



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### When you can't follow the leader

*Inconsistency: Its antecedents and outcomes*

van Gerven, E.J.G.

### Publication date

2024

[Link to publication](#)

### Citation for published version (APA):

van Gerven, E. J. G. (2024). *When you can't follow the leader: Inconsistency: Its antecedents and outcomes*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

### General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

### Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

# Chapter 1

## General Introduction and Overview



In the changing world of organizations, characterized by complexity and dynamism, leaders face a big challenge: the need to adapt their behaviors to effectively navigate shifting demands. In order to be effective, leaders nowadays have to listen to the wishes of their own managers, their followers, and the outside world. While leading their followers, they must educate themselves on an ever increasing amount of topics such as leading diversity (e.g., Homan et al., 2020), managing sustainability (e.g., Odugbesan et al., 2023), and dealing with artificial intelligence (Peifer et al., 2022). This introduces a perplexing dilemma: How can leaders maintain their credibility and reliability in the eyes of their followers when they must navigate shifting demands, adapt to changing circumstances, face diverse challenges and at times, display seemingly contradictory behaviors? This dilemma gives rise to the risk for leaders to be perceived as displaying "inconsistent leader behavior" representing the dark side of leader behavioral variability. In the pages ahead, I will provide an overview of the history of the construct, explain more about the dilemma, and introduce the construct of inconsistent leader behavior.

### **1.1 The history of inconsistent leader behavior: Contextual leadership research**

The importance of tailoring leader behavior to specific situations has been a focus in leadership studies for an extended period. After a few decades of leader-centric approaches to study leadership in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Fiedler (1958) proposed that leadership does not occur in a vacuum and that situational factors play a considerable role in determining outcomes of leader behavior. He developed a theory to explain why some leaders perform well under one condition while others perform well under different conditions. This contingency model of leadership postulates that the effectiveness of a group or organization is a function of the interaction between the motivation system of the leader and the favorableness of the situation. The model was used to explore whether group performance was determined by a match between leader style (or orientation) and the situation.

Subsequently, other researchers started exploring similar theories. In both the Multiple-linkage model (Yukl, 1971) as well as path-goal theory (House & Mitchell, 1975) situational demands are taken into account in such a way that different appropriate behaviors are identified for managers who are responsible for different types of tasks. Also, in the leader-member exchange theory, Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) theorize that different leader tactics are appropriate depending on the quality of the exchange relationship between leader and follower. The popularity of these situational theories shows that decades ago, researchers

already agreed on that adapting leader behavior to the situation is important for leader effectiveness, and hence the importance of leader behavioral variability.

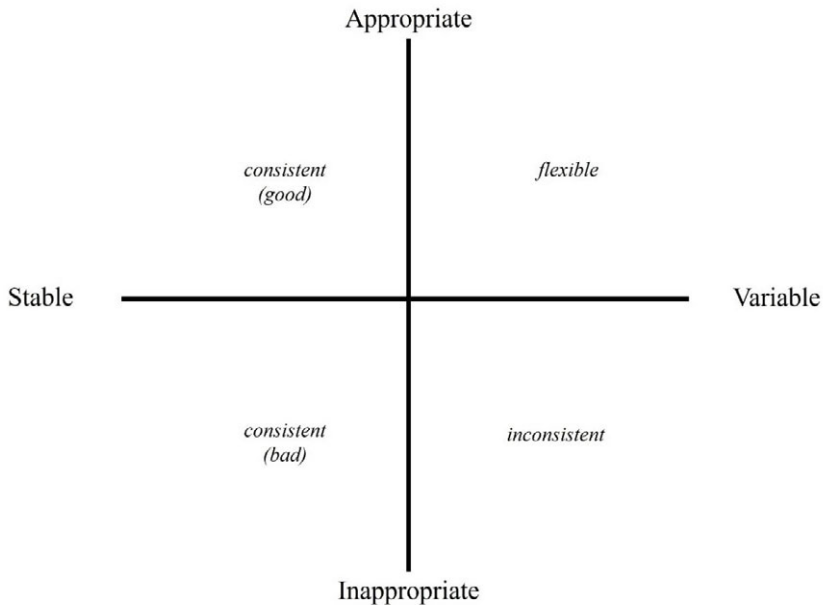
According to Behavioral Complexity Theory effective leaders need to display a range of often paradoxical and contradictory leadership behaviors depending on the situation (Denison et al., 1995). Leaders' competence, as such, is defined by the breadth and depth of their behavioral repertoire. Previous research shows that leaders that display a greater variety of leadership behaviors are rated more effective than the ones with a restricted range (Denison et al., 1995). All in all, one could argue that leaders who want to be effective and successful should make sure to have a wide range of behaviors at their disposal. However, this is not the only thing effective leaders should master, another important characteristic for a leader to display is behavioral consistency (Yukl, 2008a).

Through consistent actions, leaders can communicate their core values to their followers (Gardner et al., 2005) and reduce uncertainty (Katz-Navon et al., 2020). The consistency rule, the rule that authorities use procedures consistently across people and over time (Leventhal, 1980), is deemed most important for perceptions of fairness (e.g., Barrett-Howard & Tyler, 1986). Consistency contributes to follower's trust in their leader and ratings of effectiveness (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). In line with this, research has shown that inconsistency is viewed negatively and as something that should be avoided (e.g., De Cremer, 2003, Mullen et al., 2011).

## 1.2 The Dilemma

This combination of adaptation and consistency is where it becomes problematic: two of the most important characteristics for a leader to display are to some extent incompatible, at least so it seems. How can leaders remain credible and reliable in the eyes of followers while also showing conflicting behaviors (e.g., adapting behavior to the situation on the one hand while showing consistent behavior on the other hand)? The solution may lie in the word 'appropriate'. Denison and colleagues (1995) argue that "effective leaders are those who have the cognitive and behavioral complexity to respond *appropriately* to a wide range of situations that may in fact require contrary or opposing behaviors" (p. 526). As such, one might argue for appropriate variability, where appropriate implies that though the behavior varies, it is clearly consistent with the demands at that specific moment. Accordingly, leader behavior could be categorized along two axes: an "appropriateness" axis running from

inappropriate to appropriate and a “variability” axis running from stable to variable. Figure 1 shows the four resulting categories.



**Figure 1.** Categorization of leader behavior on appropriateness and variability axes

### 1.3 Appropriate Variability: Flexible Leadership

Flexible leadership, described as “changing behavior in *appropriate* ways as the situation changes” (Yukl and Mahsud, 2010, p. 81), seems to perfectly match appropriate variability. Flexibility is considered very important and even essential for managers (e.g., Burke & Cooper, 2004). Leaders that are behaviorally flexible have a wide variety of behaviors at their disposal and are able to identify the behaviors that are relevant for a specific situation and adapt their behaviors accordingly (Yukl, 2012). Overall, researchers argue that organizational performance improves under flexible and adaptive leadership (Yukl, 2008a).

So, problem solved? Yes and no. Though flexible leadership can be effective (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010), here we argue that it is unlikely that every single leader will be willing and able to display flexible leader behavior. Furthermore, we do not yet know what happens when flexibility goes bad. In this dissertation we introduce the term inconsistent leader behavior to

describe the dark side of leader behavioral variability, that is inappropriate variability. For example, inconsistent leaders could sometimes be very clear about what tasks followers should perform while other times leave followers in the dark regarding their tasks. We argue that inconsistent leader behavior is not the same as the lack of or the opposite of flexibility, but rather reflects a lack of appropriateness and we define it as *'follower's experience of erratic behavioral variability that, in their eyes, happens without an apparent reason'*.

#### **1.4 Inappropriate Variability: Inconsistent Leader Behavior**

As compared to flexible leadership, inconsistent leader behavior has received surprisingly little research attention (for exceptions see Suurd Ralph & Barling, 2022, and Vullings et al., 2020). Yet, several scholars have started to explore constructs related to inconsistent leader behavior, such as dynamic leader behavior (changes in behavior over time, McClean et al., 2019), emotional inconsistency (expressing different emotions over the course of a single conversation, Sinaceur et al., 2013), and behavioral integrity (the alignment between words and deeds, Simons, 2002; Dineen et al., 2006).

All in all, though inconsistent leader behavior is related to these other leadership constructs, none of them fully overlaps with inconsistent leader behavior. Similar to inconsistent leader behavior, almost all of these constructs are subjective in character. However, most are described as positive and focus on explicit reasons for varying leader behavior (e.g., flexible leadership, Yukl & Mahsud, 2010; versatile leadership, Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003) as compared to the negative description of inconsistent leader behavior that only 'happens' when there are no clear reasons. The more negative constructs focus either on the incompetent application of a specific style or on the strategic use of behavioral variability (i.e., inconsistent but with a clear reason) and are specific rather than describing more general behavior (e.g., emotional inconsistency, Sinaceur et al., 2013).

#### **1.5 Outline**

In this dissertation we develop knowledge about when and why leaders are perceived as displaying inconsistent behavior and how and when leader inconsistency hampers (team) outcomes. What happens when leader behavioral variability goes bad and leaders' behavior varies, but not in an adaptive way? Specifically, the aim of this dissertation is to investigate the topic of inconsistent leader behavior by focusing on four questions: (1) How can we measure perceptions of inconsistent leader behavior and what does the nomological network of this construct look like? (Chapter 2), (2) How does leader narcissism relate to perceptions

of inconsistency, and what role does gender play in that relationship? (Chapter 3), (3) How do perceptions of inconsistent leader behavior affect follower mental health? (Chapter 4), and (4) What is the effect of observing between-person inconsistency on anger? (Chapter 5). In what follows, the four empirical chapters are briefly outlined. When referring to the studies of this dissertation, I will use a plural pronoun to acknowledge the contributions of my co-authors in this research.

### ***1.5.1 Chapter 2: Conceptualizing Perceptions of Leader Inconsistency***

In Chapter 2, we specify and theoretically develop inconsistent leader behavior. We clarify what differentiates inconsistent leader behavior from other, related constructs and conceptualize it as the dark side of behavioral variability, where leaders are perceived to erratically change their behavior without an apparent reason. We develop and validate the ILB-4, a four-item scale to measure general perceptions of inconsistent leader behavior in followers. Furthermore, we develop two additional scales that focus on inconsistency in initiating structure and in consideration leader behavior, two fundamental factors in research on leader behavior that have proven to be robust and important predictors of follower reactions to their leaders (Fleishman, 1995; Judge et al., 2004). In four studies we establish the psychometric properties of these scales and test the nomological network of inconsistent leader behavior.

### ***1.5.2 Chapter 3: Antecedents of Inconsistency***

In Chapter 3, we focus on what precedes leader inconsistency by studying the relationship between leader narcissism and perceptions of inconsistent leader behavior, moderated by gender. We propose that the characteristics of narcissistic leaders, such as arrogance, opportunism, and impulsivity, imply an element of irrationality in leader's behaviors which can result in perceptions of inconsistency. In addition, we argue that gender plays a role in determining whether or not narcissistic leaders are perceived as inconsistent. Previous research has shown that gender influences how certain characteristics are evaluated, such that women and men are perceived differently depending on the socially expected and accepted sex role behavior (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Social role theory suggests that men are expected to display more agentic and women more communal behavior (Eagly, 1987), expectations that are also found for leaders. As narcissistic behavior reflects more agentic traits, it is more in line with stereotypical masculine behavior as compared to feminine behavior. Based on the judgment model (Sherif & Hovland, 1961), we argue that the characteristics of narcissistic leaders that communicate inconsistency are more salient when

evaluating female leaders than when evaluating male leaders (as the contrast between what is expected and what is displayed is bigger for female leaders). Accordingly, we propose that female narcissistic leaders are more likely to be perceived as inconsistent than male narcissistic leaders.

We also examine the relationship between perceptions of inconsistency and follower performance. We argue that perceived inconsistent leader behavior is negatively related to follower performance as these perceptions cause stress and deplete followers' energy. As responses to leader behavior are found to be influenced by the quality of the relationship between leader and follower, we take leader-member exchange into account and propose that the expected negative relationship between perceived inconsistency and follower performance is strongest for followers in a low-quality relationship with their leader. Overall, we test whether leader narcissism is most strongly negatively related to follower performance through perceptions of inconsistent behavior for female leaders who have a low-quality relationship with their followers.

### ***1.5.3 Chapter 4: Consequences of Inconsistent Leader Behavior***

After studying the antecedents of perceptions of inconsistency in Chapter 3, in Chapter 4 we turn to the outcomes of these perceptions. Specifically, in a large-scale field study amongst over thirty thousand employees working for a Brazilian bank we explore the relationship between perceptions of inconsistent leader behavior and follower mental health and look at the role of psychological safety climate. We draw on the job demands-resources model (JD-R, Demerouti et al., 2001) to argue that perceptions of inconsistent leader behavior can be considered a job demand that depletes follower energy because inconsistent leaders create an unpredictable and unsafe work environment. More specifically, we argue that followers perceiving inconsistent leader behavior feel less psychologically safe.

Furthermore, according to the JD-R model, job demands interact with job resources to affect well-being on the job (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In our study we look at job autonomy, a job resource that provides employees with opportunities to cope with stressful situations (e.g., Jenkins, 1991) and argue that it buffers the negative effect of inconsistent leader behavior on psychological safety. Finally, we look at the effect of decreased psychological safety on employee mental health, measured as team-level absenteeism due to mental health problems, and propose that absenteeism increases as an outcome of decreased psychological safety. With our full theoretical model we hypothesize that perceptions of



inconsistent leader behavior lead to a decrease in psychological safety and, through that, an increase in absenteeism, especially for employees with low job autonomy.

#### ***1.5.4 Chapter 5: Outcomes of Observing Between-Person Inconsistency***

So far, in each chapter discussed, we investigated (the antecedents and outcomes of) within-person inconsistency, where the person answering the questions is the one that is (to some extent) treated inconsistently by one specific leader. In Chapter 5 we study what happens when someone observes between-person inconsistency. In an online experiment amongst British soccer fans we conduct a 2x2x2 study to manipulate inconsistency, outcome favorability, and identification with the victim of (in)consistency. Participants are confronted with two very similar match situations during which a player performed a dangerous tackle on a player from the opposing team. For the participants in the high identification conditions, the situations involve the team they supported facing their strongest opponent. Participants in the low identification conditions read about two different teams they are not particularly attached to, team X and team Y. To manipulate consistency, we describe referee decisions following the described match situations that are either the same for both teams (consistent, both teams receiving a yellow card after a foul) or differ between teams (inconsistent, only team X receives a yellow card after committing a foul, team Y does not receive a card after a foul). Finally, the decisions can result in either favorable outcomes (no punishment) or unfavorable/harmful outcomes (receiving a yellow card).

We draw on social psychological research and procedural fairness theory (e.g., Brockner et al., 2001; Folger & Kass, 2000; Wenzel, 2000) and propose that inconsistent decisions, in combination with outcome favorability and identification with the victim, positively affect observers' anger about the referee decision. Furthermore, we test whether emotions (anger) affect behavior. According to research on deontic justice (Folger, 2001) people observing unfairness are motivated to try to restore justice. One way of doing this is by punishing the perpetrator (Turillo et al., 2002). In our study, we measure punishment by counting the number of pins that participants use to 'stab' a referee doll in the Voodoo Doll Task (DeWall et al., 2013). Taken together, we propose that inconsistency, outcome favorability, and identification jointly affect anger and, through anger, aggressive behavior.

#### ***1.5.5 Chapter 6: Discussion***

In Chapter 6, I summarize and integrate the findings from the previous chapters and discuss the theoretical and practical contributions of this dissertation.