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LEADER APOLOGY: A CONSIDERATION OF ATTRIBUTION OF BLAME AND LEADER GENDER

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ABSTRACT

Error recovery is an emerging area of study in the leadership literature. Given its recency, researchers are far from identifying a set of responses for leaders to use. A somewhat obvious strategy that has gathered attention is an apology. Unfortunately, studies examining the effectiveness of an apology have yielded conflicted findings (Cushenberry, 2010; Walfisch, Van Dijk & Kark, 2013). In addition, apology effectiveness has inadequately been conceptualized in terms of whether an apology has been given or not (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010). Adding to the lack of nuance, the impact of leader gender has not been considered, despite research suggesting variations in status and expectations of leaders across gender (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ridgeway, 2001). The current study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of apologies by investigating the impact of attribution of blame and leader gender on follower perceptions of leader competence. Major findings include (1) leader error had a negative impact on follower perceptions of leader competence, (2) leader apology (following leader task error) was positively related to leader competence ratings (3) internal apologies led to higher ratings of leader competence than external apologies, (4) there was not significant effect of gender on conditions, and (5) there was no significant interaction between gender and apology.

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Introduction

When an individual assumes a leadership position, they fulfill a social role that has certain rules, responsibilities, and expectations attached to it. Interestingly, we associate very grand expectations with the role of a leader; perhaps, even seeing such roles in lights similar to that of a superhero. A long line of research has demonstrated this tendency and it has become known as "the romance of leadership." The work of Meindl and Ehrlich (1987) described this view of leadership as being "an assumption, preconception, or bias of interested observers and participants" that posits leaders as the single most important driver of all organizational functioning and activity. More recent research acknowledges the existence of such a "heroic" construal of leadership and stresses its distinction from reality; highlighting leader fallibility. According to past research, leaders must make decisions under what can be ambiguous, high-stakes, time-sensitive conditions, and these are conditions that make errors more likely to occur (Eubanks & Mumford, 2010; Hunter, Tate, Dzieweczynski & Bedell-Avers, 2011; Thoroughgood, Sawyer, & Hunter, 2013).

The scientific community's acknowledgement of the inevitability of leader error and its far-reaching consequences garnered a response that focused on *error prevention* (Eubanks & Mumford, 2010; Thoroughgood et al., 2011). This focus is evidenced by Hunter et al.'s (2011) work, which discusses decades of findings regarding the individual, group, and organizational conditions under which leaders err. Only recently has research begun to also consider *error response* via the investigation of error recovery tactics and each's effectiveness. The error

recovery tactic that has received the most attention has been apologies. Unfortunately, such research has been inconsistent. Some researchers have found that apologizing is more effective than not (Walfisch, Van Dijk & Kark, 2013), while other researchers have found that apologizing may be worse than not (Cushenberry & Hunter, 2010). In addition, research on apology effectiveness has been limited to a dichotomous perspective that does not adequately reflect the diversity of apologies (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010). In other words, although researchers have examined apologies from a binary perspective, the reality is that apologies are much more nuanced than this. This means that while the characteristics of leader apologies are not universal, they are currently being studied as if they are. In addition to the nuance that exists in the content of apologies, the apologizing leader's characteristics may also be an important component in understanding their effectiveness. Specifically, the gender of the leader may be relevant as Ridgeway's (2001) and Eagly & Karau's (2002) work demonstrates that the status and expectations attached to a leader varies across gender. To date, very little research has begun to consider how gender may influence apology effectiveness (e.g. Walfisch et al., 2013).

To fill these current gaps in the literature, the goals of this project are to add to the momentum of a more comprehensive understanding of apologies by differentiating apologies by attribution of blame (Kim, Dirks, Cooper, & Ferrin, 2006) and by acknowledging and furthering findings that suggest leader and gender must simultaneously be considered (Eagly & Karau 2002; Ridgeway, 2001). Overall, this project will serve as the first step to a larger project. It will encourage a focus on *error response* rather than just *error prevention*, further a more recent conceptualization of apologies (one that presents apologies as falling along an attribution of blame continuum; Kim et al., 2006) and highlight the importance of considering leader gender while investigating the effectiveness of a leader apology. I begin by defining leader error and

discussing its impact. I then dive into research on post-error recovery tactics and emphasize the importance of considering how a gender role and leader role may influence its effectiveness. Following this literature review, I present my study and results. Finally, I draw conclusions and suggest implications.

Literature Review

Definition and Types of Leader Error

The scientific deconstruction of the "romanticized" leader, created a new area of study: *leader error*. Similar to most developing research areas, leader error research began by attempting to define the main construct of interest. Initial attempts incorporated definitions from a long history of "general" error literature such as, Reason (1990), Senders & Moray (1991), Zapf and Reason (1994), and Zhao and Olivera (2006). However, it soon became apparent that these definitions were too narrow, and that they failed to incorporate all of the components of leader error. In response, Hunter et al. (2011) proposed a more complete definition, which suggests that leader error entails three components: 1) it is avoidable; it is not a result of random chance, 2) it can be an action, or inaction, and 3) it is an unintended outcome.

Leader error research has also attempted to differentiate between types of leader errors by applying various models of leader behavior, such as the two-factor model, which includes a task-oriented and a relationship-oriented behavior dimension (Likert 1961, 1967; Stogdill, 1974). More recently, a three-factor model has been applied which adds a change-oriented behavior dimension (Yukl & Taber, 2002). These models have been criticized for their exclusive focus on leader behaviors pertinent to subordinates (Hunter et al., 2011; Thoroughgood et al., 2013). Such criticism led to Hunter et al.'s application of Fleishman et al.'s (1991) leader behavior taxonomy, which resulted in a comprehensive leader *error* taxonomy. Hunter et al. (2011) identified four "broad behavior categories," through which leader error occurs, with three-to-four "specific leader behavior categories" falling under each. Specifically, they proposed that leader error

occurs through the following leader behaviors: (1) information search and structuring, (2) information use in problem solving, (3) managing personnel resources, and (4) managing material resources. Unique to Hunter et al.'s (2011) work is the investigation of how various types of leader errors relate to each other and how variables within different contextual levels influence leader error. From a research perspective, establishing a comprehensive leader error taxonomy prompts later researchers to ask more appropriate questions; ultimately, furthering our understanding of the topic. From a practical standpoint, developing a comprehensive leader error taxonomy helps leaders identify the specific behaviors through which leader error occurs and thus, gives leaders the opportunity to prevent them from occurring. Building off Hunter et al.'s (2011) leader error definition, the current research defines leader task-error as "an action or inaction that is avoidable and results in an unintended outcome" and that arises during behaviors related to goal achievement. Moreover, leader task-error is an error that arises during task-behaviors such as information search and structuring, information use in problem solving, and managing material resources.

The current research chose to narrow its focus on *task* errors because of Cushenberry's (2010) conceptualization of leader error as high- and low-impact *task* errors and her finding that subordinates' perceptions, willingness to follow leader, and involvement in organizational citizenship behavior are all negatively affected by leader errors and consequential outcomes that directly affect them. In Cushenberry's (2010) study she conceptualized leader error as a *task* error that immediately impacted subordinate's ability to perform. Specifically, in the low-impact leader error was conceptualized such that a confederate leader forgot a scheduled training video and informed participants that they would have to read an admittedly more difficult meta-analysis article. The high-impact error condition was identically conceptualized except,

participants were also told that to receive credit, they would have to come in the next day and watch the training video. Thus, the current study found it important to first examine a leader *task* error that had an immediate repercussion for subordinates.

Impact of Leader Error

Until recently, researchers have focused extensively on *why errors occur*, examining leader characteristics, such as leader cognition and leader expertise; group characteristics, such as groupthink and team climate; and organizational characteristics, such as culture surrounding error management and communication structures (Hunter et al., 2011). Although focusing on *why errors occur* was beneficial in that it provided leaders with insight that could help lessen the chances of error, it portrayed error as something that could be eliminated altogether. Acknowledging the inevitability of leader error was an important step for leadership research because it encouraged the field to consider how leaders can best *respond to the errors* they commit.

In order to identify the most effective ways for leaders to respond to their mistakes, research first had to determine the consequences of those mistakes. As emphasized in previous research, leader error can affect a wide range of individuals associated with the organization, such as consumers, employees, stakeholders, and the organization itself (Cushenberry, 2010; Eubanks & Mumford, 2010; Thoroughgood et al., 2013). Consider the mistakes of contemporary leaders such as Heather Bresch, CEO of Mylan, who received backlash from the general public, consumers, and the government for increasing the price of EpiPens; Steve Penny, former CEO of USA Gymnastics, who resigned from his position in wake of news that he knew of and

intentionally refrained from reporting the sexual abuse of the program's gymnasts; or Oscar Munoz, CEO of United Airlines, who received widespread criticism for his insensitive response to a video of a passenger being forcibly removed. While the leader error examples listed here involve top-level leaders, it is important to note that leaders at *all levels* commit errors that can have substantial repercussions for a variety of connected constituencies. In acknowledging that leader error occurs across levels of leadership, it is important to recognize that the individuals who are most often directly affected by such errors, regardless of the level, are subordinates.

Although popular press tends to focus on consumer outrage and profit loss, leadership research has acknowledged the direct effect on subordinates and focused on follower response, as it is essential to the leadership process. As noted by Thoroughgood et al. (2013), how a follower views a leader is important for the "influence" component of leadership. Consequently, the follower response that has received the most attention has been "follower perceptions of leader." Some of the perceptions that have been examined include leader competence, effectiveness, liking, as well as recommended punishment and willingness to follow (Cushenberry & Hunter, 2010; Thoroughgood et al., 2013; Weaver, 2016). In Thoroughgood et al.'s (2013) study, the researchers utilized implicit leadership theories to hypothesize a negative relationship between leader error and measured follower perceptions. Consistent with their hypotheses, the researchers found that leaders who committed errors were viewed as less competent, less desirable to work for, and less effective. Similarly, other leader error studies that measured follower perceptions have also provided evidence for the detrimental effects of leader error on follower perceptions (Bedell, 2008; Follmer, Neely, Jones, & Hunter, 2019; Thoroughgood et al., 2013; Weaver, 2016).

In line with these previous research findings, I focus on the influence of leader errors on followers' perception of leader competence. Specifically, I expect to find a negative relationship between leader error and perceptions of leader competence. In other words, when a leader commits an error, subordinates will view that leader as less competent.

H1: Leader task error will have a negative impact on follow perceptions of leader competence.

Post-Error Recovery Tactics

As mentioned in the previous section, acknowledging the infallibility of leaders in the scientific community led to an interest in studying *error response.* Given the recency of this interest, research is far from a definitive list of "leader recovery tools." In fact, there are few empirical leadership studies that examine recovery tactics and their effectiveness.

Leading the way, Cushenbery (2010) utilizes Zhao and Olivera's (2006) work to propose and investigate four leader recovery tactics: apologizing, blaming one's circumstances, blaming others, and ignoring mistakes post high- and low-impact leader errors. Pertinent to the current research, her results revealed that "apologizing" led to the lowest ratings of leader competence and willingness to follow; while, "blaming others" led to the highest ratings of leader competence and willingness to follow, which is a finding that is in opposition to those hypothesized in her study. Leveraging open-ended responses to understand this result, Cushenberry (2010) suggests that subordinates' attribution of fault may contribute to their reactions to errors. For instance, from a follower perspective, "blaming others" shifts the fault *away* from the leader resulting in *less* negative leader perceptions; while, "apologizing" places fault *directly on* the leader, resulting in *more* negative leader perceptions.

However, not all apologies are created equal and in reality, apologies do not exist as a dichotomous yes or no. Moreover, as Fehr and Gelfand's (2010) research suggests, apologies differ in the components that make them up and those components can be structured by an apologizer who more effectively appeals to the apology recipient. Incorporating trust violation literature (Kim et al. 2006), I define an apology as "a statement that acknowledges that an error has been committed and attributes the blame to someone or something" and suggests that apologies fall along a continuum of blame, with *internal* attribution of blame at one end and *external* attribution of blame at the other. In other words, while Cushenbery (2010) examined "blaming others" and "apology" as separate conditions, in this study I explore the possibility that a leader can simultaneously apologize and still place blame outside of themselves. Accordingly, an individual who utilizes an apology with an *internal* attribution of blame, acknowledges that an error has been made and places the blame on something *within themselves*; while an individual who utilizes an apology with an *external* attribution of blame, acknowledges that an error has been made and places the blame on something *outside of themselves*. Given that leader errors effect subordinate perceptions, the question that arises is what effect does an *internally based* versus an *externally based* apology have on subordinate perceptions?

As discussed in a previous section, followers associate leader error with leader competence, such that when a leader commits an error, followers view them as less competent (e.g. Thoroughgood et al., 2013). Cushenberry's (2010) work demonstrates that the recovery tactic utilized by a leader can also impact subordinates' perception of leader competence. She suggests that a follower's attribution of blame is important in determining the extent of the impact. Specifically, her work found that leaders who shifted blame away from themselves were viewed as more competent, than those who placed the blame on themselves (operationalized as

apology). Thus, given that leader error is associated with perceived lower levels of competence, a leader who claims complete responsibility in committing an error (*internal* apology) is likely to receive lower ratings of competence, than a leader who shifts responsibility away from themselves (*external* apology).

H2: Internal apologies will lead to lower perceptions of competence---in comparison to external apologies.

Gender and Leadership

Gender has become a relevant variable for leadership researchers to study in part because of the application of expectation states theory (Ridgeway, 2001) and the theoretical development of role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In Ridgeway's (2001) work, expectation states theory is used to explain the "glass ceiling phenomenon" surrounding female leaders. It suggests that status beliefs and group stereotypes create hierarchies of social significance, general competence, and valued skills. Expectations of self and other's performance may rely on these hierarchies depending on the saliency of the status or group identity in the current situation. For instance, in mixed-sex work environments, where gender is salient, hierarchies related to gender status beliefs and stereotypes emerge and impact one's own behavior and one's evaluation of another's. In hierarchies related to gender, women are ranked below men in social significance, general competence, and valued skills. As a result, women encounter difficulty in gaining access to and exercising leadership.

Similarly, Eagly and Karau (2002) utilize social role theory to better understand the simultaneous effect of gender role expectations and leader role expectations. Specifically, they

examine how the status and power attached to leadership, aligns or conflicts with the beliefs and expectations attached to different gender roles. According to their work, people associate *agentic* qualities (i.e. assertive, controlling, confident) with the leader role, as well as the male gender role; while they associated *communal* qualities (i.e. gentle, interpersonally sensitive, nurturant) with the female gender role. As a consequence of the perceived conflict between leader role expectations and female gender role expectations, women are viewed less favorably than men as potential leaders. Further, women who engage in leader behaviors are perceived less positively than men who engage in leader behaviors.

Research has also identified several phenomena that emerge as a result of perceived role conflicts and expectation violations. For instance, Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, and Nauts' (2012) work discusses the "backlash effect" which describes a "catch-22" that women face: If women demonstrate agentic qualities they will be perceived as competent and capable of leadership, but at the same time, less likeable and hirable. In addition, Vandello and Bosson's (2013) work refers to a phenomenon known as "precarious manhood" which is the idea that manhood is perceived as "hard earned, yet easily lost." Their work suggests that when men display feminine qualities they are punished, such that their manhood is taken away from them and perhaps, the benefits that accompany masculinity.

Given that apologies are interpersonal in nature and associated with the popular notion of being "the kind thing to do," apologies can be considered as more communal (rather than agentic) in nature; which thereby, aligns with the female gender role, and conflicts with the male gender role and the leader role. Therefore, I expect that a leader apology will lower perceived leader competence and gender will moderate the relationship such that a female leader apology will have a weaker effect than a male leader apology. Moreover, for female leaders, I expect to

find that their use of an apology will only somewhat lower subordinates' perceptions of such leader's competence. Alternatively, for male leaders, I expect to find that their use of an apology will greatly lower subordinates' perceptions of such leader's competence.

H3: Gender will moderate the effect of apologies such that for female leaders, apologies will have a weaker effect on competence than male leaders.

Methods

Participants

A total of 301 undergraduate students were recruited from the psychology department subject pool at a large Northeastern University and randomly assigned to one of four conditions (male/female leader, internal/external apology). Participants received course credit as compensation for the completion of our survey. To ensure the quality of the data I incorporated four attention checks in the survey. Participants were excluded from the data if they missed two attention checks. A total of 23 participants were excluded. In addition, this sample was collected as part of a larger project with similar, yet distinct objectives. Therefore, in order to remain within the scope of the current study, I removed participants who were exposed to a different manipulation; leaving 137 participants. Of the 137 participants, 32.8% were male, 66.4% were female, and 0.4% indicated "other." Further, 79.1% reported that they were Caucasian, 4.7% reported that they were African American, 6.8% reported that they were Hispanic and latino(a), 15.1% reported that they were Asian, and 1.4% reported that they were Alaskan Native and Native American. Participants were able to select multiple ethnic and racial identities. As a result, the percentages do not add up to 100%.

Procedure

Once logged onto the psychology department subject pool system, participants could view a brief description of the current study. After successfully proceeding through screening questions and signing informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions (male/female leader, internal/external apology) and then they began the survey.

The first few sections of the survey set up the work scenario. Participants were given background information on the organization, an introduction of the leader, and a brief description of his/her role (employee). Following the background information, participants answered manipulation checks and baseline items. Next, participants were given information about the specific situation. Moreover, participants were informed that their boss asked them to analyze collected data and to summarize the findings in a presentation that would be communicated to the boss during a one-on-one meeting later in the week. Then, participants were presented with the leader task error, in which he/she discovered that their boss failed to forward an email with updated data and that they would need to redo the work they had done. The last section, displayed the leader's apology.

After reading the vignettes (See Appendix A), participants were asked to respond to survey measures, manipulation check items, and demographic information.

Manipulation Development

Leader apology. Participants were randomly assigned to either an internal apology condition or an external apology condition. Adapted from Kim et al.'s (2006) work, the *internal* apology condition involved the leader acknowledging that an error had occurred, and attributing

the blame to something *within* themselves; while the *external* apology condition involved the leader acknowledging that an error had occurred, and attributing the blame to something *outside* of themselves. Specifically, the *internal* apology condition stated, "*I wanted to pull you aside and apologize for not forwarding the updated data. I didn't forward it as soon as I received it and I let it slip out of my mind. It is completely my fault and it won't happen again*;" and the *external* apology condition stated, "*I wanted to pull you aside and apologize for not forwarding the updated data. Work has been stressful. The issues with our intranet system have made routine tasks more complicated. Hopefully they get that figured out soon. This won't happen again*."

Leader gender. In our leader introduction section of the survey, I manipulated gender by including the name of the leader, as well as a photograph of the leader. Following the work of Thoroughgood et al. (2013), I utilized "Bill Smith" for the male leader name and "Barbara Smith" for the female leader name. In regards to leader pictures, I gathered pictures from Adobe Stock and ensured that the leaders' environments looked as similar as possible. Further, each photo was checked to confirm that the leaders in the photos were perceived to be relatively equal in age, race and attractiveness. The specific photos can be found in Appendix A.

Manipulation Checks

Gender. Prior to survey deployment, the leader pictures were checked to ensure roughly similar levels of perceived age, race, attractiveness, and competence.

Apology. Prior to survey deployment, the study vignettes were presented to undergraduate and graduate research lab members who were asked to indicate their perceptions

of apology type. Responses suggested a perceived distinction between internal apology and external apology.

Task error. The final survey included an item to test whether participants perceived a task error. Participants were first asked to rate the statement, "My supervisor made a mistake" (*error* manipulation check) and then the statement, "My supervisor forgot to send me important information" (*task* error manipulation check) on a 5-point likert scale (1-Strongly disagree, 5-Strongly agree). Running a one sample t-test to check the manipulation, I found a significant difference between responses to the *error* manipulation check (M = 4.67, SD = 0.70) and the *task* error manipulation check (t(135) = 78.4, $p < .001$).

Measures

Perceived leader competence. To measure follower perceptions of leader competence, the survey included a scale adapted from Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Jun Xu (2002). Participants were asked to indicate to what extent (1-Not at all, 5-Extremely) each listed characteristic (competent, confident, independent, competitive, and intelligent) described their supervisor. The reliabilities of this scale for each measurement point were acceptable ($\alpha_1 = .77$, $\alpha_2 = .81$, $\alpha_3 = .82$).

Results

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 stated that leader task error will have a negative impact on follow perceptions of leader competence. To determine the relationship between leader task error and perceptions of competence a repeated measures one-way ANOVA was run. Results revealed that there was a significant difference between pre task error perceptions and post task error perceptions, ($F(1, 136) = 253$, $p<.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.39$). Prior to the leader task error, participants gave higher ratings of leader competence ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.66$) compared to the ratings given post leader task error ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 0.88$). This provides support for Hypothesis 1. See Appendix B Table 1, Figure 1.

Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 stated that internal apologies will lead to lower perceptions of competence---in comparison to external apologies. To identify the relationship between type of apology and perceptions of competence a one-way between-subjects ANOVA was run. The results (found in revealed that there was a significant difference between perceptions of those in the internal apology condition versus those in the external apology condition, ($F(1, 132) = 6.79$, $p = 0.01$). However, inconsistent with what was expected, *external apologies* led to lower perceptions of

competence (M = 3.37, SD = 0.79), in comparison with internal apologies (M = 3.73, SD = 0.82), thus Hypothesis 2 was not supported. See Appendix B, Table 2, Figure 2.

Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3 stated that gender will moderate the effect of apologies such that for female leaders, apologies will have a weaker effect than male leaders. To test a moderation of gender on the relationship between leader task error and perceptions of competence a 2 x 2 mixed ANOVA was run. Results revealed no significant main effect of gender ($F(1,135) = 96.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.41$) on competence, and no significant interaction between gender conditions and the apology ($F(1, 135) = .62$, $p = .432$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$), which means that hypothesis 3 was unsupported. Unexpectedly, results also demonstrated that the assumed negative direction of the relationship was in fact, a positive relationship ($F(1,135) = 96.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.41$). Specifically, the mean competence ratings (across genders) post-apology was higher (M = 3.54, SD = 0.82), than the mean competence rating pre-apology (M = 2.86, SD = 0.88), suggesting that apologies had a positive main-effect, rather than negative main-effect on competence. See Appendix B, Table 3a and 3b, Figure 3a and 3b.

Discussion

General

This study set out to investigate the effectiveness of an apology post leader-error. By utilizing a new and more comprehensive conceptualization of apologies and by considering the impact of leader gender, the current study acknowledged that not all apologies are created equal and found that they may not be perceived equally either. Consistent with previous research (Cushenberry & Hunter, 2010; Thoroughgood et al., 2013; Weaver, 2016) results show that leader error will lead to lower follower perceptions of leader competence. Thus, it is important for leaders to realize that their errors may have an impact on how their followers view them.

Novel to this study, I also examined the effect of an apology's attribution of blame on ratings of leader competence. Results revealed that those in the internal apology condition significantly differed from those in the external apology condition. *However, they did not differ in the way I predicted*. I assumed that following a leader apology, perceptions of leader competence would continue to lower. Moreover, I assumed that in addition to enduring a "hit" for committing an error, leader competence would endure *another* "hit" following an apology. I based this assumption on the "acknowledgement of error" component of the conceptualization of an apology. I assumed that apologies draw attention to the fact that a leader did something wrong and thus, I expected an apology to lower perceptions of leader competence. Building off of this expectation, I predicted that an *internal apology* would lead to lower perceptions of competence than an *external apology*. In contrast with these expectations, the results suggest that leader competence ratings *do not decrease following an apology*. Instead, following an apology, leader

competence ratings slightly increase from the post error level. Further contrasting my expectations, it was found that *external* apologies led to lower perceptions of competence than internal apologies. Moreover, the degree to which an apology increases the lowered perceptions of competence, depends on the attribution of blame, such that *internal* apologies increase lowered perceptions slightly higher than external apologies. In other words, following an error, *internal* apologies led to higher ratings of leader competence, than external apologies.

A possible explanation for the unexpected positive relationship between apology and perceptions of leader competence relates to Fleishman et al.'s (1991) leader behavior taxonomy. As discussed in the literature review section, they proposed a four-factor model of leader behavior that included information search and structuring, information use in problem solving, managing personnel resources, and managing material resources. An implicit connection among each factor is an awareness of surroundings. In order for leaders to search, structure, use, and manage information, personnel, and resources, they must be cognizant of what is occurring around them. Given that the current study conceptualized leader apology such that it incorporated an acknowledgement that an error had occurred, it is possible that the leader's apology signaled that the leader was vigilant of the environment and thus, led to slightly higher ratings of leader competence.

To explain the unexpected finding that *internal* apologies led to higher ratings of leader competence than external apologies it may be important to consider an emergent field of research: authentic leadership. According to Walumbwa, Avolia, Gardner, Wernsing, and Peterson (2008), highly publicized private and public sector scandals have led the general public to demand that leaders behave in morally and ethically appropriate ways. Thus, utilizing an *internal* apology may fit the general public's current expectations and demands of leaders, such

that the general public wants leaders who take responsibility for their actions. This line of thought was relatively supported in participant's responses to a qualitative item that was included in the survey. All participants were asked to type a response regarding their thoughts on whether their leader's apology was effective. To exemplify the support I found, a participant in the *internal* apology condition responded, "Yes, it is always great to see people be accountable. I think that is a great leadership quality and encourages everyone else to do the same."

The study also examined whether gender moderated the relationship between leader apology and perceptions of competence. Inconsistent with expectations, there was no significant interaction between gender conditions and apology. There are many reasons why this could be the case, several of which have to do with study design. For example, the design only utilized photos to manipulate leader gender. It may be that gender was not salient enough in the manipulated scenario. I attempted to create saliency of gender by including a picture of each leader and by using stereotypical feminine and masculine names. However, Ridgeway's work (2001) suggests that gender saliency may more so depend on context, which is consistent with a finding of Thoroughgood et al. (2013) who found that the gendered context influenced perceptions of leader effectiveness following an error. Alternatively, these unexpected results may be explained by considering research related to authentic leadership. Given the emerging desire for an honest and transparent leader (Walumbwa et al., 2008), it could be that *all* leaders, regardless of gender, are expected to apologize following an error.

Several propositions can be made from these findings. First, our results provide support for the notion that it is not sufficient to rely on a dichotomous perspective when examining the effectiveness of an apology. Moreover, our study suggests that whether an apology is effective or not, may depend on its attribution of blame. Therefore, future research should incorporate more

nuanced conceptualizations of apologies. Second, in an effort to recover from the negative effects of committing an error, both male and female leaders should consider utilizing an apology. It is important to mention however, that although apologies were found to slightly increase leader competence ratings from post-error levels, they did not increase leader competence ratings to pre-error levels. Thus, apologies did not completely "erase" the negative effects of committing an error. As such, future research should investigate whether leader competence ratings can return to original perceived competency levels and if so, how. It may be beneficial to investigate various combinations of recovery tactics and develop longitudinal studies. Third and finally, while employing an apology, leaders should consider its components and be mindful of the idea that different dimensions of each component may differ in the extent of their effect. For instance, the results of this study revealed that *external* apologies had a stronger effect than internal apologies.

Theoretical Implications

Our findings suggest that if researchers are to truly capture the complexity of the relationship between recovery tactics and outcomes, they must draft theories that move beyond a dichotomous perspective and incorporate the potential dimensions of various recovery tactics. For instance, the effectiveness of apologies may depend on something more than whether it is employed. Thus, it is reasonable to question whether other recovery tactics have different dimensions to them. Our results also suggest that more research needs to be conducted to determine the necessity of incorporating certain individual attributes into theory. Although our study did not find a significant interaction of gender, this could be the result of the unequal

gender composition of our sample. Lastly, our study should encourage the inclusion of an "outcome" component. Although our current study was limited to follower perceptions, it raises questions as to what leader, subordinate, and organizational outcomes are related to recovery tactics.

Practical Implications

Consistent with previous research, our results indicate that leader error will negatively impact follower perceptions of leader competence. Leaders can then choose to respond and attempt to recover. Research has not yet put forth a definitive list of recovery options. However, the current study suggests that an apology may be effective, in that it may mitigate the negative effect of a leader task error. Specifically, an apology may raise lowered perceptions of competence. As mentioned previously though, perceptions of competence may not be raised back to pre error levels. Thus, it is important for leaders to recognize that an apology may not be enough to "erase" the negative effects of committing an error and that they will be operating in a context in which their competence is not perceived as being at "full capacity."

In addition, it is crucial for leaders to recognize that not all apologies are created equal. When crafting an apology, leaders must take different components into consideration, such as the attribution of blame. Followers may respond better to an *internal* apology than an external apology because an *internal* apology signals to followers that their leader possesses attributes that they value and desire in their leaders. Simply questioning whether an apology was made is insufficient. Instead, leaders must thoughtfully craft an apology that appeals to their followers.

Finally, although our study did not provide support for the importance of considering gender when employing an apology, leaders should not dismiss it, or other personal characteristics, quite yet. In the meantime, as researchers conduct more studies to investigate the importance of personal characteristics of both the leader and the subordinates, as well as other contextual factors, leaders should keep in mind that those factors *can* affect the effectiveness of their apology. Being conscious of the potential influence of contextual variables will encourage leaders to pay attention to their surroundings and perhaps, as a result, will help leaders identify and understand the patterns particular to their setting.

Limitations

While interpreting the results of the current study, it is important to keep the following limitations in mind. First, as noted in the discussion, our sample was 66.4% female and 32.8% male. Therefore, our results may be more reflective of the expectations of female subordinates. Second, I conducted a vignette study, which may limit the generalizability of results. Moreover, participant responses provided in a simulated scenario may differ from participant responses provided in real-life scenarios. However, acknowledging this weakness of a vignette study, I put substantial effort into the ecological validity of each vignette and conducted several manipulation checks. Third, the effects found in our study were the result of a manipulated scenario that involved only one mistake, followed by an apology. It is possible that the effects I found may differ in longitudinal studies. Moreover, an apology may be more or less effective in the long-run, than in the short-run. Fourth, despite research findings indicating differential effects of type of error (e.g. Weaver, 2016), the parameters of the current study were limited to only one type of

error: *task error*. Thus, it may be the case that apology effectiveness varies across error type. Fifth and finally, although research findings demonstrate that leader error effects a wide range of perceptions (Cushenberry & Hunter, 2010; Thoroughgood et al., 2013; Weaver, 2016), the current study only investigated subordinate perceptions of *leader competence*. Therefore, the effects found cannot be generalized across different subordinate perceptions such as their forgiveness of the leader, and their willingness to work with the leader in the future.

Future Research

The findings of the current research support the move beyond a dichotomous perspective of apology effectiveness. Therefore, future research should continue to test the new conceptualization presented in this work. In addition, future research should work to determine the importance, or lack thereof, of certain individual characteristics. To do so, researchers should recruit a more gender-equal sample and should also examine a variety of characteristics such as age and race. Further, although the current study only examined *leader* characteristics, it may be beneficial to explore the effects of subordinate characteristics as well, as subordinates are crucial components in the leadership process. Future research should also begin to identify different recovery tactics, being careful not to portray each in an overly simplified manner. Finally, future research should work to investigate the relationship between recovery tactics and various leader, subordinate, and organizational outcomes.

Conclusion

Although it is important to investigate how to *prevent* leader error, failing to also study how to *respond* to error is a disservice to leaders. Leaders are human and as such, they will inevitably commit an error. Therefore, leaders need to develop an understanding of how they can best respond to the errors they commit. Responding to this exigence, the current study, along with several other studies, have begun to examine the effectiveness of leader error recovery tactics. This current study investigated the effectiveness of apologies and found that utilizing an apology as a recovery tactic may be more complicated then whether it is employed. Specifically, attribution of blame (internal vs external apology) may influence the extent of apology effectiveness. Additionally, apologies are potentially one of many recovery tactics. Therefore, future research must explore the different options that leaders have and in doing so, be mindful of potential nuances.

Appendix A

Vignettes

Situational Context

You are an employee of the organization Precision Unlimited. You've been working at this organization for a little over two years, but recently switched to a new team. You've been on this team for about 3 months now.

Female Supervisor Introduction

This is your supervisor, Barbara Smith.

Barbara has a Bachelor's degree and 10 years of experience with Precision Unlimited. She's been managing the team of 6 that you work on for about 3 years now.

Male Supervisor Introduction

This is your supervisor, Bill Smith.

Bill has a Bachelor's degree and 10 years of experience with Precision Unlimited. He's been managing the team of 6 that you work on for about 3 years now.

Leader Task Error

Thursday has arrived. You have invested a lot of time and effort preparing for your one-on-one meeting with Bill/Barbara. You even put some other pressing tasks on hold to make sure all your analyses and slides are perfect.

After arriving at Bill’s/Barbara’s office and exchanging formalities, you begin to present your work. You go over the detailed analyses that you conducted and explain your thoughts on how he/she can best communicate this information to the client.

As you are giving your presentation, you notice Bill/Barbara intently examining your slides, then his/her computer, with a slightly confused look on his/her face.

You conclude your presentation with a slide asking for comments, questions, and concerns. Bill/Barbara inquires about the data that you have based your presentation on and says, “These aren’t the client’s numbers.” Upon checking his/her email account, he/she explains that he/she failed to forward you an email from the client with updated data on Monday.

Leader Internal Apology

Later that day, Bill/Barbara comes by your desk and asks if you have a moment to speak with him/her again. You return to his office down the hallway. After shutting the door, Bill/Barbara says...

“I wanted to pull you aside and apologize for not forwarding the updated data. I didn’t forward it as soon as I received it and I let it slip out of my mind. It is completely my fault and it won’t happen again.”

Leader External Apology

Later that day, Bill/Barbara comes by your desk and asks if you have a moment to speak with him/her again. You return to his/her office down the hallway. After shutting the door, Bill/Barbara says...

“I wanted to pull you aside and apologize for not forwarding the updated data. Work has been stressful. The issues with our intranet system have made routine tasks more complicated. Hopefully they get that figured out soon. This won’t happen again.”

Appendix B Tables and Figures

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Competence Ratings at Study's 3 Time Points

	Pre Error Comp.	Post Error Comp.	Post Apology Comp.
N	137	137	137
Mean	4.11	2.86	3.54
Standard Deviation	0.662	0.883	0.820

Table 2

One-Way ANOVA Hypothesis 2 Descriptives

	Apology Cond	N	Mean	SD	SE
Post Apol. Comp.	Internal	65	3.73	0.823	0.1021
	External	72	3.37	0.785	0.0925

Table 3a

Repeated Measures ANOVA Hypothesis 3 Descriptives

			95% Confidence Interval	
Gender Condition	Mean	SE	Lower	Upper
F	3.25	0.0905	3.07	3.43
M	3.15	0.0905	2.97	3.33

Table 3b

Repeated Measures ANOVA Hypothesis 3 Descriptives

				95% Confidence Interval	
Gender Cond	Time Point	Mean	SE	Lower	Upper
F	Post Error	2.95	0.102	2.75	3.15
	Post Apology	3.55	0.102	3.35	3.75
M	Post Error	2.76	0.104	2.55	2.96
	Post Apology	3.54	0.104	3.33	3.74

Figure 1

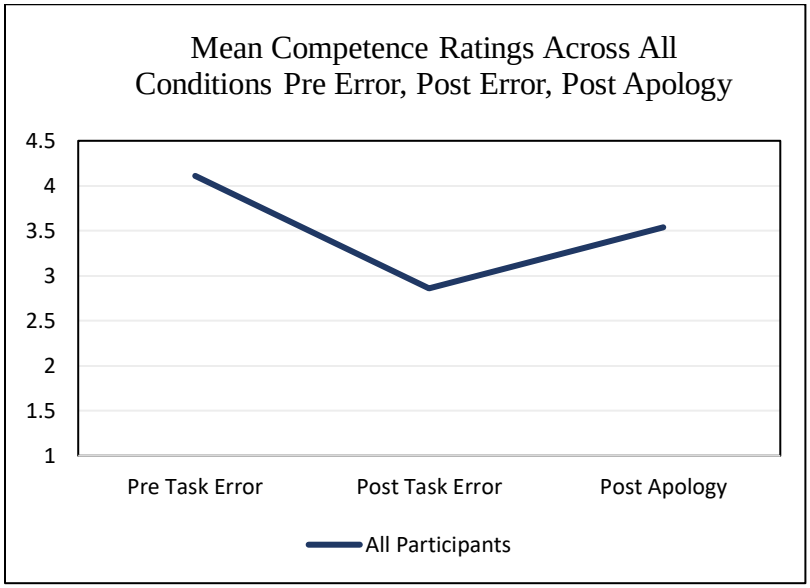


Figure 2

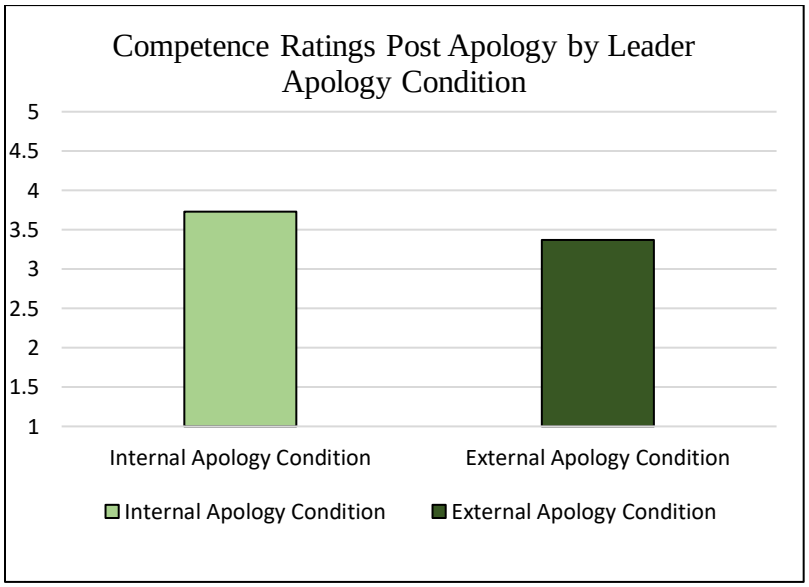


Figure 3a

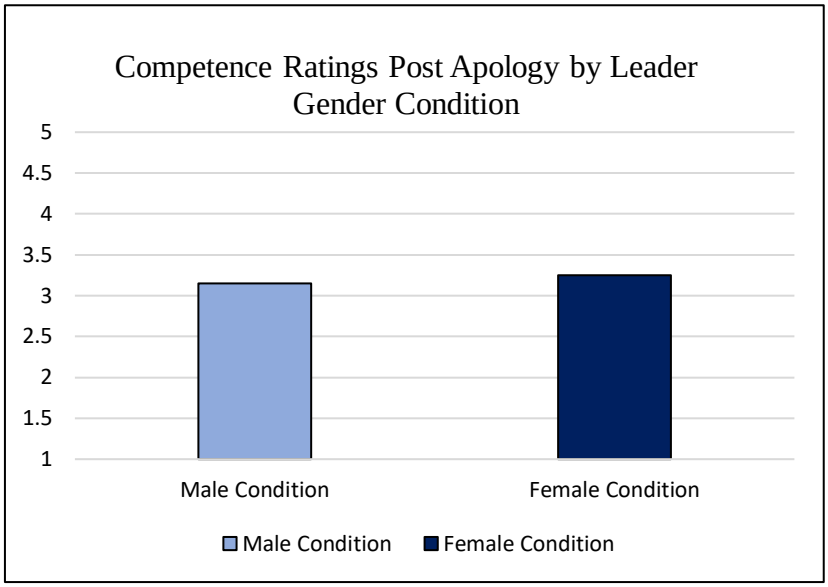
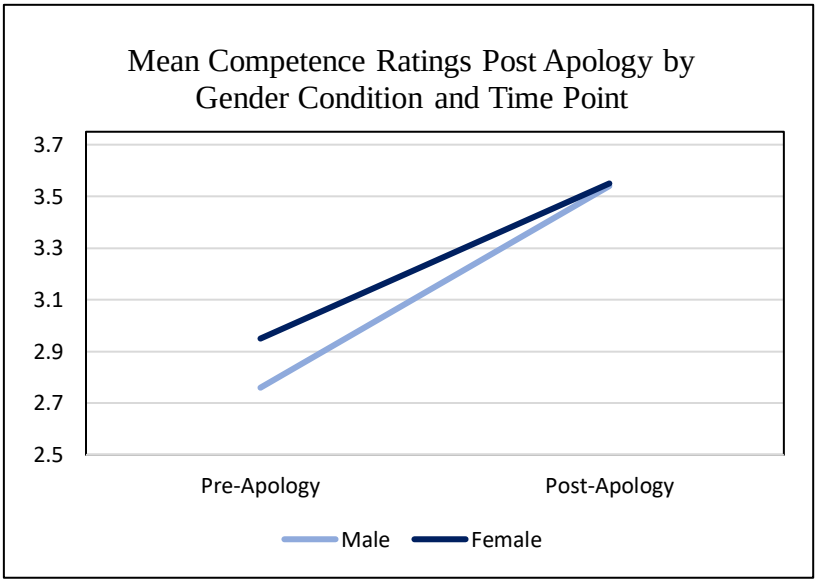


Figure 3b



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ACADEMIC VITA

EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.
Bachelor of Science in Psychology, Business Option, May 2019
Schreyer Honors College

RESEARCH IN PREPARATION

Swigart, K., **Coleman, K**., Burke, V. A., Hunter, S. Unpacking the Apology: The Effects of Apology Attributions and Gender on Perceptions of Leader Warmth and Competence. Target: Leadership Quarterly

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Leadership and Innovation Lab, Dr. Sam Hunter **Fall 2017-Present**

Leader Apologies: A Consideration of Attribution of Blame and Leader Gender

Lead researcher, Honors Thesis

- Conducted leader error literature review, collaborated with doctoral students and faculty to develop hypotheses.
- Assisted with the design and collection of data by completing the study's IRB and creating the vignettes for each of the study's 4 conditions.
- Analyzing, writing up, and presenting findings at Penn State's Psi Chi Undergraduate Research Exhibition.

Kickstarter Project

Undergraduate Research Assistant

- Contributed to literature review on originality paradox and signaling theory, collaborated in developing hypotheses.
- Worked with lab team to design a 2x2x2 lab study including helping to define study manipulations around originality, pitch quality, and product quality, and developing product pitch video scripts and video.
- Assisted faculty and graduate student in writing the study's IRB.

Teams and Decision-Making Lab, Dr. Susan Mohamed **Spring 2017**

Undergraduate Research Assistant

- Discussed constructive feedback regarding graduate students' thesis and dissertation drafts.
- Completed reference check for up-coming faculty publication.
- Participated in item-sort tasks and manipulation checks.

Human Performance Rhythms Lab, Dr. Frederick Brown **Fall 2016**

Undergraduate Research Assistant

- Coded closed-ended survey response data collected over the course of several years.
- Inputted and organized survey data in excel.

RELEVANT WORK EXPERIENCE

Leadership Development Center, University Park, PA **Fall 2018-Present**

Undergraduate Research Assistant

- Attend weekly meetings to discuss action items regarding previous and upcoming assessment centers.
- Assemble packets containing essential participant and assessor materials for the day of the assessment.
- Facilitate coordination of participants and assessors throughout the assessment.
- Present participants with required material at synchronized times, both in-person and online.

Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, MA **Summer 2018**

Improving Schools: The Art of Leadership and Family Engagement in Education Program Intern.

- Created participant, faculty, facilitator, and coordinator name badges, name tents, program certificates, program hours via Microsoft mail merge.
- Constructed seating charts and small groups via Microsoft Excel.
- Mailed participant pre and post program materials.
- Purchased faculty requested session materials.
- Verified copyright licensing for session materials by researching PPE's current licenses and contacting publishers.
- Responded to needs of participants, faculty, facilitator, and coordinators as they arose during program.

Huck Institutes of Life Sciences Assessment Center, University Park, PA. **Spring 2017-Fall 2017**

Assessor

- Rated graduate students' performance during an interview, a research presentation, and an impromptu elevator pitch using BARS.
- Compiled assessment data and generated a typed narrative feedback report.
- Edited competency BARS used in each portion of assessment to ensure reliability and validity.
- Collaborated with assessment team to revamp recruitment efforts.

FMP Consulting, Arlington, VA. **Summer 2017**

Internal Strategic Human Capital Planning Project Intern

- Streamlined general online recruitment efforts by organizing and re-activating accounts.
- Identified local and national resources to partner with for recruitment initiatives.
- Explored newly accessed databases for potential business expansion.
- Revised the order and edited the content of the internal onboarding process.
- Created a storyboard for employee training video.
- Collaborated with co-worker to develop a systematic evaluation of revised interview process.

VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

Habitat for Humanity Penn State Chapter, University Park, PA. **Fall 2016 – Spring 2017**
Member

- Unloaded and organized new donation shipments at local Habitat for Humanity ReStore.
- Installed insulation and built walls during a build-trip in Pittsburg, PA.
- Briefed club president on I-O psychology's understandings of selection and assessment for executive board selection process.
- Participated in Penn State's Habitat for Humanity Collegiate Challenge by traveling to Denver, Colorado to build homes over spring break.

Penn State 46-hour Dance Marathon, University Park, PA. **Fall 2015 – Spring 2016**
Dancer Relations Committee Member

- Engaged in weekly safety trainings.
- Created and presented weekly inspiration via PowerPoint presentation.
- Participated in fundraising events throughout the year such as THON 5k.
- Provided mental, physical, and emotional support to assigned dancer throughout the 46-hour dance marathon.

RELEVANT SKILLS

- Microsoft Office (Excel, Word, PowerPoint)
- SPSS proficient