

RUNNING HEAD: THE SITUATION-DEPENDENT NORTH

The Situation-Dependent North: The Effects of Abstract versus Concrete Visions in Times of
Prosperity and Crisis

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Abstract

The present research investigated the effectiveness (i.e., follower performance, follower organizational identification and perceived leader effectiveness) of concrete versus abstract visions in times of crisis and prosperity. Based on an integration of insights from the vision communication and organizational change literature, we proposed that the effectiveness of a vision's content (i.e., concrete versus abstract) will be moderated by the situation (i.e., crisis versus prosperity). Specifically, we argued and showed in one experimental study that concrete visions are more effective than abstract visions in times of crisis, whereas abstract visions are more effective than concrete visions in times of prosperity. Theoretical contributions and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

Key words: Leadership, vision content, crisis, vision effectiveness

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Vision is the leader's magnetic north; it gives direction and purpose to the organization.

– Kouzes and Posner (2006, p.12)

Recently, President Obama gave his Oval Office address on BP's oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Given the scope of this environmental disaster, affecting millions of U.S. citizens and businesses, this was a time when the President was expected to provide a clear vision to guide his followers through the crisis. However, Obama's vision was criticized for being too "academic", "high-level", "abstract", and not "specific" enough (Real Clear Politics, 2010; Shapiro, 2010). Not only did the President's speech meet with public disapproval but it also cost him a severe drop in ratings (64% of Americans believed Obama did a fair to poor job in responding to the disaster), clearly diminishing his effectiveness as a leader (Harder, 2010).

This example distinctly illustrates the power of (in)effective vision communication. Indeed, empirical studies have provided converging evidence showing that *ineffective* vision communication is related to organizational decline and failure (DeLisi, 1998), as well as competitive disadvantage (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989). In contrast, *effective* vision communication has been related to increased follower performance (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996), increased follower organizational identification (Bryman, 1992), and enhanced perceptions of leader effectiveness (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999). Given that ineffective vision communication can have such a wide variety of negative consequences, the question that arises is: why are some visions effective whereas others are not?

To this end, vision content has been proposed to play a critical role in effective vision communication (Berson, Shamir, Avolio, & Popper, 2001; Stam, van Knippenberg, & Wisse, 2010). Unfortunately, the current empirical record paints a conflicting picture as to what effective vision content entails. On the one hand, work from the vision communication

literature suggests that visions with an abstract content are more effective than visions with a concrete content (e.g., Baum, Kirkpatrick, & Locke, 1998; Kantabutra, 2008). In contrast, the organizational change literature argues in favour of detailed and specific communication pointing in the direction of a more concrete vision (e.g., Beyer, 1999a; van Knippenberg, Martin, & Tyler, 2006).

We posit that this inconsistency in findings may be due to the fact that these two research traditions have typically investigated the effectiveness of vision content under different conditions. That is, vision communication scholars have considered the effectiveness of vision content primarily in times of prosperity, whereas organizational change researchers have focused on crisis situations. Because times of prosperity and crisis will inevitably tap into different concerns on the part of followers, it seems reasonable to assume that different types of vision content (i.e., abstract vs. concrete) may be more effective under these different conditions. Therefore, we posit that the effectiveness (conceptualized as follower performance, follower organizational identification and perceived leader effectiveness) of the vision's content is moderated by the type of situation the leader and followers are facing.

Specifically, we propose that in times of prosperity, abstract visions are more effective than concrete visions, because followers are in need of information as to *why* they are doing what they are doing, and this information is provided by an abstract vision. In contrast, we posit that in times of crisis, concrete visions will be more effective than abstract visions because followers are looking for information as to *how* to overcome the crisis, which is provided by a concrete vision.

Our aim is two-fold: 1) to contribute to an understanding of the role of vision content (i.e., concrete vs. abstract visions) in increasing follower performance, organizational identification and perceived leader effectiveness; and 2) to show that the effectiveness of the vision's content is contingent on the situation.

Leadership and Vision Communication

Leader *visions* are typically defined as images of the future (den Hartog & Verburg, 1997; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Shamir, Arthur, & House, 1994), with *vision communication* referring to the expression of a vision with the aim of convincing others (usually followers) that the vision is valid and worthwhile (Stam et al., 2010). Vision communication consists of vision content and the actual communication process (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999). Because, the bulk of research on vision communication has focused on the actual communication process, and findings on the effectiveness of vision content are scarce and inconclusive (Berson et al., 2001; Stam et al., 2010) this research will focus on the role of vision content in determining vision effectiveness.

Obviously, the content of a vision can differ along many dimensions. However, one dimension that is often claimed to be of importance is the level of abstractness of a vision (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Kantabutra, 2008). In accordance with Construal Level Theory (CLT; Liberman & Trope, 1998; for a review, see Trope & Liberman, 2010), a *concrete vision* is defined as a visionary appeal that emphasizes the near future, and revolves around answering the question *how* a desired future end-state can be reached. In contrast, an *abstract vision* is defined as a visionary appeal that emphasizes the distant future, and revolves around answering the question *why* the desired future end-state should be reached.

To this end, findings from the vision communication literature suggest that abstract visions are more effective than less abstract visions (e.g., Baum et al., 1998; Kantabutra, 2008; Locke, 1991; Shamir et al., 1994). For example, Shamir and colleagues (1994) argued that it is more effective to emphasize vague and distal goals in the vision statement than specific and proximal goals. Indeed, this argument has been supported by empirical evidence. For instance, a quantitative longitudinal field study by Baum and colleagues (1998) found that, the abstractness of a company's vision was positively related to organizational performance.

In addition, Kantabutra (2008b) showed that the abstractness of the vision's content was an important predictor of vision effectiveness. Specifically, she found that abstract vision content contributed to improved store performance and staff satisfaction in retail stores. However, it is important to note that this research tradition has typically investigated the effects of vision content on vision effectiveness under conditions of stability. Hence, these studies remain mute as to whether abstract visions are also effective under conditions of change, crisis or turmoil.

In contrast, research traditions that explicitly investigate (vision) communication in times of change and crisis, argue that concrete and specific (vision) communication is more effective than abstract (vision) communication (e.g., Den Hertog, Van Iterson, & Mari, 2010; van Knippenberg et al., 2006). Indeed, organizational change scholars argue and show that in times of crisis/change followers want and need a concrete and clear vision (e.g., Allen, Jimmieson, Bordia, & Irmer, 2007; van Knippenberg et al., 2006). For instance, a qualitative study by Allen and colleagues (2007) investigated the influence of communication in times of change and turmoil on employees' change-related uncertainty. Analyzing interviews of 25 employees who recently had undergone an organizational change, they found that providing employees with detailed, accurate, and useful information resulted in lowered feelings of uncertainty.

In sum, research on vision communication suggests that abstract visions are more effective in situations characterized by stability, whereas research on organizational change suggests that concrete visions are more effective in situations characterized by uncertainty and turmoil. Importantly, this suggests that the type of situation (prosperity vs. crisis) might moderate the effects of vision content on vision effectiveness. In other words, whether a concrete or an abstract vision directs followers to the north depends on the situation.

Vision Communication in Times of Crisis Versus Prosperity

Situations faced by organizations can roughly be divided in unfavorable times of crisis and favorable times of prosperity. Typically, an organizational crisis is defined as “a low-probability, high impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly” (Pearson & Clair, 1998, p. 60). For instance, organizational crises could be environmental spills, hostile takeovers, product defects, and scandals (James & Wooten, 2005). Conversely, times of prosperity (although associated with profit and growth) are characterized by a time of stability that is the modus rather than the exception.

Because times of crisis tap into a different set of follower concerns than times of prosperity, their effects on followers will also differ. First, times of crisis and prosperity differ in the time perspective (i.e., temporal distance) they may elicit in followers. In times of crisis, the intolerableness of the situation creates an urge for change and action in the *short run*. This suggests that times of crisis causes followers to focus on the near future (Rosenthal, Boin, & Comfort, 2001). In turn, according to CLT (Liberman & Trope, 1998) *near future* actions are construed on a concrete level (i.e., on a low-level) suggesting that providing followers with concrete information in times of crisis might be particularly in line with followers’ needs during crises.

Thus, followers are likely in need of concrete information during crises. As was discussed above, one dimension that determines the concreteness of a visionary appeal is a focus on near future events. A second dimension, that is also related to a concrete level of construal is a focus on *how* aspects of an action (Trope & Liberman, 2010). That is, a vision emphasizing how aspects (e.g., “This is *how* we are going to stop the gusher”) might be particularly effective in addressing followers’ needs in times of crisis.

In addition, in order to overcome a crisis situation it has to be *changed* into a more stable or prosperous situation. Consequently, in line with research findings on effective communication during organizational change, this produces a necessity for leaders' visions to clearly and specifically inform followers about *how* to overcome the crisis situation in the *near future*. Given that a concrete vision taps into answering the question *how* a desired end-state can be reached in the *near future* – we argue that in times of crisis, concrete visions should be particularly effective.

In contrast, in times of prosperity followers are not faced with threatening uncertain events from the outside environment which call for urgent action (Rosenthal et al., 2001). Instead, the prosperous situation allows them to focus on the *long run*. According to CLT (Lieberman & Trope, 1998) *distant future* actions are construed on an abstract level (i.e., on a high-level) suggesting that providing followers with abstract information in times of prosperity might be particularly in line with followers' needs during these prosperous times.

Thus, followers are likely in need of abstract information in times of prosperity. However, a focus on distant future actions is not the only dimension that determines the abstractness of a visionary appeal. A second dimension, that is also related to an abstract level of construal is a focus on *why* aspects of an action (Trope & Liberman, 2010). That is, a vision emphasizing why aspects of an action might be particularly effective in addressing followers' concerns in times of prosperity. Indeed, research by Hunt, Boal and Dodge (1999) specifically shows that once a crisis situation is abated and the situation becomes more prosperous, it is important for the leader's effectiveness to provide followers with a vision that focuses on the *distant future* and addresses *why* it is important to reach a particular end-state. The vision that appeared to be particularly effective in prosperous and stable times included references to *why* it is important to reach a particular end-state (e.g., the work is important because it is related to

the improved standing of the university) and focused on the *distant future* (e.g., your future children will benefit from it; see Hunt et al., 1999, p. 431).

In sum, in times of prosperity followers likely have a need for a vision that sheds light on *why* it is important to reach a particular end-state and that focuses on the *distant future*. Given that an abstract vision provides followers with exactly this information – we argue that in times of prosperity, abstract visions should be particularly effective.

Second, crises and times of prosperity also differ on another note. Specifically, compared with times of prosperity, organizational crises are highly emotional events that have a strong negative impact on followers. Moreover, followers often experience times of crisis as an episode of threat and uncertainty. As opposed to times of crisis, times of prosperity are less likely to instill feelings of fear in followers (Rosenthal et al., 2001). Instead, the company's prosperous situation presumably makes employees feel proud (cf. Yang, 2009). Importantly, it has been argued that some emotions are more abstract than others (Trope & Liberman, 2010), with pride being more abstract than fear (Eyal & Fishbach, 2008). Because, times of prosperity are characterized more by feelings of pride and less by feelings of fear, under these conditions, an abstract vision might be particularly in line with followers' feelings. Conversely, times of crisis are characterized more by feelings of fear and less by feelings of pride, under these conditions a concrete vision might be particularly effective in addressing followers' needs.

The Present Research

In sum, we argue that the type of situation (crisis vs. prosperity) moderates the effects of vision content (concrete vs. abstract) on vision effectiveness (i.e., follower performance, follower organizational identification and perceived leader effectiveness). Specifically, we argue that in crisis situations leader visions that provide followers with information about how to overcome the crisis in the near future (i.e., concrete visions) are more effective than

abstract visions. Conversely, in a stable or prosperous situation leader visions that provide information about why it is important to reach a particular end-state in the distant future (i.e., abstract visions) are argued to be more effective than concrete visions. Specifically, we predict that:

Hypothesis 1: In times of crisis, a concrete vision is more effective (i.e., related to increased follower performance, organizational identification, and perceived leader effectiveness) than an abstract vision.

Hypothesis 2: In times of prosperity, an abstract vision is more effective (i.e., related to increased follower performance, organizational identification, and perceived leader effectiveness) than a concrete vision.

Because causal associations are central to the research model (see Figure 1) tested in the present study we chose to conduct an experiment (Mook, 1983).

Method

Participants and design

Seventy-five undergraduate psychology students (all females) participated voluntarily in exchange for course credit. Participants' mean age was 20.67 years ($SD = 1.17$) and they were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (Vision: abstract vs. concrete) \times 2 (Situation: prosperity vs. crisis) between-subjects factorial design.

Procedure

Upon arrival to the lab, participants were seated in individual cubicles, each equipped with a computer. All instructions and stimuli were presented on the computer screens and all dependent measures were recorded by the program software.

First, participants were informed about working together with another participant in a leader-follower relationship, via a computer-mediated virtual interaction space. Participants had to wait for a minute for the establishment of a bogus network connection between

themselves and their interaction partner. Next, they completed a purported cognitive style test and *all* participants were assigned the follower role allegedly based on their test results.

Subsequently, participants were asked to imagine that they were an employee working in a Dutch office of an international marketing company. Next, they received some general information about the marketing company as well as about their job. In addition, they were informed that their (bogus) leader was currently formulating a vision for the marketing office which they would receive as soon as he/she had finished writing it.

Situation manipulation. In the meantime, participants received more detailed background information about the company, which served as the situation manipulation. In line with Haslam and Ryan (2008), a fake newspaper article was used to induce the situation manipulation. Depending on the condition, participants read either an article entitled ‘More Good Times Ahead’ (*prosperity condition*) or ‘More Difficult Times Ahead’ (*crisis condition*). In the *prosperity condition*, participants learned that the company was on its way up in terms of increased financial performance, number of offices, and number of newly hired employees. In addition, the newspaper article showed a graph with an upward line for the company’s stock market value. Conversely, participants in the *crisis condition* learned that the company was on its way down in terms of decreased financial performance, number of offices, and number of newly hired employees. The newspaper article in the crisis condition showed a graph with a downward line for the company’s stock market value.

Vision manipulation. Next, participants were informed that their leader had just finished writing the vision and that they would receive this vision by e-mail. Depending on the condition, participants then received either an *abstract* or a *concrete* vision. The vision manipulation was designed by following insights from CLT (Liberman & Trope, 1998) According to CLT, high-level construals consist of general, decontextualized features that convey the essence of information about future events, whereas low-level construals include

more concrete, contextual, and incidental details (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Based on CLT, we manipulated the visions' level of abstractness along two dimensions: temporal distance and focus.

One factor that determines the level of abstraction is temporal distance (i.e., distance in time; Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2000). According to CLT, distant future actions are construed more abstractly (i.e., on a higher level) than near future actions. Therefore, we used words related to a distant future (e.g., "in the long run", "in the future") in the *abstract vision*. In contrast, words related to a near future (e.g., "in the short run", "this year") were used in the *concrete vision*.

Another factor that determines the level of abstraction is a focus on why vs. how aspects of an action. That is, focusing on *why* one should desire a specific end-state is related to a higher (i.e., more abstract) level of construal than focusing on *how* feasible it is to reach the end-state. In line with previous studies that have manipulated an abstract vs. concrete construal by letting participants think about why vs. how questions (e.g., Watkins, Moberly, & Moulds, 2008), our vision manipulation contained *why* questions (e.g., "Why should we want to be the market leader?") and answers (e.g., "It enables us to grow") in the *abstract vision* conditions. In contrast, *how* questions were asked (e.g., "How can we become the market leader?") and answered (e.g., "By increasing our profit") in the *concrete vision* conditions.

Idea generation task. After the crisis and vision manipulation an idea generation task (Friedman & Förster, 2001) followed. Specifically, participants were given six minutes to generate as many ideas as possible that could be used in a marketing campaign for the launch of a new perfume aimed at women for one of the company's clients.

Dependent measures

We had conceptualized vision effectiveness as consisting of follower performance, follower organizational identification and perceived leader effectiveness. To this end, one of our main dependent variables was follower's creative performance which we operationalized as the overall originality of uniquely generated ideas.

Idea originality. In line with previous research on creative idea generation, we consider idea originality (i.e., ideas that are new and unusual) to be a key component of creative performance (e.g., Diehl & Stroebe, 1987; Rietzschel, Nijstad, & Stroebe, 2006, 2010). In accordance with Rietzschel et al. (2010) two trained raters who were both blind to conditions coded all ideas for *originality* (on a five-point scale; 1 = 'not at all original', 5 = 'extremely original'). Training consisted of elaborate explanation of the concept of originality. Moreover, on the rating scales, the scale points were accompanied by descriptions. Unoriginal ideas were explained to be very common, often concerning issues that already exist (e.g., "Place ads in a youth magazine"). In contrast, highly original ideas were described as ideas that are mentioned rarely (e.g., "Use a scientific formula of the perfect scent"). As a measure of inter-rater agreement, Kendall's W (Kendall, 1955) was computed. The inter-rater agreement for the originality of all ideas (Kendall's $W = .83$) was good. Hence, we averaged the scores of the two raters into one originality score.

Next to the above mentioned performance-related dependent measure we also included more subjective measures of vision effectiveness, such as organizational identification and perceived leader effectiveness. Unless stated otherwise, these measures were all assessed using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = "totally disagree", 7 = "totally agree").

Organizational identification. To assess participants' identification with the organization we used five items adapted from van Dick, van Knippenberg, Kerschreiter, Hertel, and Wieseke (2008) (e.g., "I could easily identify myself as an employee of this company"). All items were averaged into one organizational identification score (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$).

Perceived leader effectiveness. To assess the extent to which participants perceived their leader as being effective in their job we used five items adapted from Haslam and Ryan (2008) (e.g., “The leader that wrote this vision has clear leadership credentials”). All items were averaged into one effectiveness score (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .95$).

Manipulation checks. To check the effectiveness of the situation manipulation, participants had to first answer four multiple choice questions with two answer alternatives about the financial situation of the company (e.g., the situation of the company is positive vs. negative, the company’s stock market value shows an upward trend vs. a downward trend). In addition, participants answered two questions using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = “not successful/ bankruptcy”, to “7 = very successful/ one of the most successful companies”) to indicate their perceived successfulness of the company. The two items were combined to form one average crisis score (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .88$). The vision manipulation was checked with one multiple choice question. Participants were asked to indicate whether they had received an abstract vision or a concrete vision from their leader.

Finally, some demographic indicators were recorded, and participants were debriefed and thanked.

Results

In all analyses of variance (ANOVAs) vision (abstract/ concrete) and situation (prosperity/ crisis) were factors in the design.¹

Manipulation checks

Using the four multiple choice questions, the situation of the company (prosperity vs. crisis) was correctly recalled (i.e., a correct answer on all the questions) by 96.2% of the participants. In addition, a two-way analysis of variance on our average crisis score revealed only a significant main effect of crisis, $F(1, 71) = 139.21, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .66$ indicating that participants in the prosperity condition ($M = 6.03, SD = .55$) perceived the situation of the

company as more prosperous than participants in the crisis condition ($M = 3.31, SD = 1.25$).

No other effects were found indicating that the situation manipulation was successful.

To attest to the success of the vision manipulation, 88% of the participants correctly indicated what kind of vision they had received. Participants that incorrectly recalled the vision manipulation were equally spread over all four conditions². In addition, a chi-square test, comparing the observed frequencies of cases with the expected frequencies, revealed that the vision manipulation was successful, $\chi^2(1, N = 75) = 44.15, p < .001$.

*Idea originality*³

A two-way ANOVA on the average originality score only revealed a significant Vision \times Situation interaction effect, $F(1, 71) = 6.37, p = .01, \eta^2_p = .08$ (see Figure 2). Simple main effects analyses showed a non-significant trend in the crisis condition for participants receiving a concrete vision to generate more original ideas ($M = 1.48, SD = .33$) than participants receiving an abstract vision ($M = 1.29, SD = .31$), $F(1, 71) = 2.29, p = .14, \eta^2_p = .03$, CI (diff) = between $-.06$ and $.46$. In the prosperity condition, participants generated more original ideas when they received an abstract vision ($M = 1.63, SD = .56$) than when they received a concrete vision from their leader ($M = 1.34, SD = .40$), $F(1, 71) = 4.26, p = .05, \eta^2_p = .06$, CI (diff) = between $.01$ and $.57$. In addition, participants receiving an abstract vision performed significantly better in times of prosperity ($M = 1.63, SD = .56$) than in times of crisis ($M = 1.29, SD = .31$), $F(1, 71) = 6.44, p = .01, \eta^2_p = .08$, CI (diff) = between $.07$ and $.61$. No other significant effects were found.

In line with *Hypothesis 1*, we found that in times of crisis a concrete vision seems to be more effective (in terms of follower performance) than an abstract vision. In addition, the results fully supported *Hypothesis 2*, showing that in times of prosperity an abstract vision is more effective than a concrete vision.

Organizational identification

A two-way ANOVA on our average organizational identification score revealed a main effect of the situation, $F(1, 71) = 6.99, p = .01, \eta^2_p = .09$, with participants identifying less with the organization in times of crisis ($M = 3.58, SD = 1.00$) than in times of prosperity ($M = 4.16, SD = .94$). This main effect of situation was qualified by a Vision \times Situation interaction, $F(1, 71) = 6.41, p = .01, \eta^2_p = .08$ (see Figure 3). Simple main effects analyses indicated that in the crisis condition participants receiving a concrete vision identified significantly more with the organization ($M = 3.91, SD = .73$) than participants receiving an abstract vision ($M = 3.21, SD = 1.15$), $F(1, 71) = 5.54, p = .02, \eta^2_p = .07$, CI (diff) = between .11 and 1.30. In the prosperity condition, no differential effects of vision were found, $F(1, 71) = 1.60, ns$. However, participants receiving an abstract vision identified significantly more with the organization in times of prosperity ($M = 4.34, SD = .86$) than in times of crisis ($M = 3.21, SD = 1.15$), $F(1, 71) = 13.70, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .16$, CI (diff) = between .52 and 1.74. No other significant effects emerged.

In line with *Hypothesis 1*, in times of crisis a concrete vision proved to be more effective (in terms of higher organizational identification) than an abstract vision. However, the results on organizational identification did not support *Hypothesis 2*.

Perceived leader effectiveness

A two-way ANOVA on our average effectiveness score yielded a significant main effect of vision, $F(1, 71) = 3.89, p = .05, \eta^2_p = .05$ with participants perceiving their leader as more effective when they received a concrete vision ($M = 4.68, SD = 1.09$) than when they received an abstract vision ($M = 4.10, SD = 1.44$). Again, this main effect was qualified by a significant Vision \times Situation interaction effect, $F(1, 71) = 4.16, p = .05, \eta^2_p = .06$ (See Figure 4). In line with our predictions, simple main effects analyses revealed that in the crisis condition participants perceived their leader as more effective when they received a concrete

vision ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 1.14$) than when they received an abstract vision ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.48$), $F(1, 71) = 8.65$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2_p = .11$, $CI(\text{diff}) = \text{between } .37 \text{ and } 1.94$. In the prosperity condition, no differential effects of vision were found. However, participants receiving an abstract vision significantly judged their leader as less effective in times of crisis ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.48$), as compared with times of prosperity ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.22$), $F(1, 71) = 6.97$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2_p = .09$, $CI(\text{diff}) = \text{between } -1.87 \text{ and } -.26$. No other significant effects emerged.

In line with *Hypothesis 1*, a concrete vision proved to be more effective (in terms of higher perceived leader effectiveness) in times of crisis than an abstract vision. *Hypothesis 2* was not fully supported by the results found on perceived leader effectiveness.

Discussion

The literature on charismatic and transformational leadership has conceptualized vision as a crucial component of leadership (Berson et al., 2001) that positively affects follower performance, organizational identification, and perceived leader effectiveness (e.g., Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Bryman, 1999). Although prior theorizing has emphasized the importance of vision content in determining vision effectiveness, to date, the empirical record on the relationship between vision content and vision effectiveness remains inconclusive (Beyer, 1999a; House, 1999). Moreover, a clear understanding of what makes a good vision (content-wise) under what conditions is especially scarce (Stam et al., 2010). Based on an integration of findings from the vision communication (e.g., Baum et al., 1998; Kantabutra, 2008) and organizational change literature (e.g., Allen et al., 2007; van Knippenberg et al., 2005), as well as from work on followers' differential need for information in different situations (e.g., Den Hertog et al., 2010), we posited that the effectiveness of the vision's content (i.e., concrete vs. abstract) is contingent on the situation (i.e., crisis vs. prosperity). Specifically, we predicted that in times of crisis a concrete vision is more effective than an abstract vision. Conversely, we predicted that in times of prosperity

an abstract vision is more effective than a concrete vision. These predictions were tested in a laboratory experiment.

The findings of this research supported our predictions. Specifically, we showed that 1) in times of prosperity an abstract vision is related to higher creative performance (i.e., the originality of generated ideas) than a concrete vision, 2) in times of crisis a concrete vision, as opposed to an abstract vision, is related to higher organizational identification, and that 3) in times of crisis a concrete vision, as opposed to an abstract vision, is related to higher perceived leader effectiveness.

Interestingly, not all results were as symmetrical as predicted. That is, for the more subjective dependent measures (i.e., follower's organizational identification and perceived leader effectiveness) the predicted effects were only present in the crisis situation. In other words, in times of prosperity concrete and abstract visions were equally effective. One potential explanation for the more pronounced effects of vision type in times of crisis and the lack of differential influence of vision type in times of prosperity, could be based on the notion of the romance of leadership (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985). In accordance with this notion, a leader is disproportionately held accountable for his/her actions in a crisis situation (Meindl et al., 1985). Hence, a leader that does not address followers' concerns via his/her vision could get 'punished' disproportionately by being rated as less effective than a leader that addresses salient concerns. Instead, in times of prosperity the leader gets bonus credits regardless of his/her actions. However, given that controlling for romance of leadership did not affect the results found this explanation seems to be less plausible¹.

A possibly more feasible explanation for the asymmetrical effects of vision type in times of prosperity and crisis, is that in times of crisis followers are particularly open to leadership (Shamir & Howell, 1999) and in need for a vision (Gordijn & Stapel, 2008). Moreover, in the unpleasant crisis situation, as opposed to the more pleasant prosperous situation,

followers rely more on their leaders to determine how they should interpret and react to the crisis (Madera & Smith, 2009). This increased follower openness to leadership could, in turn, increase the impact of the leader's vision during times of crisis as opposed to times of prosperity. In times of crisis, it appears to be especially important that the vision taps into followers' salient concerns.

The effects on our performance measure were in line with our predictions but appeared to be somewhat stronger in times of prosperity than in times of crisis. One possible explanation, as to why the effects were stronger in times of prosperity than in times of crisis, could be that the present study lacked the power to detect small differences due to the relatively small sample size. Another potential explanation revolves around the nature of our performance measure. Obviously, followers' task requirements and expected type of performance vary largely within and across organizations. Nevertheless, in the current study we consciously chose for a qualitative measure of performance related to innovation because of the increased importance for companies to be innovative (West & Altink, 1996). A number of scholars have highlighted the complexity of predictor-performance relationships (e.g., Hainaut & Bolmont, 2005) with the influence of a predictor being dependent on the specific characteristics of the task. Therefore, the asymmetrical effects of vision type in times of prosperity and crisis may be due to the nature of our performance measure. Although, we tested our predictions on just one particular measure of performance we firmly believe that this was a valid operationalization of follower performance, and we expect similar results to emerge with different performance operationalizations (e.g., productivity). Nonetheless, this remains a question to be answered in future research.

Implications for the Study of Vision Effectiveness

The results of the current study consistently showed that the content of the vision interacted with the situation in predicting the vision's effectiveness (i.e., increased follower

performance, follower organizational identification, and perceived leader effectiveness). Herewith, this research provides first empirical evidence that the situation (crisis vs. prosperity) moderates the effects of vision content (concrete vs. abstract) on vision effectiveness and moves previous work on vision communication along by providing an explanation for the inconsistencies between the vision communication and organizational change literature. In addition, this research expands the vision communication literature by providing clarity on the role of vision content as a predictor of vision effectiveness – as opposed to the bulk of research that has focused on the actual vision communication processes (Berson et al., 2001; Stam et al., 2010).

A first implication of our work for the study of vision communication is that it might prove fruitful to investigate contingency models of vision effectiveness. This line of reasoning is also supported by a recent study by Stam and colleagues (2010), showing that the vision's effectiveness was contingent on followers' regulatory focus. That is, visions with a promotion content (i.e., promoting a desirable situation) were more effective for promotion-focused followers whereas visions with a prevention content (i.e., preventing an undesirable situation) were more effective for prevention-focused followers. Although contingency models of leadership have been used in the past (e.g., Fiedler, 1967) the use of these models seems to have fallen out of favor. Typically, studies of vision communication primarily demonstrate the existence of main effects, implicitly assuming that such effects are stable over various conditions. With our study we hope to have reinvigorated a call for the use of contingency models in investigating the effectiveness of leader behaviors.

Second, the effectiveness of a vision may not only depend on the level of abstractness of its content, but also on variables related to followers' personality (e.g., followers' regulatory focus; Stam et al., 2010). Hence, followers' reactions during times of crisis versus prosperity may be influenced by their personality. For example, people with low self-esteem or a

neurotic personality (Digman, 1990) may react more strongly to stressful situations (cf. Chan, 1977). Consequently, during times of crisis, they may have a higher need for information that would reduce their fear or anxiety and may be especially in need of a concrete vision.

Third, followers' reactions during times of crisis and prosperity may also be affected by their cultural background. The existence of cultural differences may mean that leader behaviors that work in one nation may not be successful in another (Taylor, 2000). For instance, people in a highly collectivistic culture might react differently during an organizational crisis than those in a highly individualistic culture. Indeed, research by An, Park, Cho, and Berger (unpublished manuscript) showed that South-Korean respondents (collectivistic culture) reacted differently to actions taken by their leaders to solve the crisis than U.S. respondents (individualistic culture).

Fourth, in the current experiment we only tested one dimension of vision content, namely the level of abstractness. However, the content of a vision can differ along many other dimensions, such as the vision's regulatory focus, the length of the vision statement, the degree to which the vision instils confidence in followers. In addition, the leader's choice of words, symbols, and expressions also constitute critical content elements (e.g., Den Hartog & Verburg, 1997). Thus, it might prove fruitful for future research to investigate the influence of other content dimensions such as word choice, the use of metaphors, the use of inclusive language ('we', 'us') on the vision's effectiveness in different situations.

Fifth, future research might benefit from investigating the mechanisms underlying our effects. Although we theorized that the effects of vision content are contingent on the situation because of followers' differential need for information, we did not directly test this contention empirically. Interestingly, this line of reasoning can also explain the effects found by Stam and colleagues (2010) showing that promotion vs. prevention-focused visions were more effective when the content of the vision was aligned with followers' regulatory focus.

Hence, future research zooming in on this and other potential underlying mechanisms might prove especially fruitful in providing a better understanding of how vision content is related to vision effectiveness under different conditions.

Caveats and Limitations

Naturally, this research has its strengths and weaknesses. First, the use of a student sample in this laboratory experiment could raise external validity concerns. However, because our aim was to establish causality in the relationship between vision content, the situation, and vision effectiveness, we consciously chose for this experimental set-up, high in internal validity (Ilgen, 1986; Mook, 1983). Moreover, visions naturally occurring in the field most likely differ along many other dimensions next to our dimension of interest – the abstractness of the vision's content. Hence, controlling for all these possible differences may be a less realistic goal (Stam et al., 2010) than employing an experimental manipulation. Fortunately, our experimental set-up allowed us to validly manipulate the vision's content and therefore complement the existing literature on vision communication that generally uses field studies (e.g., Baum et al., 1998; Den Hartog & Verburg, 1997). It is worthwhile mentioning that this experiment does not prove that the observed effects exist outside of the experimental laboratory, but rather that these effects *could* exist (Goodwin, Wofford, & Boyd, 2000). Nonetheless, given that, previous research has shown that there is no reason to suspect that students behave differently than other populations (Brown & Lord, 1999; Dipboye, 1990) and experimental findings are often replicated in survey-based organizational research (De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2004; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005) we expect similar relationships to be observed in the field. Indeed, followers' reactions to Obama's speech provide some anecdotal evidence as to the potential relevance of the current findings in a field context. In line with our theoretical argument, Obama's choice to communicate an abstract vision in times of crisis appears to have been

ineffective in terms of his followers' perceptions of his leadership effectiveness. Ultimately however, this remains an anecdote, and we wholeheartedly endorse future tests of our hypotheses in field settings.

Second, our hypotheses were tested in a single study with only female participants. Although we have no reason to expect any gender differences, we welcome future research on this topic using male or mixed samples. Also, since our hypotheses were subjected to a single-study-test, confidence in our findings would be bolstered by future research using different samples, methodologies and manipulations as well as measures of our core variables.

Third, in the present study the level of abstractness of the visions' content was operationalized along two dimensions: temporal distance (i.e., distant vs. near future) and focus (i.e., why vs. how questions and answers). Because we only examined the combined effects of these two dimensions it remains unclear whether one dimension may have been more influential with regard to the effects on follower' performance, organizational identification, and perceived leader effectiveness than the other. Future research disentangling these two dimensions is necessary to shed more light on this question.

A fourth limitation that warrants comment is that of unit of analysis. In the current study we were interested in the relationship between vision content, the situation and *individual* follower performance, organizational identification, and perceived leader effectiveness. However, visions are often communicated to large groups of followers (Stam et al., 2010). It is not self-evident that the findings of the current research can be directly applied to groups. Yet, groups consist of individuals. Therefore, we argue, in line with Stam and colleagues (2010), that processes at the individual level will influence at least to some extent results at the group level. The use of multilevel research designs that may replicate the findings of the

present research at the individual as well as at the group level are highly recommended for future research.

Practical Implications

Although inferences for practice should be seen as tentative and as requiring further inquiry and clarification, we see potential for our findings to be used in applied settings, be they organizational or political in nature. First, there seems to be some value in leaders' attention being focused on the situation at hand when choosing the abstractness of their vision statement. The current research showed that the effectiveness of concrete vs. abstract visions depends on the situation. This knowledge is important for practice, because it shows that there is not 'one best practice' that applies to all situations. Specifically, in times of crisis it might be wise for leaders to articulate a concrete vision, emphasizing how an end-state can be reached and that focuses on the near future. Conversely, in times of prosperity articulating an abstract vision, emphasizing why an end-state should be reached and focusing on a distant future, seems to be more recommendable.

Second, results derived from our creative performance measure might be especially relevant for companies relying on innovative products and/or services. The current research showed that, providing followers with an abstract (a concrete) vision in times of prosperity (crisis) is related to the generation of more original ideas, which is, in turn, viewed as the starting point for innovation (Amabile, 1996). Thus, in times of prosperity, companies striving for innovation may benefit from articulating an abstract vision, as opposed to a concrete vision. In contrast, in times of crisis it is more effective to formulate a concrete vision, as opposed to an abstract one.

To Conclude

Our results imply that the vision Obama articulated on how to handle the BP oil spill may not have been effective in inspiring followers, not because the content of his speech was

inadequate per se, but rather because it failed to address followers' concerns in the crisis situation at hand. Instead of an abstract vision highlighting a future ideal of clean energy and emphasizing *why* this is desirable, followers yearned for clear and specific guidelines on *how* to stop the gusher and clean up the oil in the near future (Sheridan, 2010).

Based on our findings, we conclude that in times of crisis it is better to articulate a vision with a concrete rather than with an abstract content. Conversely, in times of prosperity an abstract vision is more effective than a concrete vision. In other words, whether a concrete or an abstract vision directs followers to the north depends on the situation. The current study was the first to show that different levels of abstractness in terms of vision content are effective in different situations. We sincerely hope to have opened an avenue for future research that investigates the role of vision content in determining vision effectiveness.

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Footnotes

¹ All analyses reported in the results section were also conducted by using measures of Romance of Leadership (Meindl & Ehrlich, 1988) and Personal Need for Structure (Neuberg & Newsome, 1993) as covariates. Including these controls did not change the significance or pattern of our results. In addition, participants in the four experimental conditions did not differ from each other in terms of perceived self-efficacy in generating ideas ($ps > .39$), or in their level of satisfaction with the generated ideas ($ps > .16$).

² Analyses conducted on a sample excluding participants who did not correctly recalled the vision manipulation, revealed largely the same results (i.e., significant results remained significant and showed the same pattern) as the ones reported on the full sample.

³ Including productivity as a control in our analyses on idea originality did not change the significance or pattern of our results.

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Research model.

Figure 2. Idea originality as predicted by vision content and situation.

Figure 3. Organizational identification as predicted by vision content and situation.

Figure 4. Perceived leader effectiveness as predicted by vision content and situation.







