

# Journal of Business & Leadership: Research, Practice, and Teaching (2005-2012)

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Volume 2  
Number 1 *Journal of Business & Leadership*

Article 13

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1-1-2006

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### Recommended Citation

Silver, Lawrence and Silver, Debbie (2006) "Role of Implicit Personality Theory In Leadership Research," *Journal of Business & Leadership: Research, Practice, and Teaching (2005-2012)*: Vol. 2: No. 1, Article 13.  
DOI: 10.58809/ICUS3419  
Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/jbl/vol2/iss1/13>

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## ROLE OF IMPLICIT PERSONALITY THEORY IN LEADERSHIP RESEARCH

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*Implicit personality theory explains how individuals interpret the world around them including the events they experience and observe. Research in social and educational psychology indicates that one's implicit personality theory influences the extent to which one makes judgments about ability regarding the self and others. While some researchers have begun to apply the concept to organizational studies, this paper explains the value of extending that research into three areas important to leaders: (1) employee evaluation, (2) managerial feedback, and (3) work motivation.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Recent organizational behavior researchers have evidenced an interest in the role of implicit theories and their impact on effective managerial and leadership behaviors (Button, Mathieu & Zajac 1996; Kenney, Blascovich & Shaver 1994; Nathan & Alexander 1985; Werth, Markel & Forster 2006; Wrenn & Maurer 2004). Although all are based on the seminal works of Heider (1958) and Kelly (1955), the studies differ in their concept of implicit theory.

One model of implicit theory applied to leadership theory is that of "implicit leadership theory" (ILT) developed by Calder (1977). This theory contends that followers form role schemas or normative expectations of how a leader should behave in certain situations. Once a member of a group evidences a distinctive, expected leadership behavior, other members of the group attribute leadership qualities to him or her. For example, if followers believe a member of the group deserves to be listened to, they will allow themselves to be influenced by that person in most scenarios without re-evaluating the speaker's credibility in different circumstances (Sorrentino & Field 1986).

Recently another model of implicit theory developed by Carol Dweck and her colleagues (e.g., Dweck 1999; Dweck, Chiu & Hong 1995; Dweck & Leggett 1988; Levy & Dweck 1998) has emerged as the basis for most of the application of the concept to organizational behavior (e.g., Button, Mathieu & Zajac 1996; Werth, Markel & Forster 2006; Wrenn & Maurer 2004). Briefly, this model views implicit theories as personality traits although contextual considerations exert influence. According to Dweck (1999) people believe that certain characteristics of others and themselves (e.g., intelligence, ability, morality) are either fixed or malleable. For example, one's intelligence is either fixed

and cannot be changed or is malleable and can be enhanced with proper effort and instruction.

Although based in social psychology, Dweck's area of research is important for the organizational behavior and leadership literature. Leaders who believe employees' ability is fixed will take a different approach to feedback and training than will leaders who believe ability is something that can be developed. The purpose of this paper is to examine current research on implicit theory and leadership and to offer application in organizational behavior for three important areas: employee evaluation, managerial feedback and work motivation.

### Implicit Personality Theory (IPT)

Implicit theories are "naïve assumptions" people hold about themselves and the social world (Kelly 1955). As such, they influence the way individuals process and understand information. They are implicit in the sense that they are not easily articulated nor fully understood by the people who hold them. This inability to express implicit theories presents a challenge to behavioral scientists in identifying and determining their effects.

One stream of research in this area contends that each person holds implicit motives that prompt one to behave in ways that satisfy needs. (McClelland, Koestner & Weinberger 1989). For example, a person with a need for achievement will act in ways that facilitate learning and success while someone with a need for affiliation will act in ways that elicit the approval of others. Extensive research has been conducted using this method, but the results are less than convincing. One criticism is that McClelland's measures lack predictive validity. Additionally, McClelland argues that such implicit needs are permanent. This contrasts with many social psychologists who view needs as temporary (Porter, Bigley & Steers 2003).

According to Dweck and Leggett (1988), an individual's implicit personality theory falls along a continuum that measures the degree to which that person believes human traits are fixed. Anchoring the higher end of the continuum is the belief that human traits are malleable and changeable while beliefs at the other extreme are that traits are fixed and unchangeable. Thus, people hold predominately one of two implicit personality theories: (1) incremental theory or (2) entity theory.

In terms of intelligence, a person with an incremental theory believes that intelligence is a malleable quality. This person believes that one's ability is not fixed and can be changed with effort. In contrast, one who holds an entity theory of intelligence believes that ability is a fixed and uncontrollable trait. Dweck and Leggett (1988) developed a scale to quantitatively measure implicit personality theory. Their scale, with some modifications by different researchers has proven to be psychometrically sound (Butler 2000; Button, Mathieu & Zajac 1996; Dweck, Chiu & Hong 1995; Plaks, Grant & Dweck 2005; Werth, Markel & Forster 2006). A representative item from Dweck's instrument is "The kind of person someone is is something very basic about them and it can't be changed very much." Subjects are asked to respond to each item on a six point Likert-type scale anchored by 1, "Strongly Disagree" and 6, "Strongly Agree" (Chiu, Hong and Dweck 1997: 22).

It is important to mention that one's implicit personality theory is not a fixed belief system held across all situations (Dweck 1999). A person may believe intelligence is fixed but that morality can be changed and improved (Chiu, Hong & Dweck 1997). Therefore, people may conceive of themselves across different situations as entity theorists who are eager to be evaluated and at other times as dynamic "systems" willing to grow and learn. While one generally possesses a predisposition toward one theory or the other, situational factors interact and affect how strongly a particular theory is held (Dweck & Leggett 1988).

Implicit theories of personality are widely held in the general population. Research by Dweck, Chiu & Hong (1995) indicates that approximately 15% of people studied in various experiments hold neither an incremental or entity implicit personality theory. The other 85% are evenly divided between entity and incremental.

In the present paper, it is proposed that a leader's implicit personality theory influences his or her impression of employee ability and, therefore, employee performance evaluation. Additionally, both the leader's

and the employee's implicit personality theories determine the effectiveness of managerial feedback. Finally, implicit personality theory determines, in part, the work motivation of leaders and employees. Each of these is developed as follows.

### **IPT and Employee Evaluation**

Employee evaluation accuracy is a subject of considerable interest in the organizational behavior literature (e.g., Allen 1992; Carmardella 2003; Maurer, Barbeite & Mitchell 2002; Nathan & Alexander 1985; Roberts & Reed 1996; Wilson & Western 2000). While the role of implicit theories in evaluation has been discussed (Nathan & Alexander 1985), there appears to be more research interest in the educational and social psychology literature (cf. Butler 2000). Below we show how the application of research in educational and social psychology can be applied to an organizational setting and what the implications for effective employee evaluations are.

Nathan and Alexander (1985) argue that certain "cognitive categorization processes" cause managers to place employees in an evaluative category (1985: 109). At the time of the employee's evaluation it is not the individual employee who is recalled but the category to which that employee has been placed. For example, a manager may believe that trainees, as a category, are generally incapable of superior performance. This manager will evaluate trainees lower than they may deserve because of the category to which they are assigned. Thus, the employee's evaluation is based on the stereotype of the group (as determined by the manager) rather than individual performance. As stated above, the problem of perception tied to implicit theories has, since Nathan and Alexander (1985), been extensively studied in the educational and social psychology literature.

Dweck, Chiu and Hong (1995) note that a person's implicit theory affects how he or she reacts to human actions and outcomes. People with an entity theory of ability generalize all failure and success in terms of fixed traits ("He failed because he lacks ability."). In contrast, those with an incremental theory look at failure and success in terms of more specific behavior ("He failed because he didn't put forth enough effort."). Moreover, people with an entity theory tend to make global trait judgments of others based on initial information about their behavior. Interestingly, entity theorists also tend to punish what they see as inappropriate behavior (with poor performance reports, for example) while incremental

theorists are more likely to recommend actions that address the cause of the behavior.

In a study of attitudes of teachers and early high school students concerning math ability, Butler (2000) found that teachers with an entity theory based their evaluation of student performance over time on an initial observation of ability. On the other hand, teachers with an incremental theory tended to assign a heavier weight to the last observation of ability. Thus, entity theorists decide early on a student's ability and assign that student to a "cognitive category" by which all subsequent behavior is judged. Further, this initial behavior is believed to be temporally consistent with little or no opportunity for improvement.

Because implicit theories involve interpretation and control of the environment, people tend to heavily invest "in believing the theory they are using is correct" (Plaks, Grant & Dweck 2005: 245). In fact, people will adopt communication strategies (e.g., selective attention, selective retention) in order to reinforce their particular theory in the face of evidence to the contrary. In a series of experiments using college undergraduates, Plaks, Grant and Dweck (2005) tested the extent to which people would discount information that violated their particular implicit theory. Their findings indicate that people with either of the implicit theories evidence

increased anxiety when presented with theory-violating information. Further, people were more likely to seek out theory-confirming information rather than theory-violating information.

Similarly, Butler (2000) found that when entity theorists were provided with theory-violating information, they tended to look for alternative sources of information to support their initial conclusions. Additionally, teachers with an entity theory would under- or overestimate subsequent performance to bring the total evaluation in line with earlier observations.

The prediction of subsequent behavior based on initial observations is similar to the concept of "self-fulfilling prophecy" previously studied in the organizational behavior literature (e.g., Georgesen & Harris 2006). The two concepts differ, however, in the context of employee evaluations. A self-fulfilling prophecy predicts outcomes. That is, in the case of employee evaluations, a manager's expectations would lead to actual employee behavior (Jussim & Harber 2005). In contrast, a manager's entity implicit theory fulfills only the manager's *perception* of employee performance.

Clearly, these findings transferred to an organizational setting have implications for leaders and managers. Table 1 below summarizes the difference between entity and incremental theorists in terms of employee evaluation.

**Table 1: Comparison of Entity and Incremental Leaders in Terms of the Employee Evaluation Process**

Entity	Incremental
Initial levels of performance are "anchors" for subsequent performance	Initial performance is indicative of current ability only
Believe ability to perform is temporally consistent	Believe ability can be improved with appropriate effort and training
Will look for alternative sources of information to explain variances in performance	Explain variances in performance with acquisition of ability
Under- or overestimates changes in performance to conform to initial judgments (even when performance declines)	Assumes later outcomes indicate improvement of ability to perform task
May not notice changes in ability if employee's performance remains constant relative to others	Notes individual changes in ability even when employee performance remains stable relative to others
Provides normative feedback	Provides feedback that encourages progress over time

### **IPT and Feedback Effectiveness**

Useful feedback has also been of interest in the organizational behavior literature. Areas of study include sincerity and feedback (Paswan, Pelton & True 2005), content of feedback (Hinkin & Schriesheim 2004) affect and feedback (Gaddis, Connelly & Mumfort 2004), the interaction of cognition and affect in feedback (Cannon & Witherspoon 2005), and goal orientation and feedback (VandeWalle, Brown, Cron & Slocum 1999). In this section, we will describe the effect of implicit personality theory on leader feedback.

In an achievement setting, one's implicit personality theory determines one's goals for that situation (Dweck & Leggett 1988). An entity theorist is concerned mainly

with demonstrating ability, especially in relation to others. Conversely, an incremental theorist is more concerned with acquiring competence. These different "theories of ability will also affect the degree to which different kinds of feedback are perceived as diagnostic for self-appraisal" (Butler 2000: 976). Because of their interest in demonstrating ability, entity theorists are more interested in normative feedback. Incremental theorists, intent on developing ability, find feedback directly related to improving task performance more helpful.

In the previously mentioned study of teachers and students, Butler (2000) indicated that entity theorists found normative feedback to be more helpful in self-appraisal while incremental theorists found temporal feedback more useful. Further, when the feedback was in

conflict with their implicit theories, students discounted the feedback and looked for alternative sources of information to bolster their preconceptions.

Interestingly, entity theorists did modify somewhat their perceptions of their ability when given normative feedback they perceived to be highly diagnostic (Butler 2000). Pupils who believed they were "smart" in math modified their viewpoint when allowed to compare their grades with other students over time. While it may seem contradictory that entity theorists would modify their judgments of their ability, the findings are consistent with the evidence that entity theorists are very concerned about their level of intelligence and tend to generalize ability on one task to other areas of achievement. That is, entity theorists are more likely than incremental theorists to believe that failure on one task will lead to failure on other tasks (Dweck & Leggett 1988).

There also appears to be an interaction between feedback and intrinsic motivation. According to Deci and Ryan (1985) competence in a particular task is crucial for intrinsic motivation. They also note that people evidence greater intrinsic motivation when given positive feedback and reduced motivation with negative feedback. Yet, when IPT is taken into consideration, the relevance of that feedback may be influenced (Butler 2000). For example, a competitive environment that emphasizes normative feedback undermines the intrinsic motivation of the incremental theorist.

In terms of feedback, intrinsic motivation should increase for incremental theorists as they receive positive temporal responses. Entity theorists, on the other hand, will increase intrinsic motivation in a case of early normative success feedback. Alternatively, normative failure feedback will undermine intrinsic motivation for entity theorists to a greater extent than it will for incremental theorists (Butler 2000).

These findings have strong implications for leaders in an organizational setting. First, leaders need to be aware of their own as well as their employees' implicit personality theories. As with the teachers and students in Butler's (2000) study, certain types of feedback will be perceived as ineffective by entity and incremental theorists. For example, a leader with an entity theory concerning ability who gives normative feedback may undermine the desire to learn and willingness to persist characteristic of an employee with an incremental theory. Ineffective feedback will lead to a search for alternative information sources to support preconceived assumptions leading to a lack of trust in management, questions about organizational justice, and reduced work motivation.

## IPT and Work Motivation

As previously stated, each of these two implicit personality theories holds a unique and different concept about the self (Dweck & Molden 1999). For the entity theorist, the self is made up of stable traits that can be measured. Alternatively, the incremental theorist believes the self is more dynamic and can be changed. Thus, the entity theorist's self-esteem is enhanced when his or her traits are measured and found favorable in comparison to others. In contrast, the incremental theorist's self-esteem is increased if he or she is allowed to pursue tasks that allow for development of skills or talents.

Dweck and Bempechat (1983) demonstrate how this concept of self is related to implicit personality theory. School children who had been previously tested to determine their own implicit personality theory were asked when it was that they felt "smart" in school. Entity-oriented children reported feelings of high task self-esteem when the work was easy, when little effort was needed for success, when the work was completed without mistakes, and when they finished first. Incremental theorists, on the other hand, reported feeling smart when they were exerting a great deal of effort, when they mastered something they did not understand, and when they mastered something new.

Thus, people choose goals and tasks consistent with the way they interpret their environment (Butler 2000; Button, Mathieu & Zajac 1996; Dweck & Bempechat 1983; Dweck, Chiu, & Hong 1995; Dweck & Leggett 1988; Werth, Markel & Forster 2006). People with an entity personality theory will choose goals they know they will accomplish. Choosing tasks that can be easily attained allows entity theorists to reinforce their self-esteem by appearing competent in the eyes of other people. Should the chosen tasks become too difficult, the entity theorist will find reasons to abandon the task or diminish its importance. In contrast, people with an incremental personality theory choose goals that offer the opportunity to learn something new or improve skill. It is the desire to learn and improve skills that increases this person's self-esteem rather than a comparison with other people.

An entity implicit personality theory is influenced by one's self-efficacy or belief in his or her capacity to successfully complete a particular task (Bandura 1986). As noted above, an entity theorist will choose tasks that lead to favorable normative comparisons. However, the higher the person's self-efficacy, the more likely he or

she is to attempt the task. That is, an entity theorist will approach a difficult task if he or she is confident of successful completion. Incremental theorists, on the other hand, believe that renewed effort will lead to task completion and increased self-efficacy. Thus, in the case of the entity theorist, self-efficacy is an antecedent to task engagement while self-efficacy is a result for the incremental theorist (Wood and Bandura 1988; Dweck and Leggett 1988).

As noted above, while implicit personality theory is considered a dispositional trait, people do consider contextual factors. To some extent, an environment can be created that emphasizes one theory or the other (Dweck & Leggett 1988; Plaks, Grant & Dweck 2005).

Persuasive evidence that contradicts one's implicit personality theory can, at least temporarily, influence one's belief systems. Heslin, Latham and VandeWalle (2005) provided subjects who evidenced an entity theory with "scientific" evidence and other situational factors that countered their beliefs. The subjects developed a much more incremental view of ability and held that view for six weeks.

Depending on the nature of the task, different implicit theories can affect motivation. For example, in a setting with simple tasks with low learning and a compensation system based on a piece rate or competition, an entity type environment may be the most beneficial for motivation employees. On the other hand, if the task is complicated with high learning and a more team oriented approach, leaders may want to emphasize an incremental environment.

## CONCLUSION

Implicit personality theory has important connotations for leadership and organizational behavior research. As demonstrated through research reported in the social psychology literature conducted by Dweck and her colleagues and in educational psychology (Butler 2000; Dweck & Leggett 1988), implicit theories affect the way people interpret the world around them and the events they experience.

Firms continue to struggle with employee turnover and poor performance in spite of increasingly sophisticated screening measures of aptitude and ability developed by human resource professionals. Yet, the question remains, why, when two people are hired with the same aptitude and ability, one succeeds and the other fails? This paper attempts to answer that question by pointing out that one's belief about aptitude and ability may be as important as the qualities themselves.

Three important areas for future research include the effect of implicit personality theory on employee evaluation, feedback given to employees, and work motivation. In terms of employee evaluation, several important implications are noted. First, leaders who believe ability is fixed (entity theory) tend to stereotype as poor performers those employees who do not function well initially. If the employee improves, the leader will attribute the improvement to factors outside the employee's control in order to reinforce the stereotype. This view of employee performance may negatively impact employee morale. If employees believe that no amount of effort will improve performance in the eyes of their supervisor, the desire to perform well will diminish. Employees will take less pride in their work and the workplace may take on an "us" versus "them" environment. Low morale and an unpleasant work environment leads to higher turnover.

In contrast, leaders who believe ability is malleable (incremental theory) will mentor and encourage employees whose initial performance is not satisfactory. Additionally, these leaders will emphasize training and tend to better distinguish between those employees who make the effort to improve and those who do not. The incremental leader's effort is collaborative and values the employee's input. Acrimonious divisions between labor and management are reduced and turnover is kept to a minimum.

Employee feedback provides another challenge for leaders because the leader needs to understand the implicit theory of the employee receiving the feedback. An entity theory employee attributes failure or difficulty with a task to a lack of ability. Thus, the entity employee discounts and/or ignores incremental feedback such as "keep trying" or "practice until you get the hang of it." In this situation, incremental supervisors need to incorporate some normative encouragement into their feedback in order to reinforce the employee's perceived self-ability. For example, the leader might purposely say something like, "Everyone has trouble with this in the beginning, but I see you are doing better than many at this stage."

In contrast, an emphasis on normative feedback will discourage the incremental employee. If an employee who believes ability can be enhanced through skill improvement senses that a supervisor believes "you either have it or you don't," an entity environment is induced, and he or she will not put forth the effort to improve. On the other hand, properly encouraged, this employee will redouble effort in the face of failure at a particular task.



The final implication addressed here is the issue of work motivation. As previously noted, a person's implicit personality theory determines how he or she responds in the face of failure or challenge. People with an entity theory who initially fail at a task diminish the importance of that task and choose other work that is easier for them to accomplish. Less challenging work allows them to demonstrate ability in relation to others and maintains their self-esteem. In the worst cases, entity theorists will resort to activities that avoid looking bad. In this situation, the employee avoids all meaningful tasks and works to protect rather than maintain self-esteem. An example is a salesperson who is always preparing to make calls but never actually approaches a prospect.

On the other hand, employees with incremental theories see failure as a temporary situation not indicative of global ability. They will increase effort and practice in order to learn what is necessary to be successful. While considered a dispositional trait, implicit personality theory is somewhat dependent on contextual considerations. An entity or incremental environment can be induced as the situation dictates. Obviously quality improvement programs such as Total Quality Management and Six Sigma will not be effective in an environment where leaders believe employee's ability is fixed and change for the better is unlikely. Thus, firms wishing to improve quality of product or service will need to encourage an incremental environment. One way to create the desired environment is to create a culture that relates knowledge, effort, and performance. As employees are socialized into the culture, they will adopt the appropriate implicit theory for that work setting.

Future research in this area should be beneficial to academics and practitioners alike. Academics will better understand how traits and situational factors interact to determine behavior. Mood and other affective states also need to be considered. Research methods used in social and educational psychology can easily be adapted for organizational studies. Measures of implicit personality theory are self-reported and evidence strong validity and reliability in a variety of situations and across all age groups. While there is no "silver bullet" for motivating employees and sustaining that motivation, implicit personality theory offers one more tool with which to work. Hopefully, academics will soon translate their research findings and psychological understanding into action plans business leaders can easily implement.

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