Ψ Psychology Press
Taylor & Francis Group

Facing an incompetent leader: The effects of a nonexpert leader on subordinates' perception and behaviour

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We investigated the effects of a leader's task-incompetence on how subordinates perceive and interact with their leader. In Study 1, 80 participants in a subordinate role interacted via e-mail and in Study 2, 80 participants interacted face-to-face with either a competent or an incompetent leader on a problem-solving task. Participants' dominance behaviour, how much they resisted the leader's influence, their perception of the leader, and their task involvement were assessed. As predicted, subordinates perceived the leader's incompetence as a lack of power and compensated for it by taking on a more powerful position themselves (i.e., more dominance behaviour, more resistance to the leader's influencing attempts). In sum, having a task-incompetent leader affects not only the subordinates' perception of the leader but also how the subordinate interacts with the leader.

Keywords: Competence; Dominance; Influence; Interaction; Leader; Subordinate.

Leader–subordinate interactions are important to study because leaders can affect considerably the way subordinates see themselves and their jobs. Having a poor leader–subordinate relationship (e.g., lack of supportiveness, of effective communication, or of feedback) has been shown to reduce

individual well-being and is one of the most stressful situations in the workplace (e.g., Hogan, 2007; House, 1981; Tepper, 2000). Subordinates' dissatisfaction with their leader not only affects the subordinates' well-being but also the company as a whole, for instance by an increase in turnover and strikes (Hamblin, Miller, & Wiggins, 1961). It has been said countless times: "People don't leave companies, they leave bosses".

One factor that influences the quality of the leader–subordinate relationship is the leader's competence or perceived lack thereof by the subordinate. As an example, the Society of Human Resource Management conducted a study showing that more than 20% of workers resign from their jobs because they perceive their leader as incompetent (Weinstein, 2007). Moreover, incompetent leaders are featured in jokes and cartoons, and performing a Google search for "incompetent boss" confirms that negative evaluations by employees of their leader's competence are extremely widespread. Whether this criticism refers to task-competence or social competence remains open in such global statements.

The present studies are concerned with the lack of *task-competence* or *expertise* of the leader as it is perceived by the subordinate. By competence we mean the contribution a person is able to make to solve a specific task (i.e., expertise). It goes without saying that not every leader is required to possess the same (or better) task-competence than his or her subordinates. As an example, a bank director does not have to know all the details of a bank clerk's job and he or she does also not have to possess the specific knowledge of the bank's financial analysts to successfully manage the bank. Nevertheless, task-competence or expertise of the leader matters in many situations and often it is the case that superiors are more task-competent than their subordinates. Focusing on task-competence of the leader is not a new idea but one that has been neglected in comparison to the study of social competence of the leader. Many of the currently used leadership models focus on the importance of social skills and leadership charisma while neglecting task-competence or so-called instrumental leadership aspects (Antonakis, 2006). Also, empirical evidence to illustrate the importance of task-competence for a leader exists. As an example, Tsui (1984) demonstrated that successful leaders of accounting departments are generally better accountants than their subordinates. Another example would be the academic context in which the doctoral student is supposed to learn directly from the professor's expertise. Moreover, having an incompetent (nonexpert) leader affects team outcome. For instance, Hamblin et al. (1961) showed that if the leader is perceived as less technically competent than the other team members, the morale of the team is low and low morale is supposed to result in low productivity, high turnover of employees, and strikes. Justis, Kedia, and Stephens (1978) investigated how a trainer's power position together with his or her task-competence affected trainees'

level of performance. Their results showed that the level of team performance increased when the technically competent person was in charge. Moreover, Sauer, Darioly, Schmid Mast, Schmid, and Bischof (2010) found performance decrements in teams with a nonexpert leader.

Besides effects on team outcomes and performance, leader task-competence also affects how subordinates perceive their leader (e.g., Lombardo, Ruderman, & McCauley, 1988) and how this perception affects subordinate behaviour (Tepper, 2000). As an example, Hollander (1985) found that decisions of individuals who have previously shown to be task-competent were respected more by team members. In the present research, we investigate how subordinates' perception of and interaction with a leader are affected by how task-competent the leader is perceived by the subordinate.

The superior–subordinate relationship is characterized by a power difference. Power, status, and dominance are all indicative of a vertical dimension or hierarchy among social interaction partners (Hall, Coats, & Smith LeBeau, 2005). *Power* means the extent to which an individual exerts or can exert control or influence over another person (Schmid Mast, Jonas, & Hall, 2009). We understand *status* as a role linked to a specific position within a hierarchy. This definition is similar to what other researchers use. As an example, Ellyson and Dovidio (1985, p. 7) say that status "is a characteristic involving one's relative position in a prestige hierarchy that is used as an organizing scheme upon which beliefs and evaluations are based". Thus, based on the different expectations related to an individual being in the high or low status position, leaders and subordinates are perceived and evaluated differently. *Dominance* is used in the present research in different ways (personality dominance, dominance behaviour, and perceived dominance). *Personality dominance* is defined as "a desire and a predisposition to attempt to influence others" (Ellyson & Dovidio, 1985, p. 7). It is usually measured with self-report questionnaires such as the Personality Research Form (PRF; Jackson, 1984), also used in the present research. People who score high on trait dominance describe themselves as ambitious, assertive, and self-confident (Gough, 1987). Personality dominance and its impact on superior–subordinate interactions have been studied for several decades and it has been shown that individuals with low or high dominant personalities behave differently (Assor, Aronoff, & Messé, 1981; Operario & Fiske, 2001; Schmid Mast & Hall, 2003). We define *dominance behaviour* as a behaviour that is typically used to gain or maintain control or influence over another or behaviours that are frequently used by high status individuals more so than by low status ones. There are many examples of dominance behaviour documented in the literature (Hall et al., 2005). In the present research, we focus on dominance expressed in speech acts. Dominance in speech behaviour has been described as imposing and strongly defending one's personal opinions and preferences in discussions

(Schmid Mast & Hall, 2003) and the term "powerless speech" refers to "the frequent use of a number of speech-style features (qualifiers, fillers, and hesitations) usually viewed as signs of tentativeness or uncertainty" (McFadyen, 1997, p. 407). *Perceived dominance* is the impression an observer or interaction partner has of a target's power. This impression is based on the perceived or known status of the target and his or her exhibited dominance behaviour. To illustrate, in the superior–subordinate relationship, the leader can be perceived differently, depending on his or her level of exhibited dominance behaviour (Schmid Mast & Hall, 2003). Because perceived dominance is in the eye of the beholder, it is typically assessed with a self-report measure (Halberstadt & Saitta, 1987; Tusing & Dillard, 2000).

Expectation States Theory (EST; Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977) posits that status hierarchies form according to how much each team member is able to contribute to the task solution, thus according to each team member's competence level. In an EST approach, team members harbour performance expectations about each other. A performance expectation is a "generalized anticipation of one's own or another's capacity to make useful contributions to the task" (Ridgeway & Berger, 1986, p. 604). Performance expectations can stem from specific status cues such as, for instance, expertise and because they are shared by all team members, they become self-fulfilling prophecies. To illustrate, when a team member is perceived as having expertise, the other team members expect this particular team member to perform particularly well in the task (i.e., high performance expectation). Such performance expectations shape the group members' behaviour in that the persons towards whom the group harbours high performance expectations are given more opportunities to contribute, their contributions are valued more, and they finally gain more influence in the team, thus more status or power. So in theory, when a hierarchy forms, the person perceived as the most competent one will become the leader. If this is true, it means that individuals who are perceived as competent (or incompetent) are also perceived as dominant (or less dominant). Indeed, research shows that dominance or leadership is associated with competence. For instance, Bass (1990) showed that task-competence was correlated with leadership and, typically, scales measuring dominance are correlated with scales measuring competence (Wiggins & Broughton, 1985; Wiggins, Phillips, & Trapnell, 1989). Also, individuals who have verbal fluency, maintain eye contact, and speak more often (all signs of dominance; Hall et al., 2005; Schmid Mast, 2002) not only occupy higher positions in the team hierarchy but are also perceived as more competent (Berger, Webster, Ridgeway, & Rosenholtz, 1986; Ridgeway & Diekema, 1989).

Thus, we predict that competence is not only a marker of dominance when hierarchies form but that even in established hierarchies differences in

leader competence will affect the degree to which a leader is perceived as dominant. More specifically, we expect that incompetent leaders will be perceived as less dominant than competent ones (Hypothesis 1).

In general, high-power individuals behave dominantly (e.g., express their preference or opinion and defend it) and low-power individuals behave submissively (e.g., agree with the superior's point of view and express their preference hesitantly if at all) (e.g., DePaulo & Friedman, 1998; Schmid Mast & Hall, 2003). However, not every leader behaves equally dominantly and not every subordinate behaves equally submissively. For instance, how much a person is motivated to occupy a high or low power position affects expressed dominance in subordinates (Schmid Mast & Hall, 2003). Whether an individual possesses a power position that is legitimate as compared to illegitimate has shown to affect his or her behavioural outcomes. As an example, in the Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, and Otten (2008) study, the powerful showed more approach behaviour than the powerless only when the power position was legitimate.

Tiedens and Fragale (2003) showed that, in peer groups, people behave more dominantly with a less dominant interaction partner and they behave less dominantly with a more dominant interaction partner; there is thus complementarity in dominance behaviour among equal status social interaction partners. In other words, the more dominant the social interaction partner is perceived, the less dominantly one behaves and vice versa. In an established hierarchy, the expectation is that the high power individual behaves more dominantly than the low power individual. In an EST approach, differences in competence correspond to differences in status so, if a leader lacks task-competence, he or she is in a situation of illegitimacy. More specifically, we suggest that when the leader is illegitimate (i.e., low competent), this will be seen as weakening his or her power position when compared to a legitimate (i.e., competent) leader, resulting in more dominance behaviour of the subordinate when compared to the dominance behaviour of a subordinate with a legitimate leader. Subordinates thus react towards illegitimate leaders less according to the leader's high status but rather according to how dominantly the leader is perceived. Indeed, research showed that subordinates of illegitimate leaders were more likely to resist and challenge the leader's decisions and directives (Wehr, Burgess, & Burgess, 1994). In other words, those subordinates showed more pronounced resistance to their leader's influence. Accordingly, we expect that subordinates of incompetent leaders will behave more dominantly towards their leaders than subordinates of competent leaders (Hypothesis 2) and that subordinates will be more resistant to their leader's influence when the leader is incompetent than when the leader is competent (Hypothesis 3). Moreover, we hypothesize that perceived leader dominance will mediate both of these relations (Hypotheses 4 and 5).

Adopting more of a leadership role when with an incompetent leader might not only bring about more subordinate dominance behaviour but might also entail feeling more responsible for the task outcome and therefore investing more effort into the task resolution. Indeed, Williams and Karau (1991) showed that when the task is meaningful for the individual, he or she invested more effort in a dyadic task when the dyad partner was incompetent. Moreover, when individuals perceived their partner as competent, they invested less effort because they thought that the partner was in principle able to perform the task alone and that their contribution is unnecessary ("free-rider mechanism"; Kerr, 1983). Based on these results, we predict that subordinates of incompetent leaders will show more task involvement than subordinates of competent leaders (Hypothesis 6).

In sum, we predict that subordinates perceive the leader's lack of competence as a lack of dominance and thus compensate for this by taking on a more powerful position themselves. This position is characterized by behaving in a more dominant way during the interaction with the leader, by being more resistant to the influencing attempts of the leader, and by putting more effort into the task. We tested these hypotheses in two studies.

STUDY 1

Method

Participants

Participants were 49 women and 31 men ($M_{age} = 25$, $SD = 3.09$, range: 20–35), mostly (86%) students majoring in different areas (e.g., psychology, arts, law) and some (14%) employees (e.g., teacher, administrator). We excluded students in computer sciences, pharmacy, and medicine for reasons explained later. Participants had the opportunity to win one of four 100 CHF prizes for participation.

Procedure

After having signed an informed consent form, participants were instructed that they would interact in a problem-solving task with another student from another university via e-mail. The problem-solving task consisted of assembling a priority list of items to be put in a first aid kit. Participants were informed that one of the dyad members would be the leader and one the subordinate and that the roles would be allocated to them randomly. Participants were told that the leader role entailed the evaluation of the subordinate and that the role of the subordinate entailed submitting

the final task solution to the leader for evaluation. The role assignment was, however, not random; the participant was always assigned to the subordinate role. Moreover, unbeknownst to them, participants were randomly assigned to interact with either a task-competent or a task-incompetent leader.

Prior to the interaction with the leader, participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire on personality dominance. They were then asked to prioritize 12 items for a first aid kid and to communicate their ranking to their leader. The leader's ranking (generated by the computer, explained in more detail later) was then revealed to the participant. The dyad's task was to discuss each item and after the discussion the participant had to come to a final ranking to be submitted to the leader for evaluation.

After the interaction, participants were asked to indicate how realistic they perceived the interaction to have been, how dominant and how competent they perceived the leader to be, how much they liked the leader, how much they liked their assigned assistant role, how attractive the task was to them, and how involved in the task they felt. Based on the written e-mail exchange, uninvolved raters coded dominance behaviour of the participant (expression of dominance and powerless speech). Also, resistance to leader influence was assessed by comparing how much participants were influenced in their final ranking by the leader's ranking (explained in more detail later).

Materials

Problem-solving task. We set out to create a task that would be interesting to participants but in which the general task-competence would be low in order to forestall for initial competence differences to affect the results. Based on the NASA Moon Survival Problem, which has been used extensively in previous studies (e.g., Linkey & Firestone, 1990; Orpen, 1995), a new task was created, the "First Aid Kit Problem". In order to maintain task-competence comparable (and low in this case) among participants, we excluded students in pharmacy and in medicine. The "First Aid Kit Problem" consists of a list of 12 items (e.g., sunscreen lotion, bandages, or mosquito lotion) that need to be prioritized in order to travel for 4 weeks in Peru. Because of lack of space in the luggage, the task of the participants was to rank order the items from 1 to 12 according to their importance. We decided to create a new task because (a) the NASA Moon Survival Problem might be too well-known and (b) we needed a task with no objectively correct answer because it was important that the interaction partner could argue in both directions, that is, in favour of placing the object higher or lower on the priority list. The leader's priority list was generated by the computer program contingent upon the participants' ranking according to

an algorithm ensuring that the gap between the leader's and the participant's ranking was constant (e.g., for the item ranked 6 by the participant, the leader would always rank it 11, for the item ranked 9 by the participant, the leader would always rank it 3[1]). Therefore, it was important that each item could plausibly be ranked higher or lower in priority with equally good arguments. To illustrate, the argument for placing an item (e.g., sunscreen lotion) higher in priority was: "The best protection against the sun is *sunscreen lotion*. I suggest that you rank it *higher* in the list." The argument for placing this item lower in priority was: "The best protection against the sun is: *clothes, sunglasses, and a hat*. I suggest that you rank it [sunscreen lotion] *lower* in the list."

The experimenter scripted the e-mail exchange; the leader was thus fictitious. Students in computer sciences were excluded as participants; we wanted to minimize the risk of them guessing that the other participant was not real. We chose to use a male leader because in Swiss organizations, 70% of leaders are men (Laessig, Moresi, Siegenthaler, & Vuille, 2006). To make the simulated interaction more realistic, participants received a first e-mail from the (virtual) leader in which he introduced himself either as a student in pharmacy (task-competent condition) or as a student in history (task-incompetent condition). Participants then responded to this e-mail by also introducing themselves.

Only then did participants communicate their initial rank of the items to the leader upon which the leader's ranking appeared next to the participant's one on the computer screen. Participants were instructed to discuss each of the 12 items via e-mail with the leader. For each item, the participant wrote an e-mail justifying the ranking of the item. The leader then sent an e-mail back explaining his choice and suggesting a higher or lower ranking of the item in question. To make the conversation credible, the time between the participant sending his or her message and the receiving of the leader's message varied according to the length of the leader's message. For each of the 12 items there was only one e-mail exchange and the items were discussed always in the same order regardless of the participant's or the leader's ranking of the individual items. At the end of the interaction, participants had to compile the final ranking, which they submitted for evaluation to the leader.

We then asked the participants to write an e-mail to the experimenter and describe their impressions of the interaction in general. We coded these impressions to check whether participants believed the cover story and assumed that there really was another participant with whom they interacted. Results showed that 39 (48%) did not mention anything about how real they found the interaction, 33 (41%) said that they did not find it

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[1]This web-based computer program was adapted from Shechtman (2002).

very realistic because they could exchange their opinion only once for each item, and 9 (11%) explicitly mentioned that they did not believe that there was a real other person in the leader role. Because the results did not change when we dropped those nine participants, they remained in the subject pool.

Leader competence manipulation. In the competent condition, participants interacted with a student in pharmacy as the leader and in the incompetent condition with a student in history. Moreover, the communication style of the competent and incompetent leader varied throughout the interaction while the content of the information exchanged remained the same for both conditions. To illustrate, participants interacting with a competent leader received the following message (with respect to the mosquito lotion): "*During my courses on* exotic infections, *I learned* that the mosquito lotion is 100% effective. Protection with clothes only *is* not enough. The mosquito lotion *should* be ranked higher." In contrast, the incompetent leader said the following: "*I have no knowledge about* exotic infections, *but I think* that the mosquito lotion is 100% effective. Protection with clothes only *seems* not enough. The mosquito lotion *could* be ranked higher."

Perceived leader dominance. The subordinate's perception of the leader's dominance was measured after the interaction with three items (one reverse scored) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "do not at all agree", 5 = "completely agree"). Sample items are: "During the interaction, I felt inferior to my leader" or "I was more dominant than my leader during the interaction" (reverse scored). Scores were averaged ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 0.94$, Cronbach's alpha = .80).

Dominance behaviour. Based on the written e-mail exchange, each of the participants' 12 messages was rated according to whether it contained an expression of dominance or not on a yes (contains an expression of dominance) or no (does not contain an expression of dominance) scale and then summed up across the 12 messages. This was done by two raters (interrater reliability: mean $r = .82$). Raters were provided with the following description of dominance: A high dominance statement is characterized by expressing a strong personal preference or opinion and by stating opinions or positions in an unbending manner (e.g., "Bandages must be ranked higher than you suggested because we are in the forest and it is easy to get injured."), whereas a low dominance statement is characterized by assuring the other of not having a preference (e.g., "I don't really have arguments for this object and it doesn't matter, thus I'm open to any of your suggestions.") or by expressing the own preference hesitantly (e.g., "mhm … maybe it's

something useful.'') (Schmid Mast & Hall, 2003). Dominance ratings were summed up across all the 12 exchanges ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 2.26$, range: 0.5–12).

Moreover, powerless speech of the written e-mail exchange was assessed because powerless speech is an indicator of low dominance (e.g., Fragale, 2006; McFadyen, 1997; O'Barr & Atkins, 1980). Each e-mail exchange was coded on powerless speech by two raters on a yes (powerless speech present) or no (powerless speech absent) scale (interrater reliability: mean $r = .75$). Only qualifiers (''maybe'', ''probably'', ''possibly'') and fillers (''like'', ''you see'') were included. Hesitations such as repetition of words or self-correction did not occur in the written e-mails. Powerless speech ratings were summed up across all 12 exchanges ($M = 0.68$, $SD = 1.06$, range: 0–6).

Because expressions of dominance and powerless speech significantly correlated, $r = -.42$, $p = .0001$, we combined them into a new variable called *dominance behaviour* after reversing the powerless speech variable and z-scoring both variables.[2]

Resistance to leader influence.   To determine the subordinate's resistance to leader influence, we calculated for each item, the absolute difference between the leader's ranking and the subordinate's initial ranking and summed them up ($=$ initial gap[3]), and we also calculated for each item, the absolute difference between the leader's ranking and the subordinate's final ranking ($=$ final gap). We then subtracted the final from the initial gap (see Moon, 1999). Lower scores indicate more subordinate's resistance to leader influence ($M = 18.38$, $SD = 9.54$, range: 2–44). Note that although difference scores can be problematic in terms of reliability (Cronbach & Furby, 1970), they not necessarily have to be (Collins, 1996). Reliability can be low and the difference measure can still be an accurate measure of change because it reflects intra-individual change.

Task involvement.   Task involvement refers to having one's attention focused on the task (Nicholls, 1983). Participants responded after the interaction to four items (two reverse scored) developed by the researchers. Sample items are: ''I worked in an involved way in the interaction'' or ''I did not perform the task scrupulously'' (reverse scored). The four items were measured on the same 5-point Likert scale as perceived leader dominance and the scores of the four items were averaged ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 0.49$, Cronbach's alpha $= .58$).

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[2]Because the results of expression of dominance and powerless speech showed exactly the same thing when calculating them separately for each variable, we opted for combining them (since they were significantly correlated) in order not to ''double'' one and the same result and also in the interest of space.

[3]Initial gap was always 48 because the computer calculated the difference between the two rankings to be stable as explained in more detail in the Method section).

Personality dominance. Trait dominance was measured prior to the interaction with a French version of the dominance scale of the Personality Research Form (PRF; Jackson, 1984). Participants indicate for each of the 16 items whether it describes them correctly or not (eight reverse scored). Sample items are: "I would be a powerful commander in the army" or "I avoid power positions" (reverse scored). Scores on the items were averaged ($M = 0.50$, $SD = 0.26$, Cronbach's alpha = .85) and higher scores indicate more dominance.

Manipulation check scales. In order to ascertain that the leader competence manipulation only touched how competent the leader was perceived but not how realistic the participants perceived the interaction to have been, how much they liked their leader, how attractive they found the task at hand, and how much they liked their assigned subordinate role when interacting with a competent or an incompetent leader, we administered different manipulation check scales after the interaction. All items were developed by the researchers and measured on the same 5-point Likert scale (1 = "do not at all agree", 5 = "completely agree"). Scores for each scale were averaged. How competent participants perceived their leader to be (*perceived leader competence*) was assessed with six items (three reverse scored) such as "My leader was very competent" or "I was more competent than my leader" (reverse scored) ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.76$, Cronbach's alpha = .80). *Perceived realism of the interaction* was measured with the following two items: "I found that the interaction was realistic" and "I found that the interaction was not natural" (reverse scored) ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 1.09$, Cronbach's alpha = .83). *Leader liking* was measured with four items (two reverse scored). Sample items are: "My leader was agreeable" or "My leader was not nice" (reverse scored) ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.00$, Cronbach's alpha = .85). To evaluate how attractive the subordinate found the task (*perceived task attractiveness*), participants responded to four items (two reverse scored) such as "I found the task very interesting" or "I found that the task was boring" (reverse scored) ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.69$, Cronbach's alpha = .83). To evaluate the subordinate's liking of the assigned subordinate role (*role liking*), six items (three reverse scored), such as "I liked my role" or "I would prefer the role of the leader" (reverse scored) were used ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.65$, Cronbach's alpha = .78).

Results

As predicted, competent leaders ($M = 3.51$) were perceived as more competent than incompetent ones ($M = 2.81$), $t(78) = 4.61$, $p = .0001$, confirming that the manipulation of competence was successful. We aimed for the interaction with the competent and with the incompetent leader to be

equally realistic and equally attractive for participants. This is exactly what we found: There was no significant difference in perceived realism of the interaction between interactions with a competent and with an incompetent leader, $t(78) = 1.60$, $p = .11$, no significant difference in liking of the competent or incompetent leader, $t(78) = 1.34$, $p = .18$, and no difference in perceived task attractiveness when interacting with a competent or incompetent leader, $t(78) = 0.48$, $p = .63$. Moreover, there was no significant difference in role liking when interacting with a competent or incompetent leader, $t(78) = 0.49$, $p = .63$.

We predicted that an incompetent leader would be perceived as less dominant than a competent one (H1). We calculated a 2 (leaders' competence: competent vs. incompetent) $\times$ 2 (gender of the participant) ANOVA with perceived leader dominance as the dependent variable and we entered personality dominance as a covariate to control for the potential influence of trait dominance. The main focus of this research was not on gender. However, because research on power often shows gender differences, we included the variable in our analyses to control for its potential effect on the results.

Results confirmed the prediction in that there was a significant leader competence main effect, showing that competent leaders were perceived as more dominant than incompetent ones (Table 1). There was no significant gender main effect, $F(1, 75) = 1.28$, $p = .26$, and no significant interaction effect, $F(1, 75) = 0.44$, $p = .51$.

We expected subordinates of incompetent leaders to behave more dominantly in the interaction than subordinates of competent leaders

TABLE 1
Main effects of leader competence

	Study 1			Study 2		
	Competent M	Incompetent M	F	Competent M	Incompetent M	F
Perceived leader dominance (H1)	3.44	2.66	15.55**	3.46	3.10	5.01*
Dominance behaviour (H2)	−0.28[a]	0.25	7.85**	2.90	3.52	6.98*
Resistance to leader influence (H3)	21.35	15.40	8.09**	10.56	8.24	5.77*
Task involvement (H6)	4.36	4.41	0.24	4.10	4.11	0.005

Study 1's $df = 1, 75$; Study 2's $df = 1, 74$, all ps are one-tailed; note that for resistance to leader influence, the smaller the number the more pronounced the resistance [a] Note that this is a composite variable, generated from two variables that were z-scored (range: −3.45 to 1.80).
**$p < .005$, *$p < .05$.

(H2). We calculated the same ANOVA as before for dominance behaviour as the dependent variable. Results confirmed a significant main effect of leader competence, meaning that subordinates of incompetent leaders expressed more dominance in their e-mails than subordinates of competent leaders (Table 1). There was no significant gender main effect, $F(1, 75) = 0.26$, $p = .61$, and no significant interaction effect, $F(1, 75) = 1.46$, $p = .23$.

We also predicted that subordinates of incompetent leaders would be more resistant to leader influence than subordinates of competent leaders (H3). Calculating the same ANOVA as before for resistance to leader influence as the dependent variable yielded a significant leaders' competence main effect with subordinates of incompetent leaders being more resistant to their leaders influence than subordinates of competent leaders (Table 1). There was no significant gender main effect, $F(1, 75) = 1.05$, $p = .31$, and no significant interaction effect, $F(1, 75) = 0.01$, $p = .93$.

We examined whether perceived leader dominance mediates the relationship between leader competence and subordinate dominance behaviour (H4). Figure 1 shows that the significant association between leader competence and subordinate dominance behaviour became nonsignificant when controlling for perceived leader dominance (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Using the bootstrap framework (Shrout & Bolger, 2002)—recommended to be used instead of the Sobel test when sample sizes are small—showed that this decrease was significant, $b = 0.24$, 95% CI $= -0.44$, -0.08. Thus, perceived
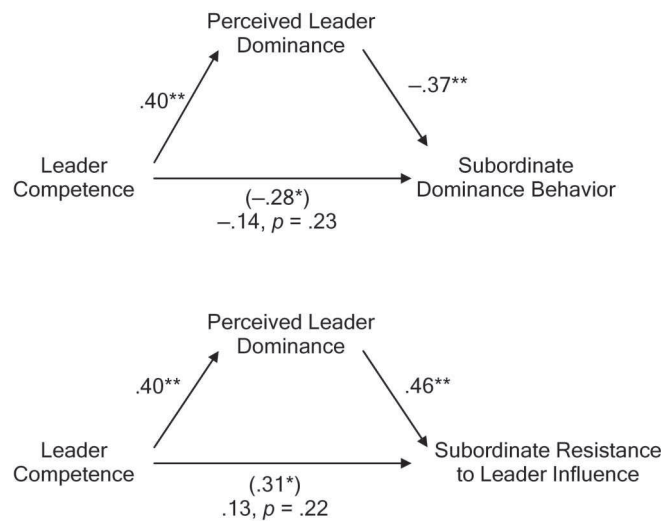

Figure 1. Complete mediations of perceived leader dominance on the relation between leader competence and subordinate dominance behaviour and between leader competence and subordinate resistance to the leader in Study 1. **$p < .005$, *$p < .05$.

leader dominance completely mediated the relation between leader competence and subordinate dominance behaviour.

Also we tested whether perceived leader dominance mediates the relationship between leader competence and subordinate resistance to leader influence (H5). Figure 1 shows that the significant association between leader competence and subordinate resistance became nonsignificant when controlling for perceived leader dominance (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Bootstrapping (Shrout & Bolger, 2002) indicated that this decrease was significant, $b = 3.51$, 95% $CI = 1.17$, 6.55. We therefore confirmed that perceived leader dominance completely mediated the relation between leader competence and subordinate resistance.

Finally, we expected participants of incompetent leaders to show more task involvement than subordinates of competent leaders (H6). We calculated a 2 (leaders' competence: competent vs. incompetent) × 2 (gender of the participant) ANOVA with task involvement as the dependent variable and we entered personality dominance again as a covariate. Contrary to our prediction, results for task involvement showed no significant leader competence main effect, $F(1, 75) = 0.24$, $p = .31$. There was also no significant gender main effect, $F(1, 75) = 0.47$, $p = .47$, and no significant interaction effect, $F(1, 75) = 0.01$, $p = .95$.

Discussion

We predicted and found that an incompetent leader is perceived as less dominant than a competent one (H1), that subordinates of incompetent leaders behave more dominantly towards their leaders in an interaction (H2), and that subordinates of incompetent leaders are more resistant to leader influence (H3). Moreover, according to our hypotheses, perceived leader dominance mediated the relation between leader competence and subordinate dominance behaviour (H4) and between leader competence and subordinate resistance to the leader (H5). Our results, however, do not confirm that subordinates who work together with incompetent leaders invest more in the task at hand (H6).

Using an e-mail exchange instead of a face-to-face interaction offered the opportunity to maximally standardize the leader, to the detriment of ecological validity with respect to the behaviour observed. This is why we conducted Study 2 as a face-to-face interaction.

Also, our leader was described as a student, and most of the participants were students. According to the social identity perspective (e.g., Hogg, 2000; Turner, 1999), individuals classify and evaluate themselves and others in terms of the groups they belong to. It is therefore possible that in our setting, the status differences between the assigned leader and the assigned subordinate were attenuated. The student subordinate might have perceived

the leader more in terms of his belonging to the category of students as opposed to being a leader and thus more similar to him-/herself. To add ecological validity to the power manipulation, for Study 2 we used older participants who were not students.

STUDY 2

Interactions between leaders and subordinates usually take place in face-to-face interactions. In Study 2 participants interacted with a social interaction partner who was either a competent or incompetent leader. We used an older, nonstudent leader as the interaction partner.

Method

Participants

Our sample consisted of 42 women and 38 men ($M_{age} = 23$, $SD = 3.37$, range: 18–33). The majority were university students in different domains (e.g., psychology, arts, law), 87%, and some were employees in different areas (e.g., human resources, accounting), 13%. As in Study 1, we excluded students in pharmacy and medicine. Participants who already participated in Study 1 were also excluded. Participants received a 2 CHF lottery ticket for their participation and the best dyad (explained in more detail later) had the opportunity to win one of two 100 CHF prizes.

Procedure

The procedure was nearly identical to that in Study 1, except that participants interacted with a leader (one of three male confederates) in a face-to-face interaction. Participants were informed that there is a correct solution to the priority list of assembling a first aid kit and that the two dyads who will perform best will receive a 100 CHF price. Participants were all assigned the subordinate role and were informed that they had the opportunity to work with a man who is used to lead teams during decision-making processes. Additionally, the status difference between the participant and the confederate was underscored by the confederate sitting in a comfortable and big chair and by the participant sitting in a simple wooden chair, a power manipulation that has been used successfully in previous studies (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001).

As in Study 1, participants interacted with either a task-competent or a task-incompetent leader. In the competent condition, participants were instructed that the leader has a pharmaceutical background, works in a pharmacy, and teaches in a professional school of druggists. In the

incompetent condition, participants were informed that the leader has an educational background and teaches in a school for mentally challenged children. The interaction was videotaped for later coding of dominance behaviour of the participant.

After having filled in the personality dominance questionnaire, participants were asked to prioritize eight items on a sheet of paper for the First Aid Kit. Note that we used only eight items in Study 2 and not 12 as in Study 1 because we wanted the interactions not to last much more than 15 min and pretests showed that this was best accomplished with using only eight items. The dyads were instructed to discuss and negotiate the best ranking of the eight items within 15 min. The leader started the interaction by asking the participant how high he or she ranked the first item on the sheet (mosquito lotion) and they then discussed the ranking of that item. They proceeded to discuss each item down the list, one at a time. After the interaction, the participant was asked to submit his or her final ranking to the leader for evaluation.

Finally, participants filled in the same measures as in Study 1 with an additional two measures: They were asked to indicate how authentic they perceived the leader to be, and how task-competent they perceived themselves to be. Based on the videotaped exchange, uninvolved judges rated participant dominance behaviour.

Problem-solving task

We used the same task as Study 1, except we reduced the list of 12 items to 8. The leader always presented this solution to the participant. As in Study 1, each item could reasonably be ranked higher or lower in priority. As an example, when the competent leader ranked the item higher than the participant, he said "I ranked the sunscreen lotion on the 4th position. When we travel in a South American country, it is essential to protect ourselves. ... The best protection against the sun is sunscreen lotion." When the leaders ranked the item lower than the participant, he would say: "I ranked the sunscreen lotion on the 4th position. When we travel in a South American country, it is essential to protect ourselves. ... The best protection against the sun is: clothes, sunglasses, and a hat."

Confederate training

Three confederates were trained and learned an adapted script of Study 1 before practicing the script with each other. They were all male actors and older than the participants (all between 35 and 50 years old). All three were trained to act as similarly as possible and their nonverbal behaviour was carefully controlled. They were instructed to avoid nodding, smiling,

back-channels such as "uh-huh" or "mmh-mmh", and excessive gesturing. Confederates maintained a natural and attentive eye contact.

They were trained to use specific expressions in line with the competence conditions. For instance, statements such as "as a pharmacist" or "according to the research on" or "scientific studies show" were used for the competent condition and "according to my own experience" or "I don't really have expertise on" were used for the incompetent condition.

Material

The following measures were the same as in Study 1: *personality dominance* ($M = 0.50$, $SD = 0.19$, Cronbach's alpha = .69), *perceived leader dominance* ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.74$, Cronbach's alpha = .60), and *subordinate resistance to leader influence* on the subordinate's final decision ($M = 9.23$, $SD = 4.66$, range: 2–22). Due to the low reliability of the *task involvement* measure in Study 1, we removed one item from the scale for Study 2 ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.64$, Cronbach's alpha = .73). In Study 2, we added a measure of *self-reported subordinate competence* with four items (two reverse scored) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "do not at all agree", 5 = "completely agree"). Sample items are: "I felt competent for the task" or "I was unable to do the task" (reverse scored). Scores were averaged ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.84$, Cronbach's alpha = .82).

Dominance behaviour.   Two raters watched the videotaped interactions and assessed participant *dominance behaviour* on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "not at all dominant", 5 = "completely dominant") (interrater reliability: mean $r = .86$). Raters were provided with the following description of dominance behaviour during an interaction: A high dominance behaviour during the interaction was clearly contradicting or interrupting the leader, or taking the lead of the discussion, whereas a low dominance behaviour during the interaction was waiting for the leader's lead, expressing own opinions hesitantly (Schmid Mast & Hall, 2003). The ratings made by the two raters were averaged ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.05$) to obtain a final score named "third observer dominance ratings".

Manipulation check scales.   Leader liking, perceived task attractiveness, *role liking*, and *perceived realism of the interaction* were assessed with the same items as in Study 1 ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.65$, Cronbach's alpha = .80; $M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.73$, Cronbach's alpha = .81; $M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.56$, Cronbach's alpha = .72; $M = 3.07$, $SD = 0.94$, Cronbach's alpha = .65, respectively). Compared to Study 1, we only used three of the original six items measuring *perceived leader competence* ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.75$, Cronbach's alpha = .75). Additionally, we measured *perceived leader*

authenticity with the following two items: "I found that my leader was spontaneous" and "I found that my leader did not interact naturally" (reverse scored) on the same 5-point Likert scale as the other manipulation check measures ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.04$, Cronbach's alpha = .77).

Results

As in the previous study, our manipulations were successful. Competent leaders ($M = 4.08$) were perceived as more competent than incompetent ones ($M = 3.41$), $t(78) = 4.41$, $p = .0001$. Interacting with the competent or the incompetent leader did not affect the perceived realism of the interaction, $t(78) = 0.006$, $p = .99$, the perceived authenticity of the leader, $t(78) = 0.17$, $p = .87$, how much they liked the leader, $t(78) = 0.004$, $p = .99$, how attractive they found the task, $t(78) = 1.27$, $p = .21$, and how much they liked their subordinate role, $t(78) = 1.21$, $p = .23$.

There was no significant difference in perceived competence of the three confederates, $F(2, 77) = 1.17$, $p = .32$, no difference in role liking, $F(2, 77) = 1.65$, $p = .20$, no difference in perceived realism of the interaction, $F(2, 77) = 2.31$, $p = .11$, and no difference in perceived task attractiveness, $F(2, 77) = 0.47$, $p = .63$, when interacting with the different confederates. However, there was a marginal significant difference in leader liking when interacting with the different confederates, $F(2, 77) = 2.73$, $p = .07$, showing that participants liked more Confederate 1 ($M = 4.46$) than Confederate 2 ($M = 4.09$) and Confederate 3 ($M = 4.18$). Moreover, there was a significant difference in perceived authenticity of the 3 confederates, $F(2, 77) = 4.35$, $p = .016$, showing that Confederate 1 was perceived as more authentic ($M = 3.83$) than Confederate 2 ($M = 3.02$) and Confederate 3 ($M = 3.36$). Due to the potential influence of the confederate on the results, we included confederate as a covariate in all the analyses.

To test our hypotheses, we calculated separate 2 (leaders' competence: competent vs. incompetent) × 2 (gender of the participant) ANOVAs for perceived leader dominance (H1), subordinate dominance behaviour (H2), subordinate resistance to leader influence (H3), and task involvement (H6). Confederate and personality dominance were included as covariates in the analyses.

Results are shown in Table 1 and confirmed that incompetent leaders were perceived as less dominant than competent ones (H1), that subordinates of incompetent leaders behaved more dominantly in the interaction (H2) and that they were more resistant to leader influence than subordinates of competent leaders (H3). However, contrary to our prediction (H6) but similar to Study 1, there was no significant difference in task involvement between subordinates interacting with a competent or an incompetent leader.

With respect to the aforementioned variables, there were no significant gender main effects: perceived leader dominance, $F(1, 74) = 0.85$, $p = .36$, subordinate dominance behaviour, $F(1, 74) = 0.55$, $p = .46$, and task involvement, $F(1, 74) = 0.43$, $p = .51$. However, contrary to Study 1, results yielded a significant gender main effect for subordinate resistance to leader influence, $F(1, 74) = 5.74$, $p = .019$, showing that female subordinates were more resistant to leader influence ($M = 8.20$) than males ($M = 10.60$).[4] Comparable to Study 1, none of the interaction effects between leader competence and subordinate gender was significant, all $Fs(1, 74) < 0.83$, $ps > .37$.

To examine whether perceived leader dominance mediates the relation between leader competence and subordinate dominance behaviour (H4) and between leader competence and subordinate resistance to leader influence (H5), we conducted the same analyses as in Study 1. Figure 2 shows that the relation between leader competence and subordinate dominance behaviour became less pronounced but still marginally significant when controlling for perceived leader dominance (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The bootstrap procedure (Shrout & Bolger, 2002) showed that this decrease was significant, $b = 0.14$, 95% CI $= -0.37$, -0.005. Thus, perceived leader dominance partially mediated the relationship between leader competence and subordinate dominance behaviour.

Also we examined whether perceived leader dominance mediates the relationship between leader competence and subordinate resistance to leader influence (H5). Figure 2 shows that the relation between leader competence and subordinate resistance was only marginally significant and that the relation between perceived leader dominance and subordinate resistance was not significant. Therefore, the prerequisites for mediation were not met (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Discussion

The goal of Study 2 was to replicate the pattern of results obtained in Study 1 while remedying some of the limitations of Study 1. This is why participants engaged in a face-to-face interaction and why we used an older, nonstudent man as the leader. Study 2 confirmed our predictions and the results of Study 1: Subordinates interacting with an incompetent (as opposed to a competent) leader perceived the leader to be less dominant,

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[4]Contrary to Study 1, we found that female subordinates were more resistant to their leader influence than males whatever the level of leader competence. This finding is not supported by previous studies (e.g., Eagly, 1978; Eagly & Carli, 1981), showing that women are often more easily influenced than men. Because gender effects are not the focus of our research, we do not discuss this result further.
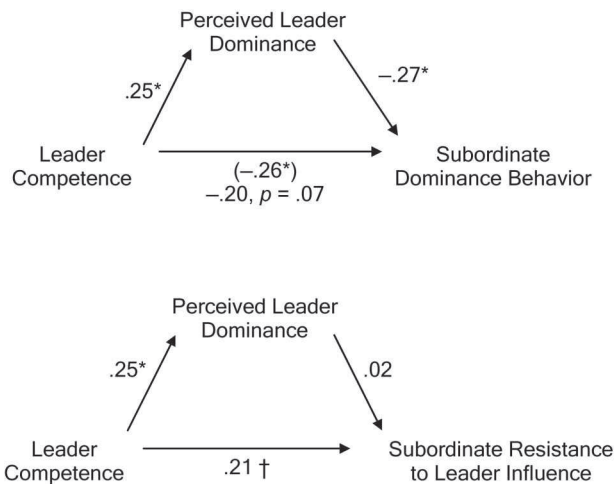
Figure 2. Partial and none mediations of perceived leader dominance on the relation between leader competence and subordinate dominance behaviour and between leader competence and subordinate resistance to the leader in Study 2. **$p < .005$, *$p < .05$, †$p < .10$.

behaved themselves in a more dominant way towards him, and showed more resistance to his influence (Table 1). As in Study 1 but contrary to our prediction, we did not find an effect of leader competence on task involvement.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The goal of this research was to investigate how a leader's lack of competence affects the perception of the leader by his or her subordinate and how the subordinate reacts to such a leader in terms of his or her own dominance behaviour towards the leader, the degree to which he or she resists leader influence, and the level of task involvement. In two studies, the same results emerged which is noteworthy because we used a different methodological approach. In Study 1, the interaction was rather artificial in that it was staged as an e-mail exchange, whereas in Study 2, participants interacted face-to-face with a real person as their leader. The fact that the results converge adds to the generalizability of our findings.

Confirming the predictions made by EST, we found that differences in competence are interpreted by group members—or in our case the dyad member—as signs of status differences. Moreover, these status differences are responsible for how people act in social interactions. We showed that perceived leader dominance mediated the relation between leader competence and subordinate dominance behaviour on the one hand and between

leader competence and subordinate resistance to leader influence (at least in Study 1) on the other hand.

Our results also show that subordinates of incompetent leaders behaved more dominantly towards their leader and resisted their leader's influence more. These findings point to the importance of a congruence between status hierarchy and competence hierarchy. If there is incongruence, subordinates compensate for it by adapting their behaviour, meaning that when together with an incompetent leader, the subordinate behaves more dominantly. Subordinates seem to automatically adjust their dominance behaviour according to the perceived dominance of their leader as shown also during peer interactions in that interaction partners complement each other's dominance behaviour (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003).

The fact that one behaves more dominantly than the subordinate role would prescribe might, however, entail problems in the long run. For instance, self-perception theory predicts that a person who behaves dominantly will also come to see him- or herself as more dominant and the person might wonder why he or she is not the one in the leadership position. This might result in power struggles and competitiveness within the superior–subordinate relationship and we expect this to be a rather stressful situation.

A leader's incompetence is a rather taboo theme. Although subordinates often mention a lack of expertise of their leader, empirical research addressing this question is scarce. One could argue that subordinates' complaints are exaggerated because many subordinates, given that they are in a situation of low power, are not in a position to assess their leaders' task-competence. However, our results show that subordinates perceived correctly an existing competence difference among leaders and thus confirmed previous empirical literature (e.g., Shipper & Wilson, 1991) suggesting that perceived leader competence is related with objective measures of competence (i.e., the profitability of a unit, the win-loss record of a team; Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994).

Contrary to prediction but confirmed in both of our studies, task involvement did not differ according to whether the subordinate interacted with a competent or incompetent leader. Note that not finding the predicted relation between leader competence and task involvement in Study 1 was thus not due to the low reliability of the scale in Study 1 because we adapted the scale for Study 2 and it showed good reliability but there was still no effect. Maybe the fact that the subordinate had to submit the final ranking to the leader for evaluation can explain why there was no effect of leader competence on task involvement. Subordinates might have invested their maximum effort in both conditions because finally it was the leader—regardless of his competence level—who evaluated the subordinate's final list. Thus, the fact that the individual contribution could be evaluated might

have increased the individual's task involvement in both conditions (e.g., Price, Harrison, & Gavin, 2006). Indeed, Table 1 shows that the means for the competent and the incompetent conditions were rather high. Another factor could be social desirability. Maybe participants just wanted to report that they took the task seriously and that they complied with the experiment and this is why they reported high levels of task involvement; recall that it was a self-report measure.

In our studies, participant gender did mostly not affect the results. This finding is supported by the situational/authority approach (e.g., Johnson, 1994; Leffler, Gillespie, & Conaty, 1982; Zelditch & Walker, 1984) suggesting that formal authority is more important than gender in understanding conversation behaviours (e.g., powerless speech and dominance behaviours). Johnson (1994) examined conversations in authority relationships between formal leaders (male and female) and their subordinates (male and female) and found that positions in the hierarchy has the most robust effect on the conversation behaviours and not gender.

Note that in our study the leader was always a man because that reflects best the current state of affairs (Laessig et al., 2006). However, it would be interesting to see whether the results came out the same if participants interacted with a female leader. Because female leaders as compared to male leaders are evaluated more negatively and thus are perceived as less competent (Eagly & Karau, 2002), perhaps making the women competent would not have worked so well and the manipulation we used would have produced weaker results.

The question of whether task performance of the subordinate or the dyad is affected by leader incompetence remains open in our studies. There is evidence pointing towards reduced team performance when the leader is less competent than the subordinate (Justis et al., 1978; Sauer et al., 2010) and some studies found that subordinates perform worse when their leader is incompetent (Hamblin et al., 1961; Hogan, Raskin, & Fazzini, 1990). However, it is also possible that when together with an incompetent leader, the subordinate would not only take on more dominance and thus compensate for the lack of dominance of the leader (as we showed in the present research) but also be more successful in solving the task at hand. Future studies might want to include task performance measures to clarify this question.

The existing literature focuses on the importance of *interpersonal competence* for good leadership (McCall & Lombardo, 1983; van Velsor & Leslie, 1995). For instance, based on interviewing senior executives from different organizations, revising qualitative studies, and conducting surveys, Lombardo and his colleagues (Lombardo et al., 1988; McCall & Lombardo, 1983; McCauley & Lombardo, 1990) concluded that incompetent managers had relationship problems, were incapable of building a team, and showed

poor leadership. Thus, they were less interpersonally competent. As a consequence, today, many leadership trainings focus on interpersonal skills. The present research shows that a leader's task-competence is also an important factor which is in line with some authors' assertion that instrumental thus task-related aspects of leadership are equally important for effective leadership (e.g., Antonakis, 2006). Given that technical skills are certainly considered as the more trainable skills, organizations might profit from continuously updating their leader's technical abilities rather than their interpersonal skills.

The importance of the leader's interpersonal competence in comparison to his or her task-competence remains poorly understood to date. More research is needed to address the interplay of task- and interpersonal competence of the leader for leadership outcomes. More specifically, studies systematically varying both aspects of competence independent from each other and then testing their joint or separate influence on leadership outcomes and interpersonal perception and behaviour between superiors and subordinates are needed. It has to be noted that depending on the job and the leader's task at hand, the leader does not necessarily have to have the technical knowledge to be a good leader. To illustrate, the importance of interpersonal or task-competence is affected by the leader's hierarchical position within the organization (e.g., Boyatzis, 1982; Mumford, Marks, Connelly, Zacaro, & Reiter-Palmon, 2000). Task-competence seems more important than interpersonal competence at a low hierarchical level. With increasing complexity of the activities and relationships in an organization, different types of competences are needed (i.e., task and interpersonal) (Yukl, 2006) and leader training should therefore definitely not neglect aspects of technical competence.

Our research included data collection in a laboratory setting with participants allocated to low power roles. Whether participants who actually are in a hierarchical relationship with a leader perceive their leader's level of competence in the same way as our participants and whether they react in the same manner to a competent or incompetent boss remains to be tested. Leader perception might differ in long-term relationships.

Also, our research shows that "leadership cannot be studied apart from followership" (van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008, p. 193). The way the leader is perceived affects the subordinate and vice versa. In emergent leadership situations, the group members often appoint the leadership position to the person they perceive as the most competent to solve the task at hand (Berger et al., 1977; Ridgeway & Berger, 1986). The leader thus possesses legitimate power. As soon as the group detects a lack of competence in the leader, he or she is in an illegitimate situation and the group will replace the leader with another person. In organizations, it is very rare that a group gets to choose or appoint their leader; often the human

resource department or the next higher instance chooses a leader for the group. When the group judges the leader as incompetent, the leader cannot so easily be replaced and the situation of having an illegitimate leader lasts. This is a problematic situation not only for the subordinates, who do not have the power to replace their leader, but also for the leader, who might suffer from nonacceptance or nonrespect of his or her subordinates. An illegitimate leader might thus be linked to costs related to reduced work satisfaction, increased health complaints, absenteeism, and higher turnover.

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