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Dirk van Dierendonck Sabrine Driehuizen

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Leader's intention to support followers' self-worth

Dirk van Dierendonck and Sabrine Driehuizen
*Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University,
Rotterdam, The Netherlands*

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to focus on the role of the followers' competence, will to achieve, and self-determination on a leader's intention to support a followers' sense of self-worth.

Design/methodology/approach – Using an experimental scenario study design with a sample of 316 managers, a mediated three-way moderation model was investigated that tested the extent to which a new subordinate's competence, self-determination, and will to achieve would influence the manager's positive expectations of them and their willingness to support this subordinate's sense of self-worth.

Findings – The results showed that a subordinate's competence plays a key role and that a subordinate's will to achieve and self-determination played an additional role that was mediated by positive expectations of the leader.

Practical implications – The key findings emphasize that leaders can benefit from understanding how dyadic relationships form and are influenced by the earliest phases of the development of such relationships.

Originality/value – By taking the perspective of the leader, the paper provides empirical evidence of key determinants of the leader-follower relationship.

Keywords Leadership, Competence, Expectations, Motivation, Self-determination, Self-worth

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Most of us spend our daytimes in the workplace, and our jobs are often important parts of our lives. It is therefore not surprising that a large part of our sense of self-worth resides in our jobs. We like to feel meaningful, effectual, and worthwhile within the organization in which we are employed, and the relationship that we have with our direct supervisors plays an important role in this respect. There is ample evidence indicating that attempts by leaders to build self-esteem, self-worth, and/or feelings of competence are a strong motivator for people (Redmond *et al.*, 1993). In today's dynamic organizational context, an essential approach to the study and understanding of leadership concerns the relational process between a leader and a subordinate on a one-to-one basis (Yammarino *et al.*, 2005). Even within larger contexts in which individuals function such as departments, business units, and organizations, effective leadership necessitates an individualized approach that gives explicit attention to leadership as an interpersonal dyadic process.

The individualized leadership approach assumes that employees need customized individual support in diverse settings and reciprocate with satisfying performance when they feel their superior pays attention to their individual needs and feelings (Dansereau *et al.*, 1998). Essentially, subordinates are viewed by themselves and by their leaders as unique individuals who are independent of the formal group that they are part of (Yammarino and Dansereau, 2002). This approach takes into account individual differences and variations in the behaviors and personalities of the leader and the follower (Graen, 2004).

The individualized leadership approach (Dansereau *et al.*, 1995) suggests that high-quality relationships between leaders and their subordinates are based on social exchange (Blau, 1964) and the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) and develop as a cycle. The cycle starts when the leader provides a subordinate with a sense of self-worth, and a subordinate reciprocates by providing satisfying performance. An underexplored area within the individualized leadership approach is what influences the intention of the leader to provide the subordinate with a sense of self-worth. Previous research (Dansereau *et al.*, 1995, 1998; Yammarino and Dansereau, 2002) fails to explain the process that occurs in the earliest stage of the relationship between leaders and subordinates in an organizational setting. Better insight into this phase would help leaders become aware of the impact of their first impressions on their subsequent behavior. An increased awareness of these mostly unconscious processes could help them build high-quality relationships with a broader range of subordinates. For this, we need a better insight into which subordinate characteristics trigger a leader to start building such high-quality relationships that encourage a subordinate's self-worth. The research in this paper focusses specifically on the perspective of leaders in the initiation process of the relationship and provides deeper insight into what motivates them to start the investment-return cycle with their subordinates. Hence, this paper examines the impact that some subordinate characteristics have on encouraging a leader to provide a subordinate with a sense of self-worth. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual model that guides this research.

Self-worth
Building on the early works of Coopersmith (1967), Korman (1976), and Wells and Marwell (1976), we define an individual's sense of self-worth as a personal evaluation reflecting what he or she thinks of himself or herself as an individual. Individuals shape and maintain this self-evaluation, reflecting the extent to which they believe themselves to be capable and worthy (Pierce, *et al.*, 1989). The goal of the support of self-worth by a leader is the development of a subordinate as an individual. It is a dyadic process that stimulates the subordinate's feeling of empowerment (Dansereau *et al.*, 1995; Yammarino and Dansereau, 2002). A leader can support the self-worth of a subordinate in different ways: by assuring that he or she has confidence in the integrity, ability, and motivation of the subordinate (House, 1977); by actively supporting the actions and
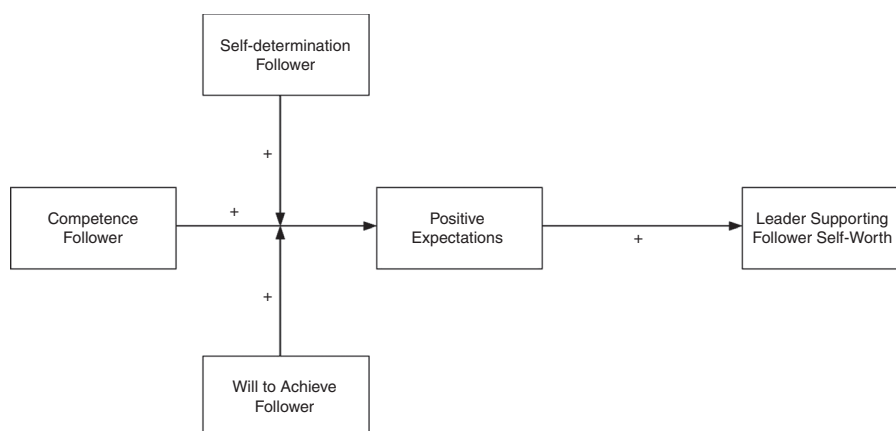

Figure 1.
Conceptual model of follower competence, self-determination, and will to achieve influencing leader's expectations and support of follower's self-worth

ideas of the subordinate (Graen *et al.*, 1975); and by paying attention to the subordinate's personal needs and feelings (Stogdill and Coons, 1957).

Baumeister (1998) stated that most individuals seek to maintain, protect, and enhance their senses of self-worth. The contingencies of self-worth, therefore, serve an important self-regulatory role: individuals engage in activities and seek out situations that provide opportunities for them to achieve success and avoid failure in the domains in which they stake their sense of self-worth (Crocker, 2002a, b; Crocker and Wolfe, 2001). According to Pierce *et al.* (1989), individuals within organization who have a high sense of self-worth will develop and maintain favorable work attitudes (such as job satisfaction) and will behave productively. They will perform at a high level because such attitudes are consistent with the notion that they are competent individuals; often, this positive view of themselves is based on positive experiences in the past. Feeling worthwhile is related to a sense of meaningfulness and self-efficacy that encourages taking on challenging tasks in which an individual feels he or she has a high chance of success. However, individuals with a low sense of self-worth will develop and maintain unproductive work behaviors and unfavorable work attitudes that are consistent with the notion that they are individuals of perceived low competence.

Relationship-based approaches to leadership

To understand the process by which leaders encourage the sense of self-worth of their subordinates, we drew from the insights of leader-member exchange (LMX) theory and from the individualized leadership approach (Dansereau *et al.*, 1995). The LMX theory suggests that leaders develop different relationships with their subordinates and make the unique relationship between a leader and a subordinate the focus of interest (Graen and Scandura, 1987). This interpersonal relationship is based on social exchange (investments and returns; Blau, 1964) and the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). The work of Gouldner (1960) on reciprocity suggests that feelings of obligation are created when one of the parties acts in a manner that is beneficial to the other and when those actions go beyond the demands of the social role. To develop a high-quality relationship, each party in the relationship (in the organizational context, the leader and the subordinate) must offer the other party something they see as valuable. Furthermore, both parties must see the exchange as fair or reasonably equitable (Graen and Scandura, 1987). A greater perceived value of the tangible and/or intangible commodities exchanged corresponds to a higher quality of the relationship. In a high-quality exchange relationship, the subordinate would feel obliged not only to perform the job adequately but also to engage in behavior that is directly beneficial to the leader and goes beyond the scope of the job description.

Relatedly, the individualized leadership approach (Dansereau *et al.*, 1995; Yammarino and Dansereau, 2002) suggests a concrete exchange of commodities within the exchange relationship. A critical investment on the part of the leader is providing the subordinate with a feeling of support of self-worth, which can be accomplished by providing attention, assurance and support to the subordinate. The critical investment on the part of the subordinate is providing the leader with satisfying performance. This can be accomplished by providing the leader with high-quality performance that goes beyond the standards and by performing in line with the leader's preferences. Dansereau *et al.* (1995) reason that the quality of the relationship between a leader and a subordinate depends on the ability of the leader to provide support for the subordinate as an individual, which is an essential element in the eyes of the subordinate.

Over the years, various studies have been dedicated to uncovering the antecedents and predictors associated with high-quality relationships. Mumford (1998) and Ferris and Harrel-Cook (1998) have noted that there are several situational and contextual factors that may directly influence the development of high-quality relationships, such as similarity (Liden *et al.*, 1993; Phillips and Bedeian, 1994) and affect or liking (Dockery and Steiner, 1990; Wayne and Ferris, 1990) between leader and subordinate. Liden *et al.* (1993) also found that expectations of the supervisor about the subordinate's future performance were a strong predictor of the quality of the relationship.

However, little research has been devoted to providing knowledge about the early development of this relationship and, more specifically, about what motivates a leader when entering a relationship with a new subordinate. The individualized leadership approach (Yammarino and Dansereau, 2002) states that it is most likely that subordinates will begin to reciprocate with satisfying performance when they perceive that their leader supports their self-worth, thereby supporting them as an individual. In exchange for satisfying performance, leaders then complete the cycle by reinforcing the perception of their support for the subordinate's self-worth. This recognition and support of a subordinate's self-worth results in the subordinate reciprocating with satisfying performance (Dansereau *et al.*, 1995; Yammarino and Dansereau, 2002). In other words, the investments of the leader initiate the resulting quality of the relationship. However, evidence for this notion within research that explicitly focusses on the leader-follower dyad is limited (Dansereau *et al.*, 1995, 1998). We do know from research into transformational leadership that individualized consideration – which encompasses a developmental and supportive orientation of the leader toward subordinates – is related to follower outcomes such as job satisfaction and affective commitment (Bass, 1985). Although we do have evidence that acknowledges the importance of attention to an individual's self-worth, it remains empirically unclear what encourages leaders to support an individual's self-worth.

Because previous research fails to explain the actual initiation process that occurs in the earliest stage of the relationship between leaders and subordinates, the primary focus of this paper are those aspects of new subordinates that underlie the initiation of the process on the part of the leader. Our conceptual model takes as a starting point the leader's estimation of a subordinates' competence, as this is most directly related to future performance. Higher levels of competence raise the expectations of the leader and lead to a stronger intention to enhance a subordinate's sense of self-worth. This process is influenced by the subordinate's level of self-determination and will to achieve.

At the start of a work relationship, a leader usually has already gathered information on the subordinate (Ferris *et al.*, 2009), upon which he or she forms a first impression of the subordinate. The information available to leaders about subordinates may be derived secondarily from sources such as test scores, recommendations, or interviews (e.g. Phillips and Dipboye, 1989) or derived directly from the subordinate during the first few days on the job (Hollander and Offermann, 1990). It is also possible that a leader gets information about a subordinate from his or her predecessor. This information can be either positive or negative. We propose that this information may result in a preliminary estimation of a subordinate's competence, even before a leader and a subordinate actually meet in person.

Competence is defined as "an underlying characteristic of an individual which is related to effective and superior performance in a job or situation" (Spencer and Spencer, 1993). The competence of professionals derives from their possession of a set

of relevant attributes including knowledge, skills and attitudes. The attributes that jointly underlie competence are often referred to as competencies. A competency is a combination of attributes underlying some aspect of successful professional performance (Gonzi *et al.*, 1993). Because leaders aim for effective and superior performance of their subordinates in line with organization interests, the impression that a subordinate is competent to perform its job will create positive expectations for the subordinate:

H1. The perceived competence of a subordinate positively influences a leader's intention to support the self-worth of a subordinate.

Subordinate's competence, will to achieve, and self-determination
There are two motivational characteristics of a subordinate that we expect to influence the impact of competence: his or her will to achieve and his or her self-determination. Motivation is generally defined as "the psychological process that gives behavior purpose and direction" (Kreitner, 1995). In an organizational context, it has been defined as "the will to achieve" (Bedeian, 1993) or as "the inner force that drives individuals to accomplish personal and organizational goals" (Lindner, 1998). Given that motivated people are generally more productive and have a greater will to achieve (Bedeian, 1993), leaders will value motivation as desirable and develop positive expectations about motivated subordinates. Being goal-oriented, enthusiastic, and ambitious are often equated with being motivated. In line with these definitions, we choose to name the first motivational characteristic that may influence the impact of competence: the "will to achieve."

Second, we focus on the state of feeling intrinsically motivated: that one has a sense of choice, personal initiative, and regulation of one's own actions. This state is referred to as "self-determination" (Deci *et al.*, 1989). It is a concept that involves a sense of empowerment and is often defined as the power or ability to make a decision for oneself without influence from the outside. Furthermore, it is related to a deeper feeling of autonomy, and it makes the person take personal initiative. Self-determination has been associated with positive work-related outcomes including higher job-related satisfaction and trust in the organization (Deci *et al.*, 1989). Breaugh (1985) has shown that feelings of self-determination increased job involvement and quality of job performance. Likewise, Sheldon and Elliot (1998) found that self-determination predicted greater effort and increased goal attainment. Given these favorable behaviors and outcomes, leaders will have higher expectations of their subordinates when they have the impression that the subordinates have high feelings of self-determination.

We expect that the will to achieve and self-determination will influence the impact of competence. For people with a relatively low level of competence, the will to achieve, and self-determination can counterbalance an otherwise potentially negative influence. That is, we expect that leaders will give subordinates with low levels of competence the benefit of the doubt if they are either highly achievement-oriented or highly self-determined. These persons will still be supported, and their self-worth will be encouraged. In addition, we expect that having all three characteristics – competence, will to achieve, and self-determination – will be most encouraged by their leader. As such, we predict a three-way interaction:

H2. The will to achieve and the self-determination of a subordinate influences the relationship between competence and supporting a subordinates' self-worth, such that when the competence is low, higher levels of will to achieve and self-determination are separately and conjointly related to a higher intention to encourage a subordinate's self-worth.

Positive expectations
Our model assumes that expectations about a subordinate play a mediating role
between a subordinate's competence and the intention of a leader to support
a subordinate's sense of self-worth. The LMX theory suggests that the expectations
of a leader about a subordinate's future performance have a strong influence on the
quality of the relationship between the two parties (Liden *et al.*, 1993). Graen and
Uhl-Bien (1995) have also stated that positive expectations are essentially needed at the
initiation of the relationship between leader and subordinate. They argued that a
partnership offer will be made or accepted only if there is a positive expectation that the
interaction will develop into a high-quality relationship.

Individuals form expectations of other people based on the information that is
available to them. According to Hamilton *et al.* (1980), to develop a coherent
representation of a target person (the subordinate), a perceiver (the leader in this case)
will acquire items of information about this person (here: level of competence,
motivation, and self-determination). This encoded information becomes organized and
represented in memory as a cognitive structure that represents the perceiver's
accumulated knowledge about the target person. This cognitive structure constitutes
the basis for the perceiver's subsequent judgments (Jaccard and Fishbein, 1975).
Cognitive information processing models (Feldman, 1986; Ilgen and Feldman, 1983)
provide a framework for these processes. Feldman (1986) has suggested that at the
beginning of a relationship between a leader and a subordinate, the leader's automatic
processes produce a categorization of the subordinate. The factors that influence this
categorization process include salient characteristics and behaviors based upon which
the leader will develop expectations of the subordinate. In turn, these expectations are
likely to influence the behavior of the leader.

Individuals are typically more likely to continue interacting with people when they have
a positive impression of them (Denrell, 2005) Thus, the overall first impression a leader has
of its subordinates will impact their expectations of them. In turn, this first impression may
be of great influence on the intention to support the subordinate's self-worth in the earliest
stage of the relationship. This idea is in line with expectancy theory (Graen, 1969; Porter
and Lawler, 1968; Vroom, 1964), a motivational model that uses the exchange concept to
explain individual decision-making processes. The theory predicts that individuals will
engage in behavior that they perceive to eventually lead to valued rewards. In this case,
based on the first impression about the subordinate, the leader may think positively about
his or her subordinates and their capacities to meet the leader's performance standards.
Following from expectancy theory, this idea would motivate the leader to provide
subordinates with a sense of self-worth because the leader expects that the subordinates
will reciprocate in a satisfying manner. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H3. The leader's expectations of the subordinate positively influence the intention of
the leader to support the sense of self-worth of the subordinate.

H4. The leader's expectations of the subordinate mediate the relationship between
the three-way interaction of the level of competence, will to achieve, and
self-determination of a subordinate and the intention of the leader to support the
subordinate's sense of self-worth.

Control variables
The goal of this study was to gain deeper insight into the subordinates' qualities that
are related to the positive expectation of the leader that influence a higher motivation to

encourage a subordinate's self-worth. To make sure our findings were not influenced by possible third-variables effects, we controlled for them in two ways. First, we used an experimental design by which the participants are randomly assigned to a condition. Second, we statistically controlled for three potential influences: the general level of the leader's empowering behavior, the leader's experience as a leader, and the gender similarity with the subordinate.

Empowering leadership emphasizes employee self-influence processes and encourages followers actively to lead themselves to self-direction and self-motivation (e.g. Houghton and Yoho, 2005; Pearce and Sims, 2002). It involves behavior-focussed strategies, constructive thought-pattern strategies, and natural-reward strategies. It is associated with encouraging self-leadership, and it is often defined as the process of leading others to lead themselves (Manz and Sims, 1991). We expect that leaders who generally display more empowering leadership behaviors will have a stronger intention to support a subordinate with a sense of self-worth, irrespective of the subordinate's competence, will to achieve, and self-determination.

Experience is identified with age, time in an organization, tenure, occupation, location, position, and rank within various contexts (Schmidt et al., 1986; McEnrue, 1988). Ferris and Harrel-Cook (1998) suggested that experience might influence whether a leader chooses to engage in or initiate an investment-return cycle. One might argue that an experienced manager knows that providing a subordinate with a sense of self-worth is effective in getting the subordinate to reciprocate with a satisfying performance. The initial judgment and expectations may be played down to see if the subordinate behaves differently or displays different attributes under the new leader's authority.

The last control variable is gender similarity. The similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971) argues that people tend to be attracted to those whom they perceive to be similar to them in terms of salient demographic characteristics. Gender is one of these demographic characteristics. Wayne et al. (1997) and Green et al. (1996) have already reported that the quality of the relationship between a supervisor and a subordinate may be higher if they are of the same gender. This dynamic could suggest that leaders would also be more motivated to initiate the development of a high-quality relationship by providing support for self-worth to a subordinate that is of the same gender. According to Graves and Powell (1995), a demographic similarity (e.g. gender) between two individuals leads to a perceived similarity in attitudes and values, which in turn leads to interpersonal attraction. This interpersonal attraction then leads to a positive bias in information processing and judgment. Under this theory, it is plausible that leaders have higher expectations of subordinates that are of the same sex.

Methods

Participants and design

A target group of leaders from the network of the authors was invited to participate in this research via an e-mail containing a link to the online scenario questionnaire. The only criterion for participating is the current holding of a leadership position for a period of several months. All participants were assured that the data would be treated anonymously and that answers would not be extracted individually. A total of 863 people clicked on the link to the questionnaire, and 352 people (40.8 percent) filled out the complete questionnaire. The participants were randomly assigned to a condition in a 2 (high vs low competence) by 2 (high vs low will to achieve) by 2 (high vs low self-determination) by 2 (man vs woman) between-subjects design.

A number of checks were performed to determine if respondents completed the questionnaire seriously. Within the questionnaire, the respondents were asked about the gender of the subordinate in the scenario they had just read. If respondents failed to correctly answer this question, it was assumed that they did not properly read or understand the text provided. In addition, any respondents who responded to all questions with the same answer were believed to have not completed the questionnaire seriously. Finally, the time to complete the questionnaire was analyzed. The mean time to complete the questionnaire was 11.8 minutes, with a standard deviation of 5.1 minutes. If respondents took less than five minutes to complete the questionnaire, their answers were assumed to be unreliable. As a result of these checks, 36 respondents were removed from the sample.

The remaining sample consisted of 316 managers. Their mean age was 40.1 years (SD = 10.8), and they had a mean of 9.6 years (SD = 8.4) experience in a leadership position. There were 59.2 percent men and 40.8 percent women in the sample. The majority (71 percent) worked in a for-profit organization. Each scenario had between 15 and 27 observations.

Procedure
First, the survey described the experimental manipulation. The participants were asked to imagine that they were the new managers of a department and that they received information about their new subordinates from their predecessors. They were shown a short text about a supposed new subordinate. Next, they were asked to make a realistic estimate of how they, as managers, would approach and treat this person.

We employed an experimental design with a between-subjects design because common-method variance, which is problematic for cross-sectional studies, is ameliorated. An experimental design also has the advantage that it avoids the potential bias of restricted recollection that would come with asking leaders how they have acted in the past. Additionally, scenario experiments generally scored relatively well on mundane realism.

Experimental manipulations
Gender similarity. Gender was manipulated by the first sentence (i.e. "This person is a man" or "This person is a woman"). The text describing the rest of the follower's characteristics would either be "he"/"him" or "she"/"her." Gender similarity was calculated as 1 if both the follower and leader had the same gender and 0 if they had different genders.

Competence. The competence of the follower was manipulated following the competence theory (Spencer and Spencer, 1993; Gonzi *et al.*, 1993). In the high-competence condition (given a male follower), the following text was given: "He is very experienced in the field and is well qualified. He is very knowledgeable, and he has performed above standards for the last year." For the low-competence condition, the following text was given: "He is not very experienced in the field and is not well qualified. He is not knowledgeable, and he has performed below standards for the last year."

Will to achieve. The manipulation of will to achieve was based on the works of Kreitner (1995), Bedeian (1993), and Lindner (1998). In the high will to achieve condition (given a female follower), the following text was given: "She shows goal-oriented behavior. She approaches the tasks with enthusiasm and tries to perform them to the

best of her ability. She is an ambitious person and seems to take pride in success." For the low will to achieve condition, the following text was given: "She does not show goal-oriented behavior. She approaches tasks with a lack of enthusiasm and seems not to try to perform them to the best of her ability. She is not an ambitious person and takes little pride in success."

Self-determination. The manipulation of self-determination was based on Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory. In the high-self-determination condition, the following text was given: "He is autonomous in executing his work and takes personal initiative. He feels effective in dealing with the work environment and experiences freedom of choice in his actions." In the low-self-determination condition, the following text was given: "He is not autonomous in executing his work and takes little personal initiative. He feels ineffective in dealing with the work environment and experiences little freedom of choice in his actions."

Dependent measures
Unless otherwise indicated, all of the items were rated on a seven-point Likert-scale, ranging from "Fully disagree" to "Fully agree."

Manipulation checks. As a manipulation check, we asked twelve items that were developed based on the same literature as was used to develop the subordinate profile (Spencer and Spencer, 1993; Gonzi *et al.*, 1993; Kreitner, 1995; Bedeian, 1993; Lindner, 1998; Deci *et al.*, 1989; Breaugh, 1985; Sheldon and Elliot, 1998). There was one item to check for gender (e.g. "This person is female"), three items for will to achieve (e.g. "This person gives the job his or her personal best effort"), and four items each for competence (e.g. "This person has much job-related experience") and self-determination (e.g. "This person experiences independence and freedom in executing the job"). The internal consistencies of the three scales were high (0.91, 0.90, and 0.91, respectively).

Intention to support a subordinate's sense of self-worth. There is no known scale to test a leader's intention for support of self-worth. Based on the literature of Dansereau *et al.* (1995), House (1977), Graen *et al.* (1975), and Stogdill and Coons (1957), a five-item scale was developed specifically for this study. Sentences were selected that best described the stated theory: "I would pay attention to this person's personal needs and feelings," "I would ensure this person of my confidence in his/her ability to successfully perform the job," "I would support the choices this person makes regarding the job," "I would support this person as an individual," and "I would make sure this person knows I believe he/she is worthwhile." The internal consistency for this scale was 0.84.

Positive expectations. The level of expectations of the follower was measured with two items directly related to expectancy theory (Graen, 1969; Porter and Lawler, 1968; Vroom, 1964): "I have high expectations of this person" and "I believe that this is the right person for the job." The internal consistency of this scale was 0.89.

To confirm that the motivation to support a subordinate's sense of self-worth and the positive expectations were related but different constructs, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis using Mplus 6 (Muthén and Muthén, 2010). The two-factor model showed an excellent fit to the data ($X2$ (13) = 66.206, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.92, SRMR = 0.06, RMSEA = 0.114) that was considerably stronger than the one-factor model ($X2$ (14) = 294.787, CFI = 0.74, TLI = 0.62, SRMR = 0.09, RMSEA = 0.252). The factor loadings of the individual items in the two-factor model were at least 0.62. The correlation between both latent factors was 0.56. These findings lend credence to the factorial and discriminant validity of the scales.

Control variables. Two additional control variables were included in the study. The first was years of management experience. The second was one's own estimate of empowering behavior in general, using the Empowering Leadership Questionnaire (ELQ) developed by Arnold *et al.* (2000). The respondents rated the 38-items on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The internal consistency of the scale was 0.91.

Results
Manipulation checks
Three ANOVAs were performed to check whether the manipulations within the profile resulted in different opinions from the respondents. As described above, the persons who incorrectly completed the question on the gender of the follower had been removed from the sample. The results for competence showed significantly different opinions for subordinates with high competence ($M = 4.91$, SD $= 0.61$) as compared to subordinates with low competence ($M = 2.22$, SD $= 0.85$), $F(1,315) = 1048.34$, $p < 0.01$). The same holds for the estimated motivation of subordinates with high will to achieve ($M = 4.83$, SD $= 0.65$) as compared to those with low will to achieve ($M = 2.43$, SD $= 0.75$), $F(1,315) = 924.34$, $p < 0.01$). The manipulation check for self-determination was successful as well, resulting in a mean of 2.19 (SD $= 0.66$) for subordinates with low self-determination and a mean of 4.71 (SD $= 0.74$) for subordinates with high self-determination ($F(1,315) = 1024.23$, $p < 0.01$). We can conclude that all three manipulations were successful.

Hypothesis testing
To detect the influence of the experimental conditions on encouraging follower self-worth as mediated by positive expectations, the PROCESS tool developed by Hayes (2012) was used. The PROCESS tool is a computational tool that allows for the direct testing of mediated three-way interaction with SPSS. In the equation, the three control variables (gender similarity with the follower, self-assessed empowering leadership, and experience in a leadership position), the three experimental conditions and their interactions were entered, and high expectations were entered as the mediator. Bootstrapping was used to test for indirect effects. Table I shows the main outcomes.

The full model explained 50 percent of the variance of a leader's expectations ($F(10, 305) = 31.02$, $p < 0.001$) and 30 percent of the variance of the intention to encourage a follower's self-worth ($F(5, 310) = 26.94$, $p < 0.001$). Of the three control variables, only self-reported empowering leadership behavior was significantly related to a stronger intention to support a subordinate's self-worth, and a leader's experience was related to having more positive expectations. No significant relation was found for gender similarity.

A leader's positive expectations were most strongly influenced by the main effects for competence and will to achieve, with added explained variance for the interaction between will to achieve and self-determination and the three-way interaction between the three conditions. Figure 2 depicts this three-way interaction in relation to positive expectations.

The results also show that positive expectations act as a mediator in the model. The main effect of competence dropped to a level below significance, $p < 0.05$. The indirect slope effects with positive expectations as a mediator were significant between low will

	Positive expectations	Intention to support follower's self-worth
Constant	1.34 (0.48)**	2.81 (0.34)***
Control variables		
Gender similarity	−0.10 (0.11)	0.01 (0.08)
Empowering leadership (self)	0.15 (0.11)	0.19 (0.08)*
Leadership experience	0.03 (0.01)***	0.00 (0.00)
Experimental conditions		
Follower competence	1.32 (21)***	0.17 (0.09)
Follower will to achieve	0.50 (0.22)*	
Follower self-determination	0.14 (0.22)	
Interactions		
Competence × will to achieve	0.28 (0.30)	
Competence × self-determination	0.38 (0.30)	
Will to achieve × self-determination	0.73 (0.32)*	
Competence × will to achieve × self-determination	−0.91 (0.42) *	
Mediator		
Positive expectations		0.29 (0.04)***
R^2	0.50	0.30

Notes: Unstandardized coefficients are described. Standard error between brackets. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$

Table I.
Multiple regression of leader supporting follower's sense of self-worth and positive expectations on follower competence, self-determination and will to achieve

to achieve and low competence (0.38, confidence interval between 0.24 and 0.58), for low will to achieve and high self-determination (0.49, confidence interval between 0.31 and 0.74) for high will to achieve and low self-determination (0.46, confidence interval between 0.29 and 0.69) and for high will to achieve and high self-determination (0.31, confidence interval 0.19 and 0.49). We can therefore conclude that positive expectations fully mediate the influence of the three-way interaction competence, will to achieve, and self-determination on the intention to encourage a follower's sense of self-worth.

Overall, as depicted in Figure 2 the results show that although being perceived as competent by one's supervisor is most important for a subordinate, being achievement-oriented and self-determined adds to being treated positively. The differences in slopes show that there is a decreasing yield of having all three rather than only two out of three.

Discussion
The main aim of this study was to contribute to our understanding of the early stage of relational development between a leader and his or her subordinate in an organizational setting. This study focussed on the initiation process from the perspective of the leader; it specifically looked into the factors that influence a leader's intention to provide a subordinate with a sense of self-worth, which will start the investment-return cycle needed to develop the relationship into one of high quality. The most important findings were the following: a subordinate's competence plays a key role in influencing a leader's expectation and a leader's intention to support a subordinate's self-worth; a subordinate's will to achieve and self-determination play an additional role in enhancing the expectations, especially for subordinates with low competence; and a subordinate's competence, will to achieve, and self-determination combine to raise the expectations of a leader and enhance the intention to enhance a subordinate's self-worth.
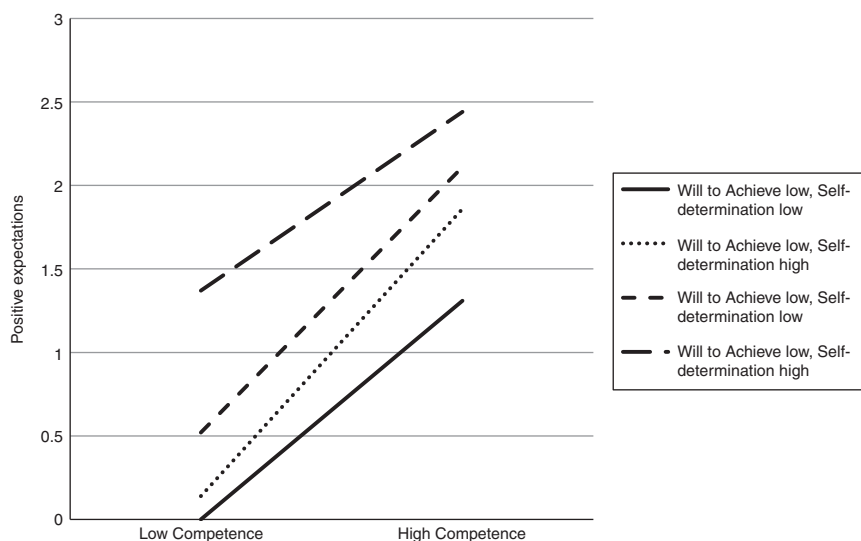
Figure 2.
Three-way
interaction of
follower competence,
motivation and
self-determination
on a leader's
expectations
of the follower

The first salient finding of this study is that the leader's expectations of a subordinate mediates the relationship between the profile information that the leader received about the subordinate and the leader's intention to provide that subordinate with a sense of self-worth. The finding that a leader's intention to support the self-worth of a subordinate is positively influenced by his expectations of the subordinate reinforces previous studies on LMX theory (Liden *et al.*, 1993; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995), which states that positive expectations are essentially needed at the initiation stage of the relationship between a leader and a subordinate, and it follows the premises of expectancy theory (Graen, 1969; Porter and Lawler, 1968; Vroom, 1964). Following these theories, positive expectations of a subordinate would motivate the leader to provide the subordinate with a sense of self-worth because the leader expects that the subordinate will reciprocate in a satisfying manner that hopefully will ultimately result in the development of a high-quality relationship between the two.

The second contribution is that the competence, will to achieve, and self-determination of a subordinate have a significant positive influence on the expectations that a leader will have about that subordinate. The results showed a significant interaction effect of competence and will to achieve. The intention to encourage a subordinate's self-worth is still relatively high when a subordinate was achievement-oriented and self-determined but not competent. This intention might be explained by the idea that competence and self-determination can be developed. The individual resources associated with competence and success includes motivation (Masten and Coatsworth, 1998). In fact, it is often precisely the employee's effort, motivation, and enthusiasm that distinguish a successful employee (superior performer) from an unsuccessful one (Bergenhenegouwen, 1996).

An interesting third contribution is the lack of influence of gender similarity, which was included in this study as a control variable. Although it may be that more information than just the statement of the gender is needed for leaders to perceive a subordinate as similar to themselves, as would be suggested by the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971), it might also be that gender similarity

plays a greater role later in the relationship then that it does at the early stage that was examined by this study. Research conducted by Liden *et al.* (1993) and Bauer and Green (1996) also reported no relationship between the quality of the leader-subordinate relationship and gender similarity. Studies continue to yield inconsistent and inconclusive results with regard to the role of gender similarity and the development of relationship between dyads, and more research is needed before firm conclusions on this subject can be made.

A study like this is, of course, not without its limitations. One of the limitations of this study is that the scenario provided is fictitious. It might be argued that the information provided is too limited for a leader to truly form an impression of the subordinate, on which a leader will act in the first interaction with that subordinate. In addition, once an impression is formed, it is more difficult to change (Feldman, 1986), suggesting that a subordinate of whom a leader has a negative impression will probably have to work harder to change this impression through later performances than a subordinate of whom the leader has an initial positive impression. The main difficulty with the measures taken from a leader's point of view is the tendency for leaders to respond somewhat defensively and to give socially desirable answers (Scandura *et al.*, 1986). Leader self-reported behaviors are usually more favorable than that of their followers. However, given the experimental setup, this effect will play a role in all conditions. In addition, we controlled for the leader's self-assessed level of empowering behavior. As such, its influence is likely to be limited. Future research taking the follower's perspective into account would be valuable.

It should also be noted that this study only investigates specific factors that influence the dependent variable. It provides only a partial possible explanation of the phenomenon as a whole. Future studies need to look into other factors that influence the proposed model in this study. It may also be necessary to be aware that our manipulation of competence included the word "experience." Experience is generally defined in terms of the knowledge or skill somebody has (and certainly so in the Dutch language context in which the research took place). Nevertheless, there may be some interference from interpreting experience purely in terms of the number of years performing a certain job or task, which is not necessarily the same as being competent. People do generally become better at what they do through practice, and even talented people need experience to become competent at their jobs.

This study also presents a number of strengths. A review of the past research revealed that in most studies on relationship formation between a leader and a subordinate, the measurements have been taken from the subordinate's point of view. This study focusses on the view of the leader, collecting its data from people who actually are or have been in management positions. An additional strength of this study is that it focusses on the early development of the relationship between a leader and a subordinate. Although Dansereau *et al.* (1975) already found evidence that relationships between leaders and subordinates were already established by the second month of the two working together; there is limited research done on this specific topic.

This study clearly also has practical implications. It shows that the leader's intention to support a subordinate's sense of self-worth is not equal for all subordinates, but is influenced by a number of factors. The expectations that a leader has of a subordinate, which are formed to a large extent by subordinates' competence, will to achieve, and self-determination, play an important role in the intention to support that subordinate's sense of self-worth. Because the positive outcomes of the development of high-quality relationships are substantial and because the support of self-worth on the

part of the leader is necessary to develop such relationships, leaders benefit from understanding how dyadic relationships form and how they can influence these relationships in the earliest stage of their development. By becoming aware of the power of first impressions and their expectations, leaders can become more effective managers and may be able to develop relationships of higher quality with more subordinates. Understanding the organizational influences of the relationship between a leader and a subordinate should provide an informed basis for creating conditions that facilitate the development of high-quality relationships. Training leaders in this regard may help foster such results. For example, leaders can be coached or taught to be more supportive of subordinates and to be more respectful toward them. Furthermore, they can be trained to improve their communication skills, such as listening and giving feedback.

In conclusion, this study provides an important contribution to our understanding of the earliest stage of the formation of the dyadic relationship between leader and subordinate. It builds on and provides additional empirical insights for the LMX theory and the theory on individualized leadership. Both theories suggest that the relational investment cycle starts with the leader offering a partnership to the subordinate or supporting the subordinate's sense of self-worth; after doing so, the subordinate reciprocates and the relationship develops in leader to offer the subordinate that partnership and support the subordinate's sense of self-worth. This study shows that the leader's intention to support a subordinate's self-worth is not equal for all subordinates, even at the beginning of a relationship. Preconceived notions play a role here. This study may serve as an impetus for more research into the start of dyadic relationships between leaders and subordinates in an organizational context.

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About the authors
Dirk van Dierendonck is an Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior at the Rotterdam
School of Management, Erasmus University, The Netherlands. He is the Academic Director of the
Erasmus Centre for Human Resource Excellence. His primary research interest is servant
leadership with specific attention to its influence on the flourishing of people within
organisations. Associate Professor Dirk van Dierendonck is the corresponding author and can be
contacted at: DvanDierendonck@rsm.nl
    Sabrine Driehuizen graduated at the Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University,
The Netherlands, where she received her MSc, BA in Human Resource Management. Presently,
she is the Director of Webworkz and she works as Productmanager International at PostNL.