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Focusing on followers: The role of regulatory focus and possible selves in visionary leadership

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ABSTRACT

Vision communication is considered to be essential for leaders to mobilize followers, but knowledge of how and why vision communication may influence followers is scarce. We argue that visions may invite followers to create an ideal self (a desired image of the self). Subsequent consideration of this ideal self may motivate followers to make the ideal self (and thus the vision) reality. Furthermore, we propose that visions that focus on followers (by addressing followers personally and involving them in the vision) are more likely to lead to the creation of an ideal self and hence to higher follower performance than visions that do not focus on followers. Moreover, we argue that this effect is particularly strong for followers with a promotion self-regulatory focus, a focus on reaching ideals and ideal selves, because promotion focus causes sensitivity to the presence or absence of ideals (Higgins, 1987, 1996, 1997). The results of two experiments support our predictions.

1. Introduction

Many scholars argue that communicating an inspiring vision of the future is essential for leaders to mobilize followers (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Conger & Kanungo, 1987, 1998; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). Indeed, research shows that vision communication may lead to improved follower motivation and performance (Baum, Kirkpatrick, & Locke, 1998; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996). However, empirical research that sheds light on when and why visions are effective is scarce. This has led to several calls for more knowledge of processes that underlie the effectiveness of vision communication (Beyer, 1999a,b; House, 1999; Shamir, 1999).

Based on studies of leadership and the self-concept (Lord & Brown, 2001, 2004; Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999; Lord & Emrich, 2000; Shamir et al., 1993; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004) we propose that one of the reasons why some visions may be more motivating than others is that they lead followers to create an ideal possible self (i.e., one's most desired image of oneself). A few scholars have pointed to the potential role of possible selves in leadership processes in general and in vision effectiveness in particular (Lord & Brown, 2001, 2004; Lord et al., 1999; van Knippenberg et al., 2004). However, the current study is the first to empirically address this issue and to identify some of the contingencies of leaders' ability to inspire followers to create ideal possible selves through the communication of a vision.

Specifically, we argue that visions that explicitly focus on followers (i.e., by addressing followers personally and involving them in the vision) are more likely to lead to the creation of an ideal self by these followers than visions that do not focus on followers. Moreover, we propose that this effect is particularly strong for followers with a promotion self-regulatory focus (a focus on reaching ideal selves), because a promotion focus heightens sensitivity to the presence or absence of ideals (Higgins, 1987, 1996, 1997). We test these ideas in two experiments using different operationalizations of self-regulatory focus.

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2. Visions and ideal selves

Visions are defined as ideal, future-oriented images that focus on values and norms (Berson, Shamir, Avolio, & Popper, 2001; Shamir et al., 1993). Communicating an inspiring vision is a central element of some of the most influential leadership theories of the last decades (Bryman, 1992; Yukl, 2000), such as charismatic leadership theories (Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Weber, 1947) and transformational leadership theories (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). Vision communication may cause followers to feel more efficacious, identify more with the organization, and provide a sense of meaning and purpose in daily work (Bryman, 1992; Shamir et al., 1993; Yukl, 2000). Importantly, vision communication may also improve follower and company performance (Baum et al., 1998; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996). The evident importance of vision communication has led many scholars to call for research that focuses on *when* and *why* visions are effective (Beyer, 1999a,b; House, 1999; Shamir, 1999).

The few existing studies on vision communication are helpful in this matter, because they give some suggestions of what might make one vision more effective than another. Baum et al. (1998), for instance, content-coded the visions of business leaders and related them to venture growth. They concluded that vision attributes (including vision desirability) and vision content (emphasis on growth) positively predicted venture growth. Mio, Riggio, Levin, and Reese (2005) found that when US presidents made more use of metaphors in vision communication they were considered to be more charismatic. They argued that metaphors made visions more vivid and comprehensible for followers. Emrich, Brower, Feldman, and Garland (2001) showed that the use of image-based rhetoric, which refers to the use of words that "quickly and easily arouse a sensory experience such as a mental picture" (Emrich et al., 2001, p. 529), was positively associated with presidential charisma and presidential greatness. They reasoned that image-based rhetoric easily invoked a mental picture of a vision, which made the vision more realistic and appealing to followers. Thus, by communicating a desirable vision and by using specific rhetoric (i.e. metaphors and image-based words) a leader may make a vision more appealing to followers. As a consequence, followers are more likely to elaborate on this vision and to picture themselves as being part of the vision. This in turn may result in greater vision effectiveness.

Although this line of reasoning clearly alludes to the role of followers in the vision communication process, research that contains direct measures of follower process variables is scant. This is unfortunate, as we believe that our understanding of vision effectiveness may benefit greatly from a stronger research focus on followers (cf. Ehrhart & Klein, 2001; Howell & Shamir, 2005; Shamir et al., 1993), and particularly on the self-concept of followers (cf. Lord & Brown, 2001, 2004; Lord & Emrich, 2000; Lord et al., 1999; Shamir et al., 1993; van Knippenberg et al., 2004). The self-concept refers to a dynamic interpretive system that consists of images, thoughts, schemas, prototypes, theories, goals, and tasks related to the self (Markus & Wurf, 1987). The self-concept has profound effects on people's perception, behavior, and motivation (Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Thus, if leaders are able to influence the self-concept of followers they indirectly also influence their perception, behavior, and motivation (for an overview see van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Shamir et al. (1993) argue that vision communication may be used as a tool to influence followers' self-concepts. By providing a vision leaders may align the self-concepts of followers with the values and identities communicated by that vision.

Because visions by definition concern the future, we argue that in order to explain vision effectiveness one should focus on that part of the self-concept that deals with the future, called the "possible self" (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves are images, thoughts, and ideas of who a person *could be*, the "cognitive components of hopes, fears, goals, and threats" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). Possible selves may be important to explain how vision communication mobilizes followers, because possible selves are closely related to motivational and self-regulatory processes, such as identity development, long term self-regulation, and social comparison processes (Dunkel, 2000; Ibarra, 1999; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004; Oyserman & Markus, 1990).

Higgins (1987, 1996, 1997) differentiates between ideal possible selves and ought possible selves. The former concern positive ideal future images of the self that represent what or whom an individual aspires to become. The latter refer to images of the self related to responsibilities and duties. Ideal possible selves in particular may be relevant in explaining vision effectiveness, because visions by definition concern ideal, possible futures. Furthermore, ideal possible selves are closely related to self-improvement motivation (Banaji & Prentice, 1994). If a leader's vision causes followers to create ideal possible selves based on this vision, it may activate motivational processes in followers aimed at making the ideal self (and thus the vision) reality. In sum, visions may be effective because they paint an image of an ideal future and this image may be personalized into an ideal future self-image for followers.

3. Follower-focused visions

We propose that those visions that lead followers to create ideal selves are more motivating for followers than visions that do not have this effect. But how can vision communication facilitate the creation of possible selves? Sashkin (1988, p. 132–133) made the following observation:

> "A final theme common to effective visions is a focus on people… Only when people are part of the vision in these ways, can they take charge of the vision and make it their own. If, in contrast, a vision remains identified as the 'property' of the leader and is never 'owned' by the organization's members, it is not likely to be carried out effectively."

Sashkin thus suggested that, if followers are to imagine their future in terms of the vision, the vision should focus on followers and include them explicitly. Orit Gadiesh, the successful vice executive of Bain & Co., provides an example of a focus on followers in a speech to employees:

> "I've asked you to listen to what people say about the power of what you do. I've asked you to look at each other and not take for granted what others envy us for… Each and every one of us is an ambassador of our company. Each and every one

> of us is part of the team. Whether you are in the administrative staff convincing someone to apply for a job, or helping a colleague get through a bad day. Whether you are a consultant or an associate consultant, striking up a conversation or on a plane or celebrating your friends' successes in your area. Whether you are talking to a potential employee or client, or working with your team, who you are and what you believe comes through. You can only say what you believe. You can only project what you feel" (as cited in Conger & Kanungo, 1998, p. 182–183).

Gadiesh addressed her followers personally by frequent use of the word "you". She thus involved followers in her vision and directly encouraged them to elaborate on it. Testifying to the effectiveness of follower-focused visions, Den Hartog and Verburg (1997) found in a qualitative study that successful business leaders specifically addressed the audience they were talking to and made an effort to involve them in their vision. We argue that by focusing on followers (e.g., specifically addressing followers and encouraging them to elaborate on their role in the vision) leaders can enhance the likelihood that followers create an ideal self based on the vision, which subsequently may lead to improved follower motivation and performance.

Hypothesis 1. Follower-focused visions motivate higher follower performance than visions that are not follower-focused.

Hypothesis 2. The effect of a follower focus in leader visions on follower performance is mediated by follower ideal self.

4. Regulatory focus

If the creation of ideal selves indeed plays a role in explaining why some visions are more motivating than others, factors that influence the creation of such ideal selves may also be important in predicting vision effectiveness. Higgins (1987, 1996, 1997), for instance, argues that as a function of their self-regulatory focus, people differ in their tendency to emphasize and create ideal selves. Specifically, Higgins distinguishes between two regulatory foci: a promotion focus and a prevention focus. A promotion focus is a tendency to approach desired, ideal end-states, while a prevention focus is a tendency to approach end-states related to duties and responsibilities. These different tendencies affect various cognitive and behavioral processes. For instance, individuals with a promotion focus are generally more creative than individuals with a prevention focus (Friedman & Förster, 2001). Likewise, individuals with a promotion focus are more motivated by a goal that emphasizes gains or by a role model that embodies excellence than by a goal that emphasizes losses or by a role model that embodies failure, while the reverse is true for individuals with a prevention focus (Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002; Shah, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998).

More importantly, individuals with a promotion focus are sensitive to the presence of ideals and ideal selves, while individuals with a prevention focus are sensitive to the presence of duties and responsibilities (Higgins, 1987, 1996, 1997). Because individuals with a promotion focus are especially likely to create ideal selves, we propose that the effects of a focus on followers in vision communication (which encourages the creation of ideal selves) will be stronger for followers with a promotion focus than for followers without a promotion focus.

Hypothesis 3. The effect of a follower focus in leader visions on follower ideal self are stronger for followers with a promotion focus than for followers without a promotion focus.

5. The current research

In the current research we test these ideas in two experiments that use different operationalizations of regulatory focus, namely chronic and contextual regulatory focus (Keller & Bless, 2006). This two-study method is employed frequently in the regulatory focus literature, because a replication with different operationalizations of regulatory focus enhances the robustness of findings (e.g. Förster & Higgins, 2005; Lockwood et al., 2002).

Chronic regulatory focus indicates stable individual differences in regulatory focus. Chronic regulatory focus changes relatively little over time and is often the result of childhood experiences (Keller & Bless, 2006). For instance, children that are raised with an emphasis on their duties and responsibilities may develop a chronic prevention focus, while children that are raised with an emphasis on their personal ambitions and dreams may develop a chronic promotion focus (Higgins, 1997). Measures of chronic regulatory focus usually assess both prevention focus and promotion focus, and generally find the two dimensions unrelated (e.g. Förster & Higgins, 2005; Lockwood et al., 2002). In Study 1 we investigate the effects of chronic regulatory focus using a measure developed by Lockwood et al. (2002), which measures both participants' prevention focus and participants' promotion focus. In this study we expect that the effects of a follower focus on followers' ideal selves will be stronger with higher scores of chronic promotion focus.

Contextual regulatory focus designates situationally induced differences in regulatory focus. Contextual regulatory focus is brought about by the individual's environment and can change from situation to situation. For instance, a task in which individuals can earn money may induce a promotion focus, while a task in which individuals can lose money may induce a prevention focus (Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997). Manipulations of contextual regulatory focus usually produce either a promotion or a prevention focus (e.g., Förster & Higgins, 2005; Lockwood et al., 2002). In Study 2 we investigate the effects of contextual regulatory focus using a manipulation based on Higgins, Bond, Klein, and Strauman (1986), which induces either a promotion or a prevention

focus in participants. In this study we expect that the effects of a follower focus on follower ideal self will be stronger in the promotion condition than in the prevention condition.

Study 1: Follower-focused visions and chronic regulatory focus

6. Method

6.1. Participants and design

The participants in this study were 105 first and second year students enrolled in business or economics (65 male, 40 female; Mean age = 19.33, SD = 2.23). Only students that held a (part-time) job were selected to participate in this study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two possible vision conditions (Vision: follower-focused vs. control). We measured chronic promotion and prevention focus and added them to the design.

6.2. Procedure

Participants were placed inside a cubicle where a computer was prepared for them. All stimuli were administered through this computer. First the participants filled out a questionnaire which assessed their chronic regulatory focus. Thereafter, participants were told that a business leader would give them a speech on an important subject for managers. We opted to create a speech about management, because this topic is genuinely important to our participants (business and economics students). This was essential, because the effectiveness of visions depends heavily on the extent to which participants are interested in the topic of the vision. The (male) leader was introduced as an authority on management and an intellectual leader of future managers. In reality, we used an actor to present the speeches. Participants listened to an audio sample in which the actor gave one of two possible speeches (follower-focused or control). While the participants listened to the speech, the text of the speech was simultaneously presented on the screen. In both speeches the actor focused on innovative management, a form of management that emphasized creativity and innovative behavior. We incorporated elements in the speech that are considered essential for organizational visions (cf. Shamir et al., 1993): The vision was future-oriented (the leader spoke about what he believed to be important for future managers), promoted a positive end-state (becoming an innovative manager), and talked about norms and values (it presented innovative management as a bona fide form of management and focused on how to behave in order to become an innovative manager).

After the speech had ended, the participants answered questions assessing the extent to which the innovative manager had become an ideal self for the participants. We then measured performance with an idea generation task, which was introduced as a task that measured participants' creativity. Before they started with the task, participants first read a cover story, which related the task to the leader's vision. The cover story was based on a cover story by Brunstein and Gollwitzer (1996). Participants were told that creativity was a very important skill for innovative managers. Specifically, participants read the following:

> "Research on innovative management showed that creativity is an important predictor of innovative management behavior. Creativity is very important for innovative managers. Making innovative decisions and solving problems innovatively requires tremendous creative ability. Moreover, creativity is regarded as one of the most essential qualities required to solve complex problems in innovative ways. Studies show that innovative managers distinguish themselves from other managers by having the ability to be creative. Managers that are pointed out as innovative managers without exception score high on creativity tasks."

We then administered the idea generation task. After the experiment, participants were debriefed, thanked and paid 10 euro (approximately USD 13) for their participation.

6.2.1. Vision manipulation

We manipulated the extent to which the leader's vision focused on followers. In the follower-focused condition, the leader addressed the followers personally and tried to make them think about their role in the vision. An excerpt of the follower-focused vision is:

> "…You can develop your innovative management potential. If you try to approach problems from different angles, if you take the time to go beyond the obvious, if you actively and consciously harness creativity, then you can develop yourself as an innovative and successful manager…"

In the control condition the speech was given in the third person. The participants were not personally addressed and they were not encouraged to think about their role in the vision. An excerpt of the control vision is:

> "…People can develop their innovative management potential. People who try to approach problems from different angles, who take the time to go beyond the obvious, who actively and consciously harness creativity can develop themselves as innovative and successful managers..."

The two visions had the same content and were of exact equal length (they only differed in their appeal to the participant's self).

We conducted a pilot study with 32 business students (23 male, 9 female; Mean age = 18.81, SD = 1.09) to test whether our vision manipulation affected the extent to which participants felt that the vision focused on them. The participants were randomly assigned to the two different vision conditions. After the vision manipulation, we asked participants two questions to assess to what extent they felt personally addressed by the speech and to what extent they had reflected on the vision (e.g. "The leader talked to the audience personally in his plea for innovative management"; $M = 4.84$, SD = 1.30, $\alpha = .86$). A t-test revealed that participants in the follower-focused condition felt more personally addressed and had reflected more on the vision ($M = 5.36$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 4.18$), $t(30) = -2.81$, $p < .01$.

6.2.2. Self-regulatory focus measure

To assess chronic self-regulatory focus we used the promotion/prevention focus questionnaire developed by Lockwood et al. (2002). Nine questions were used to assess the chronic prevention focus of the participants (e.g. "I am anxious that I will fall short of my responsibilities and obligations", $M = 3.70$, SD = .83, $\alpha = .68$). Nine questions were used to assess the chronic promotion focus of the participants (e.g. "I frequently imagine how I will achieve my hopes and aspirations", $M = 5.36$, SD = .65, $\alpha = .72$). A principal component analysis with Varimax rotation yielded a two component structure for these measures. There was no correlation between prevention and promotion focus, $r = .02$. Furthermore, t-tests with the vision manipulation as independent variable and subsequently promotion and prevention focus as dependent variables showed that the mean score of both scales did not differ between conditions, $t(103) = -.29$, *ns.* and $t(103) = -1.87$, *ns.*, respectively.

6.2.3. Ideal self

We measured ideal self with three items ($M = 4.80$, SD = 0.96, $\alpha = .68$). We based these items on Markus and Nurius' (1986) seminal article on possible selves. Markus and Nurius described three items measuring future possible selves. These items assess the existence of possible selves, the perceived desirability of these possible selves, and the perceived feasibility of these possible selves. The items we used corresponded to these aspects: "During the speech I pictured myself in the future as an innovative manager" (existence), "I believe that this vision of innovative management would suit me well" (desirability), and "I think that in the future I will become an innovative manager" (feasibility).

6.2.4. Performance

To measure performance we used an idea generation task developed by Friedman & Förster (2001). We opted for an idea generation task because we wanted participants to think we were interested in their creative ability in order to make the cover story more compelling. Indeed, idea generation tasks have sometimes been used for the purpose of measuring creativity (Friedman & Förster, 2001; Rietzschel, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2007). In line with other previous research, however, we used the task to measure performance (Diehl & Stroebe, 1987, 1991; Paulus & Yang, 2000; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005). Specifically, we gave participants 3 min to come up with as many uses for a brick as they could and to type in these uses. A rater who was blind to the experimental conditions then simply counted the number of responses each participant generated (responses that were incomprehensible or unfinished were not counted). The final score equaled the number of valid ideas each participant had entered ($M = 13.12$, SD = 6.55)[1].

7. Results

7.1. Ideal self

We conducted linear regression analysis with ideal self as a dependent variable. In step 1, centered scores of promotion focus, prevention focus, and Vision were entered as independent variables. In step 2, the interaction between Vision and promotion focus and the interaction between Vision and prevention focus were also entered.

In step 1, the results showed a significant main effect of promotion focus, $t(101) = 2.08$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .04$[2] (see Table 1), but no significant main effects of Vision or prevention focus. The higher a participant's promotion focus, the stronger his or her ideal self. In step 2 the results showed a significant interaction of Vision and promotion focus, $t(99) = 2.57$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .06$ (see Fig. 1), but no other significant effects. We then performed simple slope analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) to test whether the slopes of the interaction were significantly different from zero. This analysis showed that in the case of a high promotion focus the slope was positive and significant (a follower-focused vision led to a higher score on ideal self creation than a control vision), $t(99) = 2.39$, $p = .02$, $\beta = .50$. The slope for participants with a low promotion focus was also significant, but in the reversed direction (a follower-focused vision led to a lower score on ideal self creation than a control vision), $t(99) = -2.21$, $p = .03$, $\beta = -.48$.

[1] Even though the explicit performance goal was quantity of ideas generated, one may wonder about the quality of ideas generated. Previous research using highly similar idea generation tasks has shown that idea quality and quantity are highly correlated (i.e. in the $r = .90$ range; Diehl & Stroebe, 1991). Therefore, we opted not to analyze the quality of ideas.

[2] All eta-squares reported in this manuscript are partial eta-squares.

Table 1
Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting ideal self, Study 1 ($N = 105$).

Variable	*b*	*SE b*	β
Step 1			
Vision manipulation	0.49	0.19	0.03
Chronic prevention focus	−0.11	0.11	−0.09
Chronic promotion focus	0.30	0.14	0.20*
Step 2			
Vision manipulation	0.02	0.18	0.01
Chronic prevention focus	−0.06	0.11	−0.06
Chronic promotion focus	0.22	0.14	0.15
Vision * Prevention focus	−0.29	0.22	−0.13
Vision * Promotion focus	0.71	0.28	0.25*

Note. $R^2 = .05$ for Step 1 (*ns.*); $\Delta R^2 = .07$ for Step 2 ($p < .05$).
*$p < .05$.

7.2. Performance

We used a similar linear regression to test the effects of regulatory focus and Vision on performance. The results showed no significant effects.

8. Discussion

The results of this study confirm Hypothesis 3. A focus on followers in vision communication increased the likelihood of ideal self creation, but only when participants had a high chronic promotion focus. The study also shows some results we did not expect. Participants with a low chronic promotion focus were less likely to create an ideal self when being presented a follower-focused vision than when being presented a control vision. One way to explain this finding is that participants with a low chronic promotion focus, who tend not to think about ideals, may have felt coerced by the follower focused vision to think of themselves as innovative managers. This feeling of coercion or pressure, in turn, may have hindered participants in the ideal self creation. This effect is similar to what is called 'reactance' in persuasion research (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Reactance may point to a situation in which a persuasive message backfires and results in targets of the persuasion attempt being more opposed to the message than they were before, because the persuasive message made them feel restricted in their freedom to make up their own mind. A focus on followers may have had a similar effect on participants with a low promotion focus.

Other hypotheses are not confirmed. For instance, we found no main effect of the vision manipulation on ideal self creation. Analysis of remarks made by participants could explain this. Although most participants noted that they had deemed the speech interesting and the study fun, some participants also noted that the use of more examples in the vision could enhance their ability to imagine themselves as being innovative managers. This may have been important, because we wanted to influence the extent to which participants saw themselves as innovative managers. We remedied this issue in Study 2 by providing more practical examples of innovative management in the visions. Furthermore, we found no evidence that Vision or promotion focus influenced task performance. A reason for this may have been that our task was not tailored to our design. Several participants noted that the task we used, in their eyes, had nothing to do with innovative management. To remedy this, in the next study we used a task which was more directly related to innovative management.

Study 2: Follower-focused visions and contextual regulatory focus

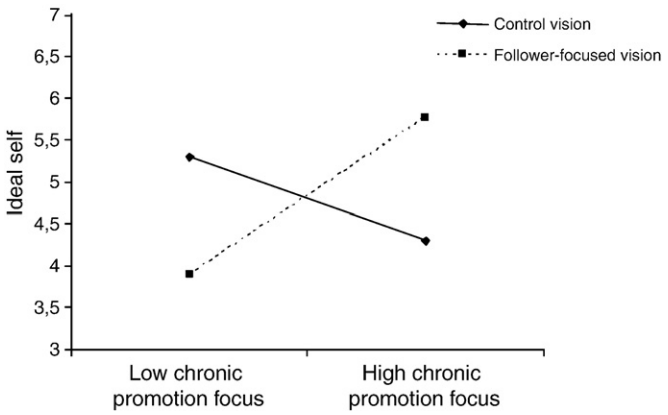

Fig. 1. Ideal self as a function of vision content for participants with high and low chronic promotion focus (Study 1).

9. Method

9.1. Participants and design

The participants in this study were 70 second and third year students enrolled in business or economics (43 males, 27 females; Mean age = 21.31, SD = 1.58). We used a 2 (Regulatory Focus: promotion focus vs. prevention focus) × 2 (Vision: follower-focused vs. control) factorial design. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions.

9.2. Procedure

The procedure of the second experiment was similar to the procedure of the first experiment, except as stated below.

9.2.1. Vision manipulation

The vision manipulation was similar to the one used in Study 1: One vision specifically focused on followers, while the other did not. To enhance the extent to which participants could imagine themselves as innovative managers, we used more examples of innovative management in our visions than we did in Study 1. For instance, the leader discussed how the communication of a vision on innovation might positively influence follower creativity ("…The best way to stimulate innovation is to communicate a creative vision about the work-group or organization…") and how creating support for innovation might be important ("…Creating support for a collective future image of creativity is the most important tool in the hands of the innovative manager…").

We again conducted a pilot study with 22 business students (9 males, 13 females; Mean age = 18.59, SD = .50) to test the validity of our vision manipulation and to investigate whether our manipulation indeed affected participant's creation of ideal selves. The participants were randomly assigned to the vision conditions. Similar to the pilot study in Study 1, we used two items to measure the extent to which participants deemed the speech to focus on them and computed the mean of these two items ($M = 5.16$, SD = 1.49, $\alpha = .64$). Similar to Study 1, we used three items to measure ideal selves ($M = 5.41$, SD = .83, $\alpha = .78$). A t-test revealed that the participants in the follower-focused vision condition felt more personally addressed and reflected more on the vision ($M = 5.85$) than participants in the control condition did ($M = 4.17$), $t(20) = -3.08$, $p < .01$, indicating that our manipulation was a success. Also, the participants in the follower-focused vision condition scored higher on the ideal selves measure ($M = 5.70$) than participants in the control condition did ($M = 5.00$), $t(20) = -2.07$, $p = .05$, indicating that in this pilot study the vision manipulation was able to influence the creation of ideal selves.

9.2.2. Self-regulatory focus manipulation

We manipulated the self-regulatory focus of participants with a manipulation developed by Higgins et al. (1986). Participants in the promotion focus condition were asked to type in what kind of person they would ideally want to be in the future, which five characteristics they would want to possess, and how their ideals and aspirations had changed over the last years. Participants in the prevention focus condition were asked to type in what kind of person they thought they ought to be in the future, which five characteristics they thought they should possess, and how their duties and responsibilities had changed over the last years. Two coders, who were blind to the experimental conditions, content-coded the answers of 59 participants (due to a computer error the answers on these particular questions of 11 participants were not saved; the answers of all other measures were saved correctly for all participants) as either concerning ideal selves or concerning ought selves. Their responses were the same on 54 out of 59 cases and in all of these cases the coding was congruent with the experimental condition. Disagreement of the 5 remaining cases was resolved through discussion.

9.2.3. Ideal self

As in Study 1, we measured ideal self with three questions ($M = 5.32$, SD = 1.00, $\alpha = .74$).

9.2.4. Performance

We again used an idea generation task to measure performance. To relate the task to innovative management, we asked participants to generate ideas about the differences between innovative managers and non-innovative managers. Similar to Study 1, we used a cover story that communicated to the participants that this idea generation task measured their creativity and that creativity was an important predictor of the ability to become an innovative manager. Indeed, generation of ideas about the relation between two constructs, like differences or similarities, has sometimes been used to measure creativity (for instance, Runco & Okuda, 1988; Wallach & Kogan, 1966). In line with other research we use idea generation to measure performance (Diehl & Stroebe, 1987, 1991; Paulus & Yang, 2000; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005). Specifically, we gave participants 3 min to come up with as many ideas as possible and to type in their answers. An independent coder who was blind to the experimental conditions counted the number of ideas each participant had generated (incomprehensible and unfinished answers were not counted). The final score was the number of valid responses that a participant had given ($M = 13.12$, SD = 6.55).

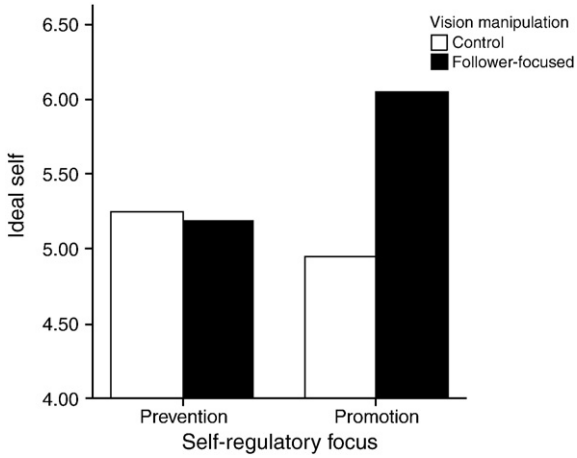

Fig. 2. Ideal self as a function of vision content for participants with contextual promotion focus and contextual prevention focus (Study 2).

10. Results

10.1. Ideal Self

We conducted a 2 (promotion vs. prevention) × 2 (follower-focused vision vs. control vision) analysis of variance with the ideal self measure as dependent variable. We found a significant main effect of Vision, $F(1, 66) = 5.19$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .07$. In the follower-focused vision condition participants scored higher on ideal self creation ($M = 5.61$) than in the control vision condition ($M = 5.10$). We also found a significant interaction effect between Regulatory Focus and Vision, $F(1, 66) = 6.62$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .09$ (see Fig. 2). As expected, simple main effects showed that in the promotion focus condition participants scored higher on ideal self creation after hearing the follower-focused vision ($M = 6.00$) than after hearing the control vision ($M = 4.95$), $F(1, 66) = 11.43$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .15$. In the prevention focus condition there was no difference between participants who heard the follower focused vision ($M = 5.18$) and the control vision ($M = 5.25$), $F(1, 66) = .45$, *ns.*

10.2. Performance

We then conducted a 2 (promotion vs. prevention) × 2 (follower-focused vision vs. control vision) analysis of variance with performance as dependent variable. We found no significant main effects, but we did find a significant interaction effect between Regulatory Focus and Vision, $F(1, 66) = 10.90$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .15$ (see Fig. 3). Simple main effects analysis showed that in the promotion focus condition participants performed better after hearing a follower-focused vision ($M = 8.27$) than after hearing a control vision ($M = 5.42$), $F(1, 66) = 6.05$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .08$. In contrast, in the prevention focus condition participants who heard the follower-focused vision scored lower ($M = 5.95$) than participants who heard the control vision ($M = 8.63$), $F(1, 66) = 5.66$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .08$.

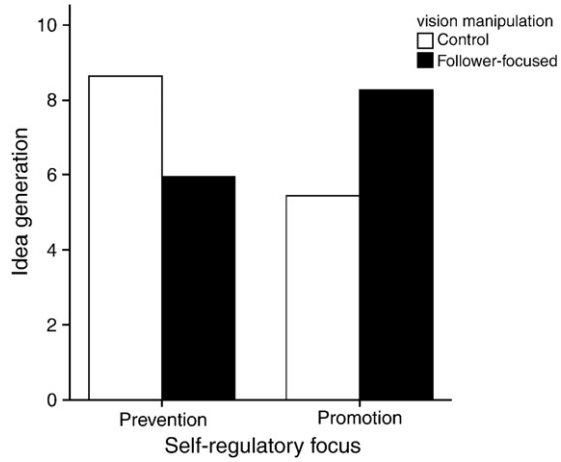

Fig. 3. Idea generation as a function of vision content for participants with contextual promotion focus and contextual prevention focus (Study 2).

10.3. Mediation analysis

We then investigated whether ideal self mediated the interaction effect of Regulatory Focus and Vision on performance. Following Yzerbyt, Muller, and Judd (2004) we controlled for the mediating variable by adding ideal self as a covariate in an analysis of (co)variance. We found that the effect of ideal self on performance was significant, $F(1, 65) = 6.58$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Moreover, the interaction effect of Vision and Regulatory Focus on performance diminished (although it stayed significant) $F(1, 65) = 7.15$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .10$. A Sobel test confirmed that the ideal self measure significantly mediated the interaction effect of our manipulations on the idea generation task $z = 1.71$, $p = .05$ (one-sided). Furthermore, simple main effects analysis showed that, when controlling for ideal self, in the promotion focus condition participants no longer performed better after hearing the follower-focused vision than after hearing the control vision, $F(1, 65) = 2.14$, *ns.* A second Sobel test confirmed that the ideal self measure significantly mediated the effect of Vision on performance in the promotion condition, $z = 2.20$, $p = .03$. In the prevention focus condition however, a significant difference between participants who heard the follower-focused vision ($M = 6.08$) and the control vision ($M = 8.69$) persisted, $F(1, 65) = 5.72$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .08$. Based on these results we may conclude that ideal self mediates the relationship between Vision and performance, but only in the promotion condition (cf. Baron & Kenny, 1986).

11. Discussion

Although we found no main effect of a focus on followers on performance, we did find the expected main effect on ideal self. A vision that focuses on followers is more likely to cause followers to create an ideal self. We also found support for Hypothesis 2 and 3. The beneficial effects of follower focused vision were only present for promotion-focused participants and not for prevention-focused participants. Furthermore, we found that for promotion-focused participants, ideal self mediated the effect of follower-focused visions on performance.

Surprisingly, we found the opposite effect of follower-focused vision for prevention-focused participants. Prevention-focused participants actually performed better after seeing the control vision than the follower-focused vision (although they did not score higher on ideal self). Although this finding does not threaten the conclusions we reached based on the findings for promotion-focused participants, it does require an explanation. The control vision, as opposed to the follower-focused vision, emphasized the importance of innovation for *all* future managers (instead of emphasizing the individual). This may have created a focus on the importance of innovation for a collective rather than the individual. Research on regulatory focus has established that regulatory focus and levels of self-construal are related (Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000). This research showed that promotion focus is related to independent self-construal, that is, people with a promotion focus are more likely to focus on themselves as unique individuals, differentiated from others. In contrast, prevention focus is related to interdependent self-construal, that is, people with a prevention focus are more likely to see themselves as related to other individuals and groups. Perhaps individuals with a prevention focus perceive collectives and groups as units that describe normative behaviors. As we discussed earlier, prevention-focused participants in particular emphasize responsibility and duty (Higgins, 1987), and therefore may be particularly affected by group norms. This would mean that prevention-focused individuals, when confronted with a vision statement that emphasizes the importance of certain qualities for a collective, may feel like they have the duty to acquire these qualities. In sum, we believe that the reason why prevention-focused individuals reacted more positively to the control vision may be explained by the fact that the control vision suggested that innovation was important for all future managers, which caused the perception of innovation as a responsibility and duty more than as an ideal.

12. General discussion

Understanding the effects of vision communication is one of the greatest challenges for leadership scholars (Beyer, 1999a; Shamir, 1999; Yukl, 1999). This research is one of the first to focus on the motivational processes underlying vision effectiveness. We argued that one of the reasons why some visions may be more effective than others is that these visions lead to the creation of ideal possible selves by followers, and furthermore that regulatory focus moderates this effect. In the current set of studies, we find that when a vision focused on followers by addressing them personally and encouraging them to think about their role in the vision followers were more likely to create an ideal possible self based on this vision. Subsequently, participants were more motivated to perform, but only when they had a tendency to focus on ideals and aspirations (a promotion focus). These results have several theoretical implications.

First, the findings of this research underline the importance of the role of possible selves in vision effectiveness and in doing so also point to the potential role of possible selves in leadership and organizational behavior in general. Much of the research that has used the notion of possible selves was conducted in the area of educational or developmental psychology (for instance, Dunkel 2000; Oyserman et al., 2004; Oyserman & Markus, 1990). However, some studies have investigated the way in which possible selves provide opportunities for employees to experiment with different work-roles (Ibarra, 1999) and the role that possible selves play in social comparison (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). This suggests that, although still in its early stages, the concept of possible selves may be pivotal for organizational behavior in the coming years. Second, by providing empirical evidence of the role of regulatory focus in vision effectiveness, this study substantiates arguments that self-regulatory focus provides a promising new framework for studying organizational behavior and leadership (Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Kark & Van Dijk, 2007). In social comparison research, regulatory focus is known to play an important role due to the close connection to possible selves (Lockwood

et al., 2002). This suggests that in those areas in which possible selves might prove important, regulatory focus might also play a part. However, the important role of regulatory focus is also evident from research in the area of creativity (Friedman & Förster, 2001) and goal setting (Shah et al., 1998).

In addition to the effects of follower-focused visions for promotion-focused followers, we also find in Study 2 that followers with a prevention focus actually performed best after being exposed to the control vision. We argue that the emphasis of the control vision on the importance of innovation for all managers may have communicated that innovation is more a responsibility or duty than an ideal. Hence participants with an induced prevention focus (and thus with a heightened focus on responsibilities and duties) may have been more motivated by the control vision than by the follower-focused vision. Furthermore, only in the promotion focus condition were the effects of vision on performance mediated by ideal self. As a consequence, we must conclude that for prevention-focused participants visions may influence performance through processes other than ideal self creation. One likely process is the creation of ought selves by followers. Ought selves are images of the self one believes one should become or has the responsibility to become (Higgins, 1987, 1996). While ideal selves motivate individuals because they provide a positive self-image to approach, ought selves motivate individuals because individuals are afraid to fall short of this self-image. Such a process is in line with our argumentation that the control vision may have communicated responsibilities and duties more than ideals. Furthermore, research in self-regulatory focus has shown that indeed prevention-focused people are prone to focusing on and creating ought selves (Higgins et al., 1986; Higgins, 1996, 1997). Future research may aim to substantiate our reasoning with empirical findings.

13. Limitations

This research is not without its problems and limitations. The experimental nature of the current studies and the use of student samples have several limitations that can be specified as general and study-specific. A general concern with experiments is generalizability from the simplicity of a laboratory experiment to the complexities of 'real life'. In this respect we agree with the notion that experimental research does not prove that certain dynamics exist outside of the experimental laboratory, but rather that they *could* exist, and that this is important in its own right (Goodwin, Wofford, & Boyd, 2000). Furthermore, the use of student samples may influence generalizibility as well. Therefore, although we have no reason to believe that the fundamental processes we focused on should be different for non-student populations (cf. Brown & Lord, 1999; De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2002; Dipboye, 1990; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005; Wofford, 1999), a next logical step would be to replicate these findings with a different (non-student) sample. Specifically, we emphasize the need for field research to boost the generalizibility of the current findings.

A study-specific limitation is that visions in the current research were not related to one particular organization. We chose to have the visions focus on innovative management as opposed to a specific organization because we deemed it more important that the content of the visions was relevant for our participants' occupational future than that the visions explicitly concerned an organizational future. Furthermore, one could claim that the leader in the current experiments was no leader in the traditional sense, because there was no long term relation between participants and leader and there was no formal authority. We tried to counterbalance this by portraying the leader as a 'real' leader and introducing him as a 'manager of managers' and an 'intellectual leader'. Therefore we believe that the situation we described does indeed represent leadership. Another study-specific limitation is the external validity of the dependent variables. The dependent measures in this study were laboratory measures of performance. The advantage of these measures is that they are behavioral rather than perceptual. However, it may be unclear to what extent the effects on these measures translate to typical organizational tasks. Taking these study-specific limitations into consideration we again stress the importance of replicating the current findings in an organizational setting.

14. Future research

The current research offers several starting points for future research. First, many of the field studies on vision communication focus on how (perceptions of) visions influence organizational performance or followers' views of leaders (Baum et al., 1998; Emrich et al., 2001; Mio et al., 2005). The current study suggests that field research should also investigate the extent to which employees feel involved in the organizational vision as well as the extent to which employees create a possible self based on the vision. In this respect, we recommend assessing both ideal self images as well as ought self images because both may play an important role in motivating and mobilizing followers.

Second, the current research focused on the individual level of the self-concept of followers. However, leaders and followers do not interact in a social vacuum. They are part of a larger group and group membership is an important factor in the leadership process (Shamir et al., 1993; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). This argues for models of visionary leadership on a group level. It is argued that leaders, through vision communication, act as entrepreneurs of collective identity (Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005). Similar to the role of follower individual ideal selves in the current study, follower organizational ideal possible selves may also be influenced by vision communication. By communicating a vision that focuses on ideals, norms, and values of the organization a leader may present followers with an ideal future organizational identity. We expect that those followers that feel involved in this future group identity are more likely to create an ideal possible image of their organization and are also more likely to identify with this organizational ideal.

Third, the current research investigated the cognitive aspects of the fit between regulatory focus and vision content. However, emotional processes are likely to play an important role in organizational behavior and in visionary leadership (Lord, Klimoski, &

Kanfer, 2002). Effective visionary leaders are able to inspire followers by displaying specific emotions (cf. Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Damen, van Knippenberg, & van Knippenberg, 2008; Lord & Brown, 2004; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, van Kleef, & Damen, 2008). Furthermore, promotion and prevention focus are associated with different emotions (Higgins et al., 1986). For instance, prevention focus is associated with emotions ranging from fear to relaxation, while promotion focus is related to emotions ranging from sadness to joy. Therefore, self-regulatory focus may play an important moderating role in emotional transfer. For instance, prevention-focused followers might be more sensitive to emotional displays of the leader that are related to prevention focus, like anxiety or relief. Similarly, promotion-focused followers might be especially sensitive to emotional displays that are related to promotion focus, like dejection or joy.

15. Implication for practice

Although we should be careful not to base too far-reaching conclusions on the present research, the findings of this research may be important for managerial practice. The current study suggests that involving followers in an ideal vision message may be important for mobilizing promotion-focused followers. To our surprise, the results also suggest that not involving followers personally may be perceived as emphasizing the responsibilities and duties of the individual with respect to the collective, and this may subsequently be important for mobilizing prevention-focused followers. This suggests that leaders should focus on followers and ideals when confronting promotion-focused followers, but that they should focus on the good of the whole and on responsibilities when confronting prevention-focused followers.

This knowledge may be particularly helpful in practice when leaders confront followers that share the same regulatory focus. There are compelling reasons to believe that such situations may indeed occur in organizational practice. For instance, Brockner and Higgins (2001) suggested that organizations may have promotion-oriented or prevention-oriented organizational cultures. Research has indeed shown that within groups people tend to conform in terms of regulatory focus (Levine, Higgins, & Choi, 2000). When interacting, the members of a group tend to polarize to either promotion or prevention-oriented regulation. Similarly, Dragoni (2005) argues that companies may have organizational (or work-group) climates that foster either employee approach (prevention) or employee avoidance (promotion) orientations. The organizational environment is another potential source of influence on regulatory focus. For instance, employees of a fast growing company may be collectively focused on gains and a positive future (promotion-focused), while the employees of a company in distress may collectively worry about possible job loss and other problems (prevention-focused). Therefore, we would advise leaders to pay attention to cultural tendencies and environmental events when articulating an organizational vision.

In conclusion, the current research adds to a growing body of research that demonstrates that the self-concepts and specifically possible selves of followers are important for explaining leadership influences (Lord & Brown, 2001, 2004; Lord et al., 1999; Shamir et al., 1993; van Knippenberg et al., 2004). It also confirms suggestions that self-regulatory focus is important for understanding leadership (Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Kark & Van Dijk, 2007). Understanding the role of follower regulatory focus and possible selves may be pivotal in revealing the mechanisms of effective vision communication.

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