Equity vs Equality: Sex Differences in Leadership

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The present study investigated differences between male and female leaders' responses to poorly performing subordinates. Ninety-four male and 94 female leaders were presented with a vignette describing an incident of poor performance that occurred in a distribution center. The subordinate in the vignette was either male or female, likable or dislikable, and performed poorly due to internal or external factors. Leaders studied the vignette and then rated the appropriateness of a series of corrective actions. Analyses indicated that the corrective actions of female leaders were more affected by the likableness and sex of the subordinate than were the corrective actions of male leaders. The results support the proposition that male leaders tend to respond to subordinates based upon a norm of equity, while female leaders respond to subordinates based upon a combination of equity and equality. Implications of the findings for management training and organizational effectiveness are discussed.

Women are assuming managerial positions in growing numbers. This trend is a function of federal legislation prohibiting sex discrimination in employment and promotion practices, the affirmative action program advocated by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and changing cultural values concerning the role of women in society.

The increased number of women in management has prompted numerous researchers to compare male and female leaders on initiating structure and consideration (e.g., Adams, 1978; Day & Stogdill, 1972), group effectiveness (e.g., Eskilson & Wiley, 1976; Jacobson & Effertz, 1974; Rice, Bender, & Vitters, 1980; Rosen & Jerdee, 1973), and subordinate satisfac-

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tion with supervision (e.g., Bartol, 1974; Liden, 1985; Osborn & Vicars, 1976; Petty & Lee, 1975; Stitt, Schmidt, Price, & Kipnis, 1983). Dobbins and Platz (1986) quantitatively summarized this research and found few differences between male and female leaders.

Despite the intense investigation of sex differences in global measures of leadership, research has rarely compared the behavior of male and female leaders in specific situations. One of these situations is the manner in which the leader responds to poorly performing subordinates. This issue is extremely important since firing an employee has both psychological and financial costs. Likewise, failure to advise or to reprimand a poorly performing subordinate results in continued substandard performance.

The present study was conducted to investigate male and female leaders' responses to poorly performing subordinates. Specifically, it examined the effects of the cause for the subordinate's poor performance, sex of the subordinate, and likableness of the subordinate on male and female leaders' corrective actions.

An Attributional Model of the Corrective Action Process

Green and Mitchell (1979) have proposed that leaders use a two-step process when responding to poorly performing subordinates. In the first step of this process, leaders make an attribution for the poor performance using Kelley's (1967) covariation principle. Leaders analyze the subordinate's behavior with regard to its consistency over time, distinctiveness across settings, and consensus across employees; they then attribute the poor performance to factors internal or external to the subordinate. Building upon the work of Weiner and his students (Weiner & Kukla, 1970; Weiner, Frieze, Kukla, Reed, Rest, & Rosenbaum, 1972), Green and Mitchell predicted that leaders will attribute poor performance to the internal factors of low ability or low effort or to the external factors of task difficulty or bad luck.

In the second step of the model, leaders select a corrective response to be taken toward the subordinate. Green and Mitchell (1979) predicted that leaders will respond more punitively toward the subordinate when poor performance is attributed to internal as opposed to external factors. They realized, however, that extraneous factors such as organizational policy may restrict the role of attributions in the selection of corrective actions. In essence, these organizational constraints may "short-circuit" the relationship between leaders' attributions and their selection of corrective actions.

The relationship between leaders' attributions and the selection of corrective actions has been evaluated in numerous studies. In general, the results of these studies are consistent with predictions of the model and indicate that leaders respond more punitively when a subordinate's poor performance is