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Restoring Trust in Organizations and Leaders

*Enduring Challenges and
Emerging Answers*

EDITED BY

Roderick M. Kramer

Todd L. Pittinsky

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Understanding Threats to Leader Trustworthiness

Why It's Better to Be Called "Incompetent" than "Immoral"

■ KIMBERLY D. ELSBACH AND
STEVEN C. CURRALL

■ INTRODUCTION

A person who is perceived as "trustworthy" is predicted to behave with honesty, fairness, proficiency, and compassion (Currall, 1992; Currall & Epstein, 2003; Mayer & Davis, 1999; Mayer et al., 1995). Such perceptions are important to organizational leaders, as they must routinely convince followers to take risks, follow ambiguous paths, and sacrifice their own personal gains for the good of the organization (Davis, Schoorman, Mayer, & Tan, 2000). In turn, organizational researchers have found that perceptions of leader trustworthiness improves team and organizational performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002).

Recently, theorists have suggested that trustworthiness perceptions may fall into two broad types (Kammrath et al., 2007): (1) *integrity- or morality-based trustworthiness* (i.e., the perception that a leader can be counted on to "do the right thing" because he or she adheres to a set of acceptable behavioral principles) and (2) *competency-based trustworthiness* (i.e., the perception that a leader be counted on to competently do his or her job because he or she has the appropriate skills and abilities). These two types of trustworthiness perceptions may be especially relevant for leaders because they align with two common leadership styles. As Wojciszke (2005, p. 157) summarize:

Morality and competence constitute two separate and basic clusters of traits in the perception of leaders (Chemers, 2001), and these clusters define the two classical styles of organisational leadership: relation-oriented and task-oriented. The two trait types appear frequently in voters' open-ended commentaries on political candidates in various countries (e.g. the US; Kinder & Sears, 1985; or Poland; Wojciszke & Klusek, 1996). They also constitute two basic clusters in the perception of political leaders, and president evaluations along these two dimensions are much better predictors of president approval than purely evaluative global attitude towards the president (Wojciszke & Klusek, 1996).

Empirical and anecdotal findings also show that trustworthiness perceptions based on morality versus competence have different meanings for observers (Butler & Cantrell, 1984; Elsbach & Eloffson, 2000; Pancer, Brown, & Barr, 1999;

Schindler & Thomas, 1993) and may require different strategies for repair (Kim, Dirks, Cooper, & Ferrin, 2006). Specifically, it appears that the effects on trustworthiness perceptions of *immoral behavior* (defined as doing something that violates moral norms such as cheating, lying, stealing, or abusing others [Cherrington & Cherrington, 1992]) are more damaging than the effects of *incompetent behavior* (defined as lacking necessary skills or abilities to do something properly, including lack of both technical and interpersonal skills [Menuy, 2005]).

In support of this notion several studies involving leaders' letters to shareholders have found that audiences react positively to leaders who take responsibility for performance outcomes of their organizations, even if those outcomes are negative (Salancik & Meindl, 1984; Staw et al., 1983). These findings suggest that audiences are highly forgiving of lapses of competence in leaders, as long as it appears that the leaders were in charge (Meindl & Erlich, 1987; Sutton & Galunic, 1996). By contrast, numerous case examples (Jeff Skilling and Enron, Martha Stewart and Martha Stewart Inc., Angelo Mozilo and Countrywide Financial Corporation) have shown the devastating effects of lapses of morality by organizational leaders—including the demise of their organizations (Lin, Che, & Leung, 2009).

A recent illustrative example of the more severe damage done by lapses in morality versus lapses in competence involves cases of two U.S. college football coaches. In the first case, Texas Tech University football coach Mike Leach was quickly fired in late 2009 following an event that damaged his morality-based trustworthiness (he allegedly mistreated a player who had suffered a concussion), despite his firm denial that he did anything wrong or different from the norms at other schools and despite the fact that he was widely-perceived to be a highly-competent coach (Blaney, 2009). By contrast, in 2004 University of Colorado football coach Gary Barnett was kept on as coach following events that damaged his competency-based trustworthiness (he was accused of poorly supervising his players on and off the field of play, resulting in sexual assault charges by a former female player). Because he was found to not have "knowingly" promoted or sanctioned any unethical actions, Barnett was only temporarily suspended from his job, and eventually reinstated (Reid, 2004a). In the first case, Coach Leach was seen as competent but also as "unethical," "arrogant," and "insubordinate"; and was subsequently, fired. In the second case, Coach Barnett was accused of being "stupid" and making "poor decisions," but was not seen as unethical, and was retained.

Together, these findings and cases suggest that perceptions of leader trustworthiness may be easier to repair following acts that are perceived as incompetent than following acts that are perceived as immoral. But why? That is, *what are the cognitive underpinnings of trustworthiness perceptions of leaders that explain why it is easier for leaders to recover from lapses of competence than lapses of morality?*

In this chapter, we use psychological research on person perception to develop a model of leader trustworthiness that helps explain why it is easier to repair damage to competency-based trustworthiness than morality-based trustworthiness. We illustrate this model through in-depth case studies of the two football coaches described above. We conclude with some theoretical and practical implications of this model.

■ COGNITIVE PROCESSES UNDERLYING PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCE AND MORALITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR TRUSTWORTHINESS

Recent psychological research points to two cognitive processes that may underlie perceptions of competence and morality important to perceptions of trustworthiness. First, recent research on *spontaneous trait inference* (i.e., how observers unconsciously attribute specific traits to actors based on the observation of specific behaviors) suggests that we may unconsciously weight situational factors in different ways when assessing leader incompetence versus leader immorality (Kammrath et al., 2005, 2007; Kim et al., 2004, 2006) and may differently perceive the stability of these two traits (Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009). Second, recent research on *motivated person perception* (Peeters, 1992; Wojciszke, 2005) suggests that we may differently assess acts of immorality compared to acts of incompetence based on our perceptions of how those acts may affect our own well-being. We discuss this research in more detail below.

Spontaneous Trait Inference Following Immoral or Incompetent Acts

Trait inferences are defined as “trait knowledge about an actor that is derived from other information” such as visible behaviors (Carlston & Skowronski, 1994, p. 841). For example, observing a person cutting in line at a grocery store checkout may lead observers to infer that the person is rude. Thus, an important aspect of trait inferences is that they influence judgments of “*person attributes* and not simply *behavior interpretations*; that is they are associated with the actor and not with the behavior” (Carlston & Skowronski, 1994, p. 841).

Psychologists have produced experimental evidence that participants routinely infer a number of common traits (e.g., shy, dedicated, clumsy, conceited, honest) from descriptions of specific behaviors in specific contexts (Carlston & Skowronski, 1994; Carlston et al., 1995; Lupfer et al., 1990; Todorov & Uleman, 2004; Uleman et al., 1996). Further, psychologists have found that trait inferences are likely to be made spontaneously—that is, “without having a particular goal or even a general impression-formation intention in mind and without [observers] becoming aware that they have made an inference” (Todorov & Uleman, 2002, p. 1051). Experimental studies show that such *spontaneous trait inferences* occur both with strangers and familiar others (Carlston & Skowronski, 1994, 2005), and with relatively short (e.g., 10 minute) and long (e.g., 1 week) intervals between observation of behaviors and trait assignment (Uleman, 1999).

Research has also shown that the strategies used to infer traits from behaviors may vary considerably depending on the *type* of trait in question (Reeder, 1993; Reeder, Hesson-McInnis, Krohse, & Scialabba, 2001; Trafimow et al., 2001). In particular, Glenn Reeder and colleagues (e.g., Reeder, 1993; Reeder & Brewer, 1979; Reeder et al., 1992) have found that *morality traits* and competence or *capacity traits* are inferred in distinct ways from observations of behavior. These distinctions appear to arise because capacity traits and morality traits are “two broad

[but distinct] constructs that underlie most social judgments” (Kammrath et al., 2007, p. 452). In this way, these traits are equivalent to the morality and competence bases for trustworthiness described earlier.

Assessing Capacity Traits

Reeder (1993) defines “capacities” as skills or abilities (e.g., athleticism, artistic aptitude) that are inferred from observing performance levels on skill-revealing tasks (e.g., hitting a golf ball, drawing a picture). In this manner, assessments of capacities are similar to what trust theorists call competence.

When making inferences about capacities, observers tend to assume that high performance (e.g., a 100-mph tennis serve) is possible only from those with high capacity, while low performance (e.g., sending an easy shot into the net) is possible from those with either high or low capacity. As a result, observers consider *situational factors* (such as environmental conditions) when inferring capacities based on observations of low performance but not high performance (Reeder & Fulks, 1980). Thus, when viewing a tennis player making a poor shot, observers may not infer low athleticism if they know the player was hindered by a gust of wind (an external environmental factor). Yet, if they observe a tennis player making a great shot, they almost always infer high athleticism, because a poor athlete would not be able to make such a shot under any circumstances.

In the same way, observers may excuse poor performance by an organizational leader if they perceive an external cause was, at least partially, to blame. For example, a CEO of an oil company with drilling operations in the Gulf of Louisiana may be forgiven for a dip in profits following a hurricane that damages many of the company’s off-shore drills. Similarly, a business school dean may maintain her image of competency following a decline in her public school’s ranking if the rankings criteria were suddenly changed to favor private institutions.

Researchers have also suggested that poor task performance may be attributed to inexperience, which is a temporary and correctable condition (Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009). As a result, an act of poor task performance (i.e., a sign of incompetence) may be forgiven if the actor can claim that he or she was inexperienced, but won’t always be so (e.g., “I didn’t perform well, but this was my first time performing this task. I’m sure I’ll get better”).

Assessing Morality Traits

Morality traits include personality dimensions, such as honesty/dishonesty, that are perceived to be relatively fixed and are related to one’s moral character (Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009). When making spontaneous inferences of morality, observers appear to hold different assumptions about the meaning of positive or negative behavior than they do for capacities. Specifically, observers tend to assume that moral behavior may be displayed by individuals high or low on the trait in question (e.g., both honest and dishonest people can tell the truth), while immoral behavior is expressed only by individuals who are low on the trait in question (e.g., only dishonest people lie). As a result, rather than considering situational factors

only on the socially *undesirable* dimension of the trait (as when considering capacities), observers consider situational factors only on the socially desirable dimension of the trait when making inferences about morality (Reeder & Spores, 1983).

For instance, a woman who gives up her bus seat to an elderly man—when there is no apparent personal gain from doing so—may be perceived to be highly considerate. If, however, the same woman gives up her bus seat to an elderly man, and it is clear that she has done so because a more desirable seat has just opened up, she may be perceived as less considerate. By contrast, if a woman *refuses* to give up her seat to an elderly man, then she will be considered *inconsiderate* regardless of the situation. That is, immoral behaviors are perceived as controllable regardless of the situation.

In addition, observers tend to perceive immoral behaviors as stable and unlikely to change over time (Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009). As a consequence, first observations of immorality are viewed as highly predictive of future immorality behaviors (Kim et al., 2006).

Summary

Together, the above findings from trait inference research suggest that leader acts that are viewed as “incompetent” may be attributed, at least partially, to situational factors outside of the leader’s control (e.g., economic climate, consumer preferences) and may be seen as a consequence of temporary inexperience by the leader that may be remedied with time. By contrast, this same literature suggests that leader acts that are viewed as “immoral” are not likely to be attributed to situational factors, but instead will be seen as a consequence of stable personality characteristics that are not likely to change. As a result of these two processes, perceivers may be more critical of leader acts that are perceived as immoral than acts that are perceived as incompetent.

Motivated Person Perceptions Following Immoral or Incompetent Acts

In addition to trait inferences, which are primarily spontaneous and descriptive in nature, perceptual process that are more motivated and evaluative may play a role in forming impressions of leader trustworthiness. In particular, psychologists have suggested that self-protective motivations may guide perceptions of trustworthiness following acts of immorality and incompetence (Wojciszke, 1994).

The Importance of Leader Morality to the Well-Being of Others

Peeters (1992) refers to traits that are relevant to the well-being of others as “other-profitable” traits and suggests that observers will be more critical in evaluating those who possess these types of traits than they will in evaluating those who possess traits that are relevant only to the actor himself or herself

(i.e., "self-profitable traits"). A number of studies by Wojciszke and colleagues (Wojciszke, 1997; Wojciszke & Klusek, 1996; Wojciszke et al., 1998a, b) provide evidence that morality is almost always viewed as an other-profitable trait, while competence is almost always (but not exclusively) viewed as a self-profitable trait.

Together, these studies suggest that if a leader is viewed as spiteful and malevolent, followers may be highly critical in their global evaluations of that leader because spiteful and malevolent traits are likely to affect those followers' well-being (e.g., the leader may play favorites and retaliate against those who disagree with his or her opinions). By contrast, if a leader is viewed as a poor golfer, followers may not be as critical of this leader. A leader's poor golfing skills are likely to more profoundly affect his or her own well-being than the well-being of his or her followers, causing followers to make less negative global evaluations of this leader. Researchers have, in fact, confirmed these suggestions (Peeters & Czapinski, 1990; Vonk, 1999).

The relative greater importance of immorality (vs. incompetence) for the well-being of others has also been shown in studies of chronically accessible traits that are important in forming global impressions of others. In one study (Wojciszke et al., 1998b) respondents rated the following ten traits as most important in others: sincerity, honesty, cheerfulness, tolerance, loyalty, intelligence, truthfulness, unselfishness, reliability, and kindness. Of these ten traits, only intelligence and reliability appear to be related to competence, while the other eight are all relevant to morality.

The Importance of Leader Competence to the Well-Being of Others

Despite the above findings, the importance of a person's morality to observers may not always outweigh the importance of his or her competence. In particular, it may be argued that, if the goals of observers are dependent on the competence, but not the morality, of a leader, those observers are likely to be more interested in that leader's competence than his or her morality. In support of this notion, a study by Wojciszke, Bazinska, and Jaworski (1998a) showed that when participants were asked what kind of traits were important when deciding who would be good person in which to confide a secret, participants chose far more morality than competence traits. Also, when asked what traits were important when forming an overall impression of a person, participants chose far more morality than competence traits. Yet, when asked what traits were important when deciding who would be a good negotiator in a complex labor negotiation, participants chose far more competence than morality traits.

In terms of leader traits, these findings suggest that followers who are directly and routinely affected by a leader's decisions (e.g., employees, customers, business partners, competitors, stockholders of a competitive business) may be more interested in that leader's competency traits than his or her morality traits. In support of this suggestion, Wojciszke, Baryla, and Mikiewicz (2004) found that employee ratings of the importance of morality versus competency traits differed across two Polish organizations based on how closely employee outcomes were linked to

leader performance. In one organization—a for-profit financial services firm in which leader performance directly affected employee salaries—employees rated competency as much more important than morality to their overall evaluations of their leader. By contrast, in the second organization—a state administrative organization in which leader performance did not affect underlings—morality traits were rated as more important than competency traits to employees' overall evaluations of their leader.

Summary

Together, the above findings on motivated person perception suggest that observers will consider their own well-being when forming impressions of leaders who display incompetence and/or immorality. As a result, perceivers may be more critical of acts of immorality than incompetence when forming general impressions of leaders because the former are more relevant to their well-being than are the latter. Yet, the above findings also suggest that perceivers are goal-directed in their perceptions and may be more critical of incompetence than immorality if the former is more relevant to their personal goals. As Wojciszke (2005, p. 167) notes:

Human information processing is highly flexible and dependent on the perceiver's cognitive and motivational goals (cf. Martin, Strack, & Stapel, 2001). When the perceiver's goal pertains to the target's competence (as in the course of employment decisions) the former will be highly tuned to information on the latter's abilities. In a similar vein, when the perceiver is for some reason or another interested in the target's integrity, the latter's morality will draw his or her attention.

■ A MODEL OF LEADER TRUSTWORTHINESS PERCEPTIONS FOLLOWING PUBLIC FAILURES

The research reviewed above suggests that both spontaneous and motivated evaluations may be important in forming impressions of leader trustworthiness. Yet, this research also suggests that cognitive processes involved in forming impressions of morality versus competency are distinct and are driven by both pre-existing assumptions about the nature of these two traits and by the direct impact of these two traits on a perceiver's well-being. Based on this research, we develop a framework that explicates these divergent cognitive processes and discusses how the initial labeling of an act as "immoral" versus "incompetent" can trigger which cognitive process is followed. We then illustrate this framework through two real-life cases of leader acts—one labeled immoral and one labeled incompetent.

Theoretical Framework

Leadership failures that are great enough to be known to the public are typically covered by the popular media (newspapers, television, radio, Internet) and discussed by journalists, who often begin by labeling the failure by type. These failures generally fall into the same two categories used to describe leadership traits

described above: failures of competence or failures of morality. Such labels are used in describing leadership failures for the same reasons they are used to describe leaders in general. That is, competence and morality are the two most common traits associated with leaders and are the traits most relevant to the well-being of followers (Peeters, 1992).

Yet, the labeling of leader acts as “incompetent” versus “immoral” may have important implications for how that act and its actor are evaluated. In particular, we would argue that the initial label given a leadership failure triggers specific cognitive processes related to the nature of that failure (i.e., specific trait inferences and motivated evaluations). This critical role of labels in the evaluation of both acts and actors has been discussed and observed by researchers of labeling theory (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). As Ashforth and Humphrey (1995, p. 418) note:

[T]he imposition of a label is argued to set in motion forces which validate the label. A label applied to a perceived act (e.g., insubordination) may quickly generalize to the actor (e.g., troublemaker), such that he or she comes to be seen as someone who is likely to perform more such acts.

Based on these arguments, we predict that a leader’s act will be evaluated based on the early and consistent use of a label that denotes it as in the category of either “immoral” or “incompetent.” Once this label is given, then one of the two cognitive processes depicted in Figure 10-1 will unfold.

If, as shown in Figure 10-1, the act is initially labeled “immoral,” perceivers are likely to make spontaneous and negative inferences about the leader’s morality without considering situational constraints or forces outside the control of the leader. Further, these trait inferences are likely to be viewed as stable and unchangeable. Finally, perceivers will be motivated to be highly critical in their evaluations of the leader because immoral acts are seen as highly relevant to the well-being of others. As a consequence of these processes, perceivers are highly likely to develop negative impressions of the leader’s morality-based trustworthiness.

By contrast, if the act is initially labeled “incompetent,” perceivers are likely to make spontaneous and negative inferences about the leader’s competence that include consideration of situational constraints or forces outside the control of the leader. Further, these trait inferences are likely to be viewed as changeable (and able to be improved) over time. Finally, perceivers will adjust the negativity of their evaluations based on how closely they perceive their fates to be linked to the leader’s performance. As a consequence of these cognitive processes, perceivers—especially those who are not closely associated with the leader’s organization—are less likely to develop negative impressions of the leader’s competency-based trustworthiness.

Case Illustrations: A Tale of Two Coaches

To illustrate our framework and its consequences for leaders, we next describe two cases of leaders who failed publicly—one who committed an act that was initially labeled immoral, and one who committed an act that was initially labeled incompetent.

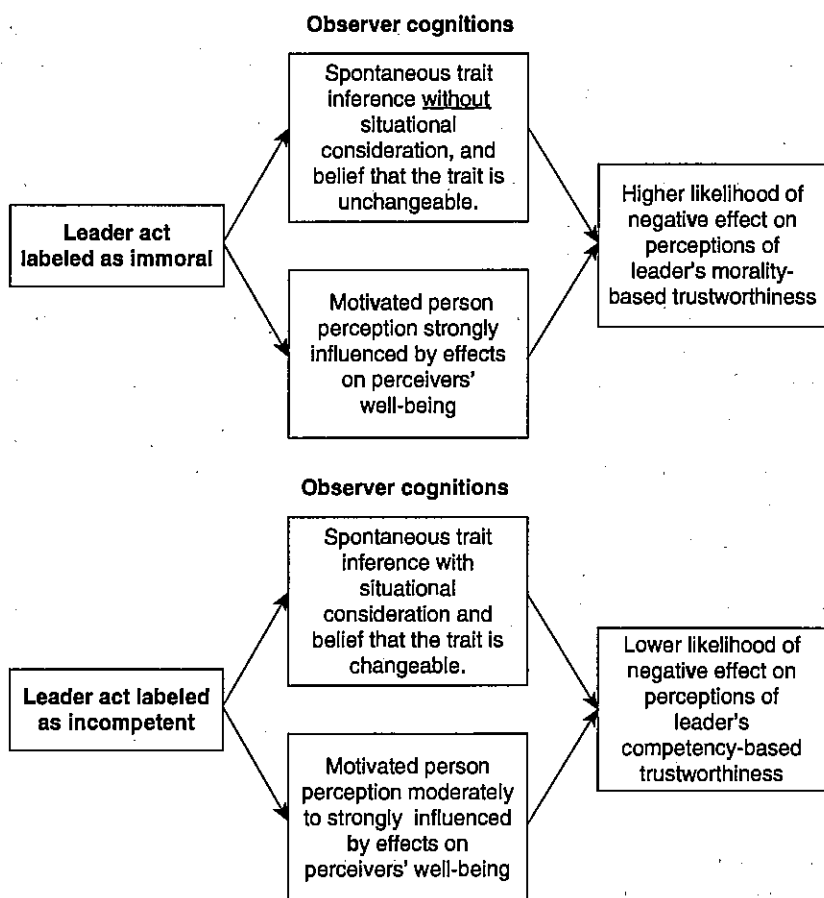


Figure 10-1 Effects of immoral and incompetent acts on perceptions of a leader's morality-based and competency-based trustworthiness

An Act of Leader Immorality: The Case of Coach Mike Leach

By December 2009 Mike Leach—head football coach at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas—had been through a tough but successful year. Early in the year, Leach had negotiated a lucrative new coaching contract that included a sizeable bonus for staying on as head coach over the next year. Leach had then led his Red Raider football team to an 8-4 record for the season, placing them third in the Big 12 Conference and getting them selected to play in the Valero Alamo Bowl, scheduled for Jan. 2, 2010. By all accounts, things were going well for the coach—but that was about to change.

Background. Long considered an outsider to the game (he never played college football), Leach had become known as an adept strategist with a sometimes quirky

personality (he apparently loved pirates and had lectured his team on the history of Caribbean pirates in the past). Leach's atypical pedigree included a J.D. from the Pepperdine University School of Law and a Master of Sports Science/Coaching from the United States Sports Academy (Anonymous, 2010a).

Before coming to Texas Tech in 2000, Leach served as the offensive coordinator under legendary coach Bob Stoops at Oklahoma, and as the offensive coordinator at the University of Kentucky under head coach Hal Mumme. In his early coaching career, Leach's "spread offense" helped college superstars like Tim Couch (Kentucky) and Josh Huelgel (Oklahoma) to become top NFL draft picks. Leach's success continued at Texas Tech, where, as head coach, he produced nine-win seasons in 2002, 2005, and 2007 and an eleven-win season in 2008. In 2008 Texas Tech defeated Texas, then #1 ranked, and Leach was chosen as Big 12 Coach of the Year and Associated Press Coach of the Year. On Nov. 21, 2009, Leach became the all-time winningest coach in Texas Tech history with a victory over Oklahoma (Anonymous, 2010a). Later that month, Texas Tech was invited to play in the Alamo Bowl against Michigan State University.

The event. On Dec. 16, 2009, football player Adam James—who happened to be the son of former NFL player and ESPN football commentator Craig James—suffered a concussion during practice. According to accounts printed in the *Lubbock Avalanche Journal* (Williams, Jan. 3, 2010), Adam James was diagnosed by team physician Dr. Michael Phy, who told him to miss practices for the coming week. The next day, James came to observe practice—as is the custom for injured players—in street clothes and sunglasses, and began walking around the practice field in a slow and nonchalant manner. When asked about his sunglasses, James apparently said that he was told to wear them by the team physician to help deal with his headaches and light sensitivity, both after-effects of the concussion. Reports indicate that Coach Leach was angry about James' behavior and apparel and thought that James was faking the concussion (Staff Reports, Dec. 29, 2009). Later reports revealed that Coach Leach already believed that Adam James was lazy and had a poor attitude based on his efforts during practice (Evans & Thamel, Dec. 31, 2009). Further, Leach appeared to have become weary of what he claimed was meddling by Adam James' celebrity father to garner Adam more playing time (Evans & Thamel, Dec. 31, 2009).

Sworn affidavits given by Dr. Phy and athletic trainer Steve Pincock (Williams, Jan. 3, 2010) describe the actions then taken by Coach Leach. According to these affidavits, Coach Leach told Pincock something to the effect of "lock his f—— p—— a— in a place so dark that the only way he knows he has a d— is to reach down and touch it." (Williams, Jan. 3, 2010). Pincock also noted:

Leach further told me to have him stand in the dark during the entire practice. He did not want James on the field, and he did not want James in the training facility. He did not want to see James. He wanted James to be uncomfortable. (quoted in Williams, Jan. 3, 2010)

The affidavits then note that James was taken to the sports medicine/athletic training shed and objects were removed so James could not sit or lie down, in keeping with Leach's orders.

Pincock said that when practice ended two to three hours later he let James out of the shed and apologized to him. As he put it:

I told James that I was sorry for having to place him in a dark shed but that these were Leach's instructions. I do not agree with this form of treatment for anyone, and I discussed this with James. (quoted in Williams, Jan. 3, 2010)

Two days later, on Dec. 19, 2009, James came to practice again. According to Pincock, Coach Leach instructed him again to place James in a dark shed. Because the team was now practicing at the stadium, and not the practice field, James was put in the media room and anything that a person might sit on was removed, except for two tractor tires. Also, according to Pincock, a student trainer monitored James to make sure he was standing the entire practice.

Regarding these two incidents, Dr. Phy's sworn affidavit notes that:

In spite of the fact that James may not have been harmed by these actions, I consider this practice inappropriate and a deviation from the medical standard of care. (quoted in Williams, Jan. 3, 2010)

Similarly, Pincock claimed that the treatment was atypical and inappropriate. As he noted:

[I don't know of any other Tech players] ever being placed in a darkened shed or room similar to James . . . Other players who have sustained concussions in the past were sometimes placed in the physician's examination room with the lights dimmed, or in the weight room or athletic training room . . . I feel that Leach's treatment of James was inappropriate, and I did not agree with it. However, I felt I had to follow the instructions of the head coach. (quoted in Williams, Jan. 3, 2010)

The next day, Dec. 20, 2009, James' parents filed a complaint with the university about the treatment of their son following his concussion. The university president and athletic director then met with Coach Leach and discussed the allegations. They also asked him to sign an apology to Adam James and to agree to a set of specific guidelines regarding his treatment of players. Leach refused to sign the document and was suspended on Dec. 28, 2009, five days before his team was to play in the Alamo Bowl.

Labeling Leach's actions as "immoral". Immediately following the suspension of the 2008 AP Coach of the Year, the popular press picked up the story of Mike Leach and Adam James. In numerous accounts published in major U.S. newspapers, as well as in commentary and interviews on national television, reporters gave their assessment of Leach's alleged offenses. In many of these accounts, Leach was called "brilliant" (Sherr, DallasNews.com, Dec. 29, 2009), "smart" (Schad, Jan. 28, 2009), and "revered" (Staff, *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 29, 2009)—labels that suggested he was anything but incompetent. Yet, at the same time, his alleged actions were called the result of "arrogance" and "disdain" for player health and well-being (Sherr, DallasNews.com, Dec. 29, 2009). These comments labeled the coach's acts as immoral and detrimental to the well-being of his players. As one reporter noted:

[Leach] . . . sent a message . . . to the rest of his players. Concussions may be the most underreported injuries in athletics, which makes them all the more dangerous. When a

coach in effect tells his players this is how he deals with head injuries, it hardly encourages them to say they might have a problem. (quoted in Sherr, DallasNews.com, Dec. 29, 2009)

In response, Leach flatly denied any wrongdoing, despite signed affidavits from the team physician and athletic trainer. Further, he claimed that his suspension was due to the influence of ESPN analyst Craig James and the university's desire to get out of paying him his expected bonus (Knott, Dec. 30, 2009). Finally, he criticized Adam James and downplayed his injury. Through his lawyer, Ted Liggett, Leach claimed that Adam James was a "disgruntled student athlete that, like many, was not happy with his playing time" and called his injury a "mild concussion"—suggesting that it was somehow not a true concussion (Associated Press, SI.com, Dec. 28, 2009).

Yet, statements by the press made it clear that an act labeled as immoral, such as mistreating a student athlete with a concussion, would not be excused by situational factors (such as ulterior motives by the university, athlete, or parents). As one reporter noted:

Adam James was diagnosed with a concussion. His coach mocked the prescribed treatment. Other than that, you can believe all the scenarios and conspiracy theory you like, and it won't make any difference. Even if Tech officials did hold a grudge against Leach over past sins and his ugly contract negotiations, he'd deserve this suspension. Even if Adam James' father were not an ESPN commentator and former college football star, Leach would deserve it. Even if Leach were not such an entertaining character whom I enjoy interviewing, he'd deserve it. (quoted in Staff, DallasNews.com, Dec. 29, 2009)

Leach responded to the bad press by filing a court motion that would have allowed him to coach the Alamo Bowl. But just before the motion could be heard on Dec. 30, 2009, Texas Tech fired him (Blaney, Dec. 31, 2009). A statement released by Texas Tech gave the following explanation for Leach's firing:

The coach's termination was precipitated by his treatment of a player after the player was diagnosed with a concussion. The player was put at risk for additional injury. After the university was apprised of the treatment, Coach Leach was contacted by the administration of the university in an attempt to resolve the problem. In a defiant act of insubordination, Coach Leach continually refused to cooperate in a meaningful way to help resolve the complaint. He also refused to obey a suspension order and instead sued Texas Tech University. Further, his contemporaneous statements make it clear that the coach's actions against the player were meant to demean, humiliate and punish the player rather than to serve the team's best interest. This action, along with his continuous acts of insubordination, resulted in irreconcilable differences that make it impossible for Coach Leach to remain at Texas Tech. (Red Raider Football, posted Jan. 8, 2010) [emphasis added]

This statement made it clear that acts meant to "demean, humiliate, and punish" a student athlete were the primary reasons for Leach's firing. These actions are widely considered unethical or immoral when committed by a college coach toward a young student athlete (Brady, Jan. 20, 2010) and further validated the

initial labeling of the act. As Jim Haney, executive director of the National Association of Basketball Coaches, noted:

When coaches are accused of abusing players it often is worse in the public's view than cheating. (quoted in Brady, Jan. 20, 2010)

Two days after his firing, Mike Leach did a live interview on ESPN where he attempted to give his side of the story. In this interview with ESPN analyst Rece Davis on Jan. 1, 2010, Leach continued to criticize Adam James, calling him “lazy” and saying he had a “sense of entitlement.” Further, he claimed to have no regrets for his handling of the situation and couldn’t think of much that he would do differently, if given the chance.

These statements only solidified the immoral label given to Leach’s acts and appeared to further damage his morality-based trustworthiness. For example, immediately following the interview, ESPN commentator Trevor Matich claimed on the air that Leach was “radioactive” in terms of his attractiveness to colleges, while analyst Rob Parker said, “coaches go out of their way to take responsibility, but he’s trying to weasel his way out of this.” Parker went on to call Leach a “stubborn, arrogant, vain man.” In his newspaper column, Dick Weiss of the *New York Daily News* echoed these comments, complaining that Leach “didn’t sound like he cared about the implications of his words” and said he came across as “less concerned about a player’s health when he is no longer useful to the team” (Weiss, Jan. 3, 2010). Finally, *New York Times* columnist George Vecsey chastised Leach for his comments and lectured that “football does not exist in some ethical vacuum” (Vecsey, Jan. 5, 2010).

The case of Coach Mike Leach clearly demonstrates the severe repercussions of committing an act that is labeled immoral. In the following case, we contrast these effects with the consequences to a leader who is labeled incompetent. This is the case of coach Gary Barnett.

An Act of Leader Incompetence: The Case of Coach Gary Barnett

Gary Barnett’s University of Colorado football team had been in trouble before. In complaints dating back to 2001, football players had been accused of sexual assault and providing alcohol to minors during off-campus recruiting visits (Knott, Feb. 20, 2004). In these cases, the players in question were dismissed from the team and/or charged with felonies when the evidence supported such charges. There was, however, little evidence that the head coach, Barnett, was knowingly involved in such acts, and he denied any wrongdoing. But this time was different: this time Coach Barnett opened his mouth.

Background. Gary Barnett had been a successful high school head coach and college assistant coach for 20 years before becoming the head football coach at Northwestern University in 1992. He left Northwestern in 1999 after turning the team—which was perennially at the bottom of the Big Ten Conference—into a consistent winner that made it to the Rose Bowl in 1995. In 1999 Barnett became the head football coach at the University of Colorado, taking over the program

from former coach Rick Neuheisel, whose tenure at Colorado had been plagued by NCAA recruiting violations resulting in the loss of 25 scholarships in his final year as head coach. Colorado was looking to Barnett to repair the tarnished reputation of its football team and athletic department (Anonymous, 2010b).

The event. On Feb. 18, 2004, SI.com (the online version of *Sports Illustrated* magazine) published an interview by former Colorado place kicker Katie Hnida. In the article, Hnida claimed that while she was a member of the Colorado football team in 2000, she endured verbal harassment, groping in the huddle, other players exposing themselves to her, and finally, a rape by a teammate. She also said that at the time she didn't report the harassment and assault to Coach Barnett because she was afraid he'd kick her off the team. She claimed, "He didn't want me on the team in the first place. I thought for sure he'd kick me off." Finally, she said that she didn't report the assault to the police in part because she was scared that such an action would anger Barnett. In addition, Hnida's father claimed in the article that, at the time, he told both Coach Barnett as well as Athletic Director Dick Tharp about the sexual harassment of his daughter (he did not know about the rape at the time) and said he got nowhere talking with them. The article also reported Barnett's and Tharp's denials of any knowledge of the sexual harassment or assault of Katie Hnida, and Barnett was quoted as saying, "Not one time did I ever see or hear about anybody treating her wrong." (Reilly, Feb. 18, 2004).

The next day, Feb. 19, 2004, Coach Barnett's response to media questions about the Hnida story were published. When asked about the allegations of sexual harassment and assault leveled by Hnida, Barnett responded:

There isn't a shred of evidence [to back up Hnida's rape allegation]. (quoted in O'Keefe & Siemaszko, Feb. 19, 2004)

Further, he inexplicably commented on Hnida's playing ability, claiming that Hnida was an "awful" player who couldn't compete in a "guy's sport." As he put it:

Katie was a girl. Not only was she a girl, she was terrible. There was no other way to say it. She could not kick the ball through the uprights . . . It's a guy's sport, and [the male players] felt like Katie was forced on them. It was obvious Katie was not very good. (quoted in O'Keefe & Siemaszko, Feb. 19, 2004)

These remarks, which appeared to be a completely inappropriate response to questions about an alleged rape, motivated University of Colorado President Elizabeth Hoffman to put Coach Barnett on paid leave (Johnson, Feb. 20, 2004). Although President Hoffman said she was "reserving judgment on what Barnett knew [about the Hnida case]" (O'Driscoll & Brady, Feb. 19, 2004), she was angered by his remarks about Hnida's playing ability. As *USA Today* reported,

"I have told him [Barnett] in no uncertain terms that was an unacceptable remark," Hoffman told the Associated Press. "You have a rape allegation here. That's a very serious criminal allegation. It's simply inappropriate to essentially blame the victim, which is what he did." (quoted in O'Driscoll & Brady, Feb. 19, 2004)

Labeling Barnett's actions as "incompetent." Now it was the media's turn to judge Barnett. In the eyes of many newspaper reporters and concerned onlookers, there

was plenty of blame to go around for the apparent sorry state of the University of Colorado football program. In several articles, reporters blamed the institution, including the University of Colorado president and athletic director, for creating a culture in which the transgressions of football players went unnoticed and unreported (Araton, Feb. 20, 2004; Editorial Staff, Feb. 20, 2004; Knott, Feb. 20, 2004; Reid, Feb. 20, 2004b). Yet, across all of these accounts reporters refrained from directly accusing Coach Barnett of deliberate wrongdoing; instead, they continually called the coach incompetent.

For example, *New York Times* reporter Harvey Araton blasted Barnett about his comments concerning Katie Hnida's kicking ability in response to the rape allegations. As he put it:

Barnett is either a blithering idiot or oblivious to the world outside the lines. (quoted in Araton, Feb. 20, 2004) [emphasis added]

Similarly, an editorial in the *New York Times* reported:

The response to [Hnida's] charges by Colorado football coach Gary Barnett was breathtakingly dumb. (quoted in Editorial Staff, Feb. 20, 2004) [emphasis added]

And *Washington Post* writer Tom Knott asserted:

Barnett was sent to his home, with pay, following his asinine comments . . . If the man [Barnett] had one active brain cell, he might have shown some compassion to Hnida . . . He is dumber than dirt, that is for sure, and he should be thankful that the school president, a woman, no less, is still allowing a paycheck to be dispatched his way. (quoted in Knott, Feb. 20, 2004) [emphasis added]

Even President Hoffman was surprised by Barnett's lack of understanding. As she noted:

It was my feeling . . . that he did not understand the seriousness of the comments he had made the day before. (quoted in Jenkins, Feb. 20, 2004)

On the evening of Feb. 19, 2004, Coach Barnett apologized for his earlier remarks about Hnida's kicking ability in a live television interview with CNN's Larry King. Yet, even this apology was perplexing and suggested a poor understanding of the issues. In response to King's question, "What did [comments about Hnida's kicking ability] have to do with her charges of being raped?" Barnett was quoted as saying:

I said the wrong thing about Katie . . . And I was trying to communicate that we cared about Katie. (quoted from *Larry King Live*, Feb. 19, 2004)

It's unclear how attacking Hnida's kicking ability could have been perceived by Barnett to express "care for her," and this statement only further validated the charges of incompetence leveled against Barnett. Barnett himself noted:

I took a question that maybe I shouldn't have taken. I should have cut my conversation off sooner. (quoted from *Larry King Live*, Feb. 19, 2004)

At the same time, Barnett defended himself against claims of immorality, saying that he had done everything he could to prevent sexual harassment by his players. As he told King:

When I came to Colorado in 1999, I made a decision to change the culture there, around academics and around recruiting. I introduced a 124-page manual that talked about behavioral and character expectations including . . . sexual harassment, alcohol abuse, and specifically date rape. You know, we brought in speakers, nationally-known speakers on sexual harassment and diversity. We bring in every night during our summer camp for three weeks from 9:00-10:00 at night, we go through every single section of that book with our players.

Further defenses of Barnett's integrity came from former players. As one ex-player noted:

He [Barnett] has faithfully directed the participants in this program to the highest level of integrity and moral discipline. (quoted in Hutchinson, Feb. 20, 2004)

Even legendary Florida State University football coach Bobby Bowden (no stranger to recruiting violations himself) came out in defense of Barnett's character, saying:

I know this. You can't get many men much better than ol' Gary Barnett. Talk about a good man. And I know he's got good morals. (quoted in Staff, Wire Reports, March 3, 2004).

As suggested by our model, these early labels (incompetent but not immoral) appeared to set the tone for evaluations of the coach's trustworthiness in two ways. First, because Barnett's incompetence was viewed as potentially threatening to the well-being of many university constituents (e.g., it could hurt faculty and students by damaging the university's reputation, and it could hurt women, in general, because of the stereotypes it supports), many observers were strongly negative in their assessments of the coach's competency-based trustworthiness (Michaelis, Feb. 20, 2004). As one commentator reported:

The attitude toward women and sex at Colorado and in much of college football is archaic, dangerously so. What's needed at that university, and a few others besides, is a head coach with a more modern notion of what a real man is, so he can teach it properly to his players. . . . But a portrait is emerging of Barnett as a coach so out of touch that he firmly disciplined lateness or dressing out of uniform, but failed to report and alleged rape to authorities. . . . What a good modern football coach ought to be interested in creating is not a virile man, but simply a grown man, an adult who is command of himself and his impulses. Clearly, Gary Barnett is not the man for that job. (quoted in Jenkins, Feb. 20, 2004)

Another reported echoed this remark, claiming:

It is much easier to accept or celebrate the fanatic pro coach who doesn't know Jerry Seinfeld from Howard Dean or who makes ignorant, sexist remarks. The pros are not responsible for turning their macho princes loose on vulnerable young women in frat houses and dorms. (quoted in Araton, Feb. 20, 2004)

At the same time, however, Barnett's continued claims about his educational and policy efforts provided a "situational" constraint that appeared to moderate observers' negative perceptions of the coach's competency-based trustworthiness. That is, observers seemed to consider the fact that Barnett had put in place policies and educational programs to prevent recruiting abuses when evaluating his apparent "incompetence" in supervising recruiting parties. For example, one reporter noted that President Hoffman reported:

[U]nder Barnett, Colorado had substantial guidelines about monitoring high school recruits' visits to campus. (quoted in Drape, March 6, 2004)

Hoffman went on to say:

On paper, we had a stricter recruiting program than most universities. We want to make sure that now we have a nationally respected recruiting program. (quoted in Drape, March 6, 2004)

These assessments were further substantiated in May 2004, when the independent commission reported that:

There is no clear evidence that university officials knowingly sanctioned [the use of sex, alcohol, and drugs as recruiting tools] or had direct involvement. (quoted in Sink, May 19, 2004)

In the end, the panel did chastise Barnett for providing "insufficient supervision of recruits," but they did not find him to have deliberately sanctioned improper recruiting practices. Further, because Barnett was labeled "incompetent," the panel seemed to perceive that this was a changeable trait and that, over time, the coach might improve in his abilities (as suggested by our model). This ability to improve is illustrated in comments by one member of the Board of Regents, who suggests that Coach Barnett probably recognized his mistakes in hindsight. As this member remarked:

Certainly Gary said some dumb things, things he wished he wouldn't have said. I'm not saying he did everything right . . . but the report, though it shows a certain insensitivity on Gary Barnett's part, does not rise to the level of dismissal. (quoted in Kenworthy & Whiteside, May 19, 2004)

The relatively minor damage that the "incompetent" label did to Coach Barnett's trustworthiness became even clearer later that month. On May 27, 2004, President Hoffman officially reinstated Coach Barnett as head football coach at the University of Colorado (Brennan, May 27, 2004). One parent summed up the outcome as follows:

We're just glad to have our coach back. We knew Gary would be back because of his integrity. (quoted in O'Toole, May 27, 2004)

Together, the above two cases illustrate how the initial labeling of a leader's act as either "immoral" or "incompetent" can lead observers down two distinct cognitive paths toward perceptions of his or her trustworthiness. We discuss the implications of these findings below.

■ DISCUSSION

In this chapter we have argued that leader trustworthiness may be more severely damaged by lapses of morality than by lapses of competence. We have substantiated this claim with a framework of perceptions of leader trustworthiness grounded in research on spontaneous trait inferences and motivated person perception. This framework shows how the cognitive processes of observers may differ following leader acts that are labeled “immoral” versus those that are labeled “incompetent.” Finally, we have illustrated this framework through two contrasting case studies of leaders who had engaged in either immoral or incompetent acts. Our model has several implications for understanding perceptions of trustworthiness among leaders.

First, our framework suggests that forming perceptions of leader trustworthiness involves dual cognitive processes (i.e., both motivated and spontaneous cognitions) by perceivers. Dual-process frameworks—that explain interpersonal perception based on both motivated and spontaneous cognitions—have become increasingly popular among psychologists (see Chaiken & Trope, 1999). Yet, these frameworks are relatively rare in organizational research. Our dual-process framework of trustworthiness perceptions provides a model of how perception in organizational settings may be better explained by considering both motivated and spontaneous thought processes. In particular, our framework shows how observers’ differing perceptions of immoral and incompetent acts by leaders might not be explained by motivated cognition alone (i.e., these perceptions are not only based on how the acts affect follower well-being). Only when we also consider spontaneous cognitions, and understand how immoral and incompetent acts are evaluated distinctly through spontaneous trait inference processes, are we able to explain observers’ different reactions to immoral and incompetent acts.

Second, our framework suggests that the initial labels given to leader acts have important effects on how trustworthiness is assessed. As noted earlier, research on the effects of labels on person perception in organizations suggests that labels given to initial actions by a person (i.e., the first actions that many audience members are aware of by that person) may have strong effects on how later actions by that same person are interpreted (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). Our case studies and framework provide support for this research and further suggest how initial labels can set in action specific cognitive processes, both spontaneous and motivated, that lead to very different interpretations of a person’s trustworthiness. In this manner, our framework emphasizes the ever-increasing power of the popular press to frame our perceptions of leaders.

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, our model suggests that it may be less damaging for a leader to be labeled incompetent than immoral. Further, if given a choice, our framework suggests that a leader may wish to promote impressions of incompetence as a preemptive defense against potential accusations of immorality. This is a counter-intuitive but intriguing suggestion given our mythical perceptions of leaders (Meindl et al., 1985) as those who are unfailingly competent.

Yet, it may be time for such a bold suggestion. In recent years, numerous case studies (see Elsbach, 2006) have shown how the myth of the strong, competent

leader may cause those in charge to continue pursuing failing courses of action, even when it is clear that outcomes are worsening (Staw & Ross, 1981). In addition, recent research has shown that audiences are readily forgiving of mistakes that can be attributed to “honest incompetence”—defined as human limitations and fallibility due to bounded rationality (Hendry, 2002). These findings suggest that protecting the image of unfailing competence may be overemphasized by leaders. Our framework adds one more argument to this rationale by suggesting that incompetence is a far preferable label to immorality when things go badly, because incompetence is seen as both situationally dependent and temporary, while immorality is seen as an always-controllable and stable personality trait.

In conclusion, our framework of trustworthiness perceptions adds to our understanding of this most valuable image by illustrating how two distinct cognitive processes, which lead to very different outcomes for leaders, may be prompted by the simple labeling of an act. If given a choice, our framework suggests it is better to be called incompetent than immoral.

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