

The Neural Response to Charismatic Leaders

Sabine Bergner, Robert Rybnicek, Karl Koschutnig, Alfred Gutschelhofer
(all authors from Graz University, Austria)

Corresponding author: sabine.bergner@uni-graz.at

There is a saying that ‘A good boss can make your career, but a bad boss can make your life miserable’. In line with this saying behavioral research demonstrates that leaders clearly impact the motivation of their subordinates to perform well in the job (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Recent findings suggest that particularly charismatic leadership enhances subordinates’ motivation which in consequence increases their job performance (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Charismatic leaders move their followers beyond self-interests through charisma, inspiration, and intellectual stimulation. In contrast laissez-faire leadership resembles the avoidance of leadership and refers to being absent when needed or taking no action even when problems arise. Contrary to charismatic leadership laissez-faire leadership negatively relates to subordinates’ job performance and motivation (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Since motivation can be described as an individual’s propensity to obtain reward, working for a charismatic leader might be regarded as a reward whereas working for a laissez-faire leader might be regarded as punishment. Based on this assumption the aim of the study was to assess whether the neural mechanisms underlying the experience of charismatic leadership and laissez-faire leadership would resemble those that can be observed when experiencing other rewarding or punishing stimuli.

An event-related functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) study was conducted using a comparison task followed by leadership and monetary incentives. In total, 43 healthy students (15 male) with a mean age of 23 years participated in both steps of the study. In the pre-scan step participants were introduced to the leadership and monetary incentives. The prospects of a certain amount of Euros served as monetary incentives. The rewarding monetary incentive was a high gain of Euros (a picture of bank notes). In contrast, the punishing monetary incentive was a very small gain of Euros (a picture of coins). Leadership incentives were two leaders offering the subject a job in their team. Each leader was represented by a photo with neutral emotional expression. In the pre-scan step participants learned that one photo represented a charismatic leader (rewarding incentive) while the other one represented a laissez-faire leader (punishing social incentive). In order to combine the photos with the particular leadership style, participants listened to the recording of a speech that was given by the leaders to their subordinates. One recording contained the speech of the charismatic whereas the other contained the speech of the laissez-faire leader. In fact, the speeches were fake, written by the researchers and spoken by two actors. The content of the speeches were the same whereas the chosen wording, intonation of the speaker as well as pace, tone of voice and volume was

manipulated. Thus, for the subjects the impression arose that they could have a job in the team of a charismatic versus a laissez-faire leader.

During the scan, in phase 2, participants engaged in a comparison task that was followed by leadership (pictures of a charismatic or laissez-faire leader) and monetary incentives (gaining more or less money). Participants completed one block of 54 trials on each incentive. At the comparison task participants were instructed to indicate which one of two simultaneously presented sets of dots contained the larger number of dots. The ipsative scaling of the task guaranteed a hit rate of 60% for all subjects. In the leadership reward block a hit or respectively an incorrect answer was followed by the framing of the charismatic or respectively laissez-faire leader’s photo. In the monetary reward block a hit or an incorrect answer was followed by the framing of the bank notes or respectively the coins (see Fig. 1).

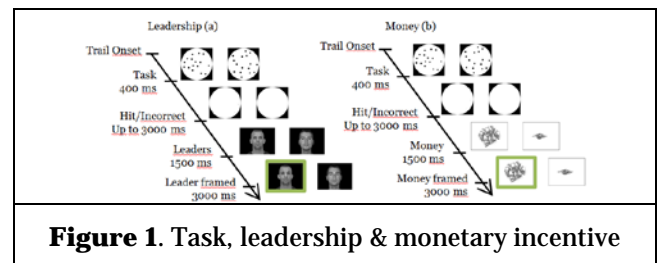


Figure 1. Task, leadership & monetary incentive

The behavioral manipulation check for the leadership incentives indicated that charismatic leaders were clearly perceived as charismatic, and much more preferred as laissez-faire leaders. In addition, reaction time varied as a function of reward sensitivity; those to whom leaders played a more important role at work than money were faster in the leadership reward block. Preliminary neuro-imaging results displayed substantial overlap between the leadership and monetary reward incentive in the nucleus accumbens, caudate nucleus, and ventromedial prefrontal cortex. Moreover, the more charismatic a leader was rated the stronger was the activation in the aforementioned ROIs. Findings illustrate that on a neural basis a charismatic leader motivates in a similar manner as the perspective to receive more money.

REFERENCES

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