessed felt dominance with four items such as “I tried to control the interaction,” or “I felt dominant,” which were averaged ($\alpha = .77$, $M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.90$). We expected that participants in the leader role would feel more dominant than would participants in the subordinate role.

Felt competence was assessed with two items: “I felt up to the task,” and “I felt competent.” Scores on those two items were averaged ($\alpha = .82$, $M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.98$). How much each participant liked the assigned role was assessed with two items: “I felt comfortable in the assigned role,” and “I did not feel at ease with the assigned role” (reverse-scored). Both items were averaged ($\alpha = .76$, $M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.09$). We designed the two roles to be equally attractive for participants and to convey equal competence. We thus expected the two roles not to differ on attractiveness, and we expected participants in both roles to feel equally competent.

Interpersonal sensitivity. To assess interpersonal sensitivity of the leaders, we used the empathic accuracy paradigm (Ickes, 1997, 2003). Leaders watched videotaped interactions of three different target dyads. Each target dyad was composed of a real superior with his or her real subordinate (i.e., a male superior with a female subordinate in a Swiss Army recruiting center; a female superior with a female subordinate in the cleaning service of a Swiss

university; and a male superior with a male subordinate in the information technology branch of an international company). Each target dyad was videotaped while solving an 8-min survival task (Pfeiffer & Jones, 1970). After solving the task, the subordinate (target) individually watched the videotape and was instructed to stop the tape at each moment he or she had a thought or a feeling during the interaction and to report it on a sheet of paper with the corresponding time stamp on the videotape (*actual* thought or feeling of subordinate target). We selected 3 min of the entire 8-min interaction of each dyad. The 3-min excerpt was selected according to the criterion of the subordinate having had reported eight thoughts or feelings within the 3-min time window.

Participants watched these video excerpts, and the experimenter stopped the tape at the precise moment when the subordinate target individual indicated having had an actual thought or feeling (8 stops per dyad, 24 stops total). The participants were instructed to infer the thought or feeling of the target subordinate each time the video was stopped and to write it down on a sheet of paper (*inferred* thought or feeling of subordinate target). For each stop, participants were given 45 s to write down their answer.

Interpersonal sensitivity was the degree of similarity between the actual thoughts and the inferred thoughts and feelings rated by two coders on the following scale: 0 = *not similar at all*; 1 = *somewhat similar*; 2 = *similar* (according to Ickes, 1997, 2003). The ratings of the two coders were averaged. Interrater reliability was .96 ($M = 12.47$, $SD = 4.30$; range = 4–21). Higher values indicate more interpersonal sensitivity.

Results

Manipulation Check

As predicted, assigned leaders felt more dominant ($M = 3.94$) during the interaction than did assigned subordinates ($M = 3.47$), $t(37) = 2.02$, $p = .05$. There was no difference in felt competence between assigned leaders ($M = 4.08$) and assigned subordinates ($M = 4.45$), $t(37) = 1.51$, $p = .14$; and there was also no difference between assigned leaders ($M = 4.07$) and assigned subordinates ($M = 4.36$) with regard to how much they liked their respective roles, $t(37) = 1.16$, $p = .26$.

Subordinate Satisfaction and Interpersonal Sensitivity

As hypothesized, subordinate satisfaction—as one important factor of good leadership—was positively related to the leader's interpersonal sensi-

Table 2

Intercorrelations of Study Variables

Variable	Interpersonal sensitivity	1	2	3	4	5
1. Satisfaction	.48**	—				
2. Perceived RO leader	.46**	.53**	—			
3. Perceived TO leader	.25	.39*	.39*	—		
4. Self-reported RO leader	.16	-.14	.15	.04	—	
5. Self-reported TO leader	-.02	-.06	.09	.21	.19	—
6. Gender	.12	-.16	.27†	.30†	.01	.24

Note. RO leader = relationship-oriented leadership; TO leader = task-oriented leadership. $N = 38$, except for self-reported TO leader, $N = 36$, because of missing data. Gender: 0 = female; 1 = male.

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

tivity, $r(38) = .48$, $p = .001$, one-tailed. When controlling for gender with a partial correlation (because gender often shows effects on interpersonal sensitivity; Hall, 1984; McClure, 2000), the result remained unchanged, partial $r(33) = .57$, $p = .0001$. Note that subordinate satisfaction was measured during an interaction with the leader; and leader interpersonal sensitivity was measured in a subsequent, unrelated standardized task.

Table 2 shows that the leader's interpersonal sensitivity was positively related to the subordinate's perception of relationship-oriented leadership. However, it was unrelated to the subordinate's perception of task-oriented leadership, and it was also unrelated to the leader's assessment of his or her leadership style as relationship-oriented or task-oriented. Also, there was no significant gender difference in interpersonal sensitivity.

Table 2 also shows the relation of subordinate satisfaction to the other variables. The way the subordinate perceived the superior's leadership style was related to subordinate satisfaction. The more the superior was perceived as showing a relationship-oriented leadership style and the more the superior was perceived as showing a task-oriented leadership style, the more the subordinate was satisfied. However, the leader's self-perception of his or her leadership style was unrelated to subordinate satisfaction, as was gender. Note that none of the relations depicted in Table 2 changed when controlling for gender and calculating partial correlations.

To determine the relative influence of the leader's interpersonal sensitivity on subordinate satisfaction while controlling for all other variables, we

Table 3

Multiple Linear Regression of Subordinate Satisfaction

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	Beta
Interpersonal sensitivity	.06	.03	.32*
Perceived relationship-oriented leadership	.48	.18	.41*
Perceived task-oriented leadership	.47	.29	.23
Self-reported relationship-oriented leadership	-.34	.20	-.22†
Self-reported task-oriented leadership	-.08	.22	-.05
Gender	-.51	.20	-.34*

Note. $R^2 = .60$. $F(6, 29) = 7.10$, $p = .0001$. Gender: 0 = female; 1 = male.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$.

calculated a linear regression in which we regressed subordinate satisfaction on the variables shown in Table 3. Interpersonal sensitivity remained a significant contributor to subordinate satisfaction, as did perceived relationship-oriented leadership style and gender (women were more satisfied than men).

We then tested whether interpersonal sensitivity had incremental validity to explain the variance in subordinate satisfaction. To do this, we calculated the same linear regression as reported in Table 3, but without interpersonal sensitivity, and we tested whether the initial regression that included interpersonal sensitivity yielded a significant increase in explained variance when compared to the regression model without interpersonal sensitivity. This was indeed the case: for the inclusive model, $R^2\Delta = .07$, $F_{\text{change}}(1, 29) = 4.65$, $p = .039$.

Discussion

We predicted and found that good leaders—operationalized as leaders with satisfied subordinates—are more interpersonally sensitive, and thus are better at correctly assessing subordinates' thoughts and feelings. Our results also show that the extent to which the subordinate perceived the leader to adopt a relationship-oriented leadership style was related to the leader's interpersonal sensitivity. These results confirm existing results showing that superiors who are judged as good at identifying emotions are also perceived as showing relationship-oriented leadership, but not necessarily task-oriented leadership (Kellett et al., 2006). Note that perceived relationship-

oriented leadership did not explain the relation between interpersonal sensitivity and subordinate satisfaction. Thus, interpersonal sensitivity is a variable that shows incremental validity for explaining subordinate satisfaction.

Subordinate satisfaction was measured after an actual, face-to-face interaction between a high- and a low-power individual, whereas the leader's interpersonal sensitivity was assessed in a completely unrelated (standardized) task of assessing thoughts and feelings of subordinates who did not even interact with our participant leaders; thus, a task that was entirely independent of the interaction. Therefore, the result cannot be a result of shared method variance or contamination.

To assess interpersonal sensitivity, we used a standardized tape with target subordinates to be assessed. This had the advantage of circumventing the problem inherent in measuring interpersonal sensitivity in face-to-face interactions; namely, the confounding of targets' expressiveness with perceivers' interpersonal sensitivity (Hall, Rosip, Smith LeBeau, Horgan, & Carter, 2006; Snodgrass, Hecht, & Ploutz-Snyder, 1998). Targets who are more expressive are easier to read. To control for target expressiveness, we did not use face-to-face interactions to assess interpersonal sensitivity. Instead, we presented the same subordinate targets on videotape to all participants by using the standardized empathic accuracy paradigm (Ickes, 1997, 2003).

We used a measure of subordinate satisfaction with one's leader. Note that job satisfaction is a broader construct encompassing many more facets, such as compensation satisfaction (Scarpello & Campbell, 1983). Because subordinate satisfaction was measured in an experimental setting and not in a real job setting, only the satisfaction with the leader aspect of job satisfaction could be assessed.

We did not find any significant gender effects, with the exception of women being more satisfied than men (Table 3). Meta-analytic research clearly shows a gender difference in interpersonal sensitivity favoring women (Hall, 1984; McClure, 2000). However, the individual tests vary with respect to whether or not they show a gender effect. Note that we repeated all of the analyses while controlling for gender, and the results did not change, meaning that the reported results are independent of gender. Future research could investigate whether followers' interpersonal sensitivity was linked to superiors' satisfaction in order to show whether people are more satisfied with interpersonally sensitive interaction partners in general.

General Discussion

The goal of the present research was to show that people think that interpersonal sensitivity is an important attribute for good leaders and

that good leadership—that is, leadership characterized by satisfied subordinates—is related to higher levels of the superior's interpersonal sensitivity. This is exactly what we found.

In Study 1, we showed that people expect good leaders to be more attuned to individual differences in others' traits and states than are good subordinates. That followers have specific expectations about leadership behavior and characteristics is well documented in the research addressing implicit leadership theories and leadership prototypes (Kenney et al., 1994, 1996; Lord et al., 2001). Investigating the role that interpersonal sensitivity plays with regard to expectations harbored toward good leaders is new.

Knowing that leaders are expected to be interpersonally sensitive is important for leadership training because, as a general principle, work-related expectations that are not fulfilled entail dissatisfaction (Kopelman, 1979). So, if leaders can be trained to show an interest in their collaborators as persons and in how they feel and what they think, subordinates might be particularly satisfied with these superiors because their behavior corresponds to what subordinates expect from good superiors. Research on interpersonal sensitivity has suggested that the training of interpersonal sensitivity is possible (Costanzo, 1992).

Study 2 showed that the more interpersonally sensitive a leader is, the more satisfied his or her subordinate will be. This confirms Murphy's (2002) finding of a positive relation between a leader's emotional sensitivity (assessed with a questionnaire) and follower satisfaction. Moreover, subordinates of more interpersonally sensitive leaders perceived their superiors' leadership style as being more relationship-oriented. Many authors have underscored the importance of interpersonal sensitivity for good leadership (Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003; Kellett et al., 2002; Mayer et al., 2004; Palmer et al., 2001; Wolff et al., 2002; Zaccaro et al., 1991), particularly for subordinate satisfaction (Lowe et al., 1996; Yukl, 2006).

Because we assigned the leader and subordinate roles randomly, there is no confound of the power position with pre-existing abilities of interpersonal sensitivity. Although it is possible that in established hierarchical relations, high-power people might be more interpersonally sensitive because interpersonal sensitivity helped them to attain their high-status position, this is not a valid explanation for our results. How exactly superior interpersonal sensitivity is linked to subordinate satisfaction and whether we can, in fact, postulate a causal relationship remains to be tested. It was beyond the scope of the present research.

We think that an interpersonally sensitive leader is able to tune into the needs of subordinates. He or she recognizes whether it is a good time to allocate a specific task to a specific person. As an example, an interpersonally sensitive superior would be able to identify correctly that one of his or her

followers is in a sad mood or depressed (even if the follower does not explicitly share his or her feelings with the superior) and would, therefore, decide to put a colleague of this particular follower in charge of a new, demanding, and stressful project. The optimal matching of followers to specific jobs potentially results in more satisfied subordinates.

Moreover, it is possible that interpersonally sensitive superiors are more effective communicators because they have the capability to “tune into” their subordinates’ thoughts and feelings. Research has shown that supervisor communication and the way he or she gives personal feedback are related to subordinate job satisfaction (Pincus, 2006). Future research could investigate whether the communication or interaction styles of highly interpersonally sensitive leaders are different from less interpersonally sensitive leaders. Our result—showing a positive relation between interpersonal sensitivity and perceived superior relationship orientation—hints as to the interpersonally sensitive leader adopting an interaction style that is different from that adopted by less sensitive leaders.

We also showed that interpersonal sensitivity and perceived relationship orientation both explained subordinate satisfaction, independent of each other. Interpersonal sensitivity is thus a necessary, but not sufficient prerequisite for achieving high team member satisfaction. Moreover, having the skills to accurately assess others does not guarantee that the superior will act accordingly. Conversely, if the superior lacks interpersonal sensitivity skills, an important prerequisite for his or her actions is missing.

It goes without saying that good leadership has many facets. In the present research, we focused on good leadership as people’s expectations (Study 1) and as subordinate satisfaction (Study 2), but we did not assess the performance of the superior, the subordinate, or the dyad. Whether increased leader interpersonal sensitivity is related to better subordinate performance or to better team or dyadic performance is an open question. Given the positive link between job satisfaction and job performance (Judge et al., 2001), one could assume such a relation.

There is support for the claim that interpersonal sensitivity is related to better performance. Salespersons with better nonverbal emotion recognition were more successful in their jobs (Byron, Terranova, & Nowicki, 2007), and better emotion recognition was related to better negotiation outcomes (Elfenbein, Foo, White, Tan, & Aik, 2007). However, there is also empirical evidence showing the opposite. For instance, Murphy (2002) reported a negative relation between a group leader’s emotional sensitivity and group task performance. Riggio et al. (2003, Study 2) reported no relation between a self-reported social sensitivity measure and team performance, or ratings of performance by subordinates or superiors. Whether, to what extent, and under what circumstances the boss’s attunement and correct inference of

others' thoughts and feelings are not only related to more satisfaction but directly impact performance remains to be tested.

Future research could investigate the relation between interpersonal sensitivity and subordinate satisfaction in a real, established status hierarchy. It is possible that in established hierarchical relationships, the superior's interpersonal sensitivity becomes even more important for subordinate satisfaction because if subordinates are confronted with insensitive leaders, they might leave the job as an ultimate consequence of dissatisfaction.

Because of increased social and geographical mobility within the workforce, it seems important to know what people are looking for in a good superior because employees are, within certain limits, free to look for another position when they are dissatisfied with their superior. The fact that satisfaction with one's superior is a major driving factor for overall job satisfaction has been well documented (Harter et al., 2002). Moreover, although much leadership training already focuses on interpersonal skills, it might be beneficial to employ more performance-based training similar to the task that was used in the present study (i.e., empathic accuracy).

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