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LEADER ERROR RECOVERY:

APOLOGY, BLAME, & DENIAL AS TACTICS FOR REPAIRING LEADER-SUBORDINATE  
RELATIONSHIPS

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by

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## Abstract

Leaders make mistakes, and their mistakes have consequences for their relationship with subordinates. Given that errors are simply a part of rather than a digression from leadership, the emergent question becomes how leaders should respond in order to maximize recovery efforts. This laboratory based experiment examined 353 participant reactions to apologizing, blaming one's circumstances, blaming others, and ignoring mistakes as methods for recovering from error. Results indicate that blaming others had the highest subordinate ratings of leader competence, willingness to follow the leader in future projects, and subordinate organizational citizenship behavior. Subordinates were more positive in the blaming others condition than in the control condition where the leader did not make a mistake. In contrast, apologizing resulted in the lowest subordinate ratings. Participants also gave lower ratings to the leader when the mistake was a higher impact mistake vs. a lower impact mistake. These results indicate that, contrary to popular belief, an apology may not always be the most effective method of leader error recovery.

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## Introduction

“No sensible person ever made an apology.”

— *Ralph W. Emerson, 1803–1882, poet*

Within the study of leadership there has been a substantial emphasis on heroic leadership, especially the view that the leader is the driving force behind team success (Meindhl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985; Meindhl & Ehrlich, 1987; Yukl, 2006). The romanticized view of leadership has resulted in the portrayal of leaders as infallible. This heroic leadership bias is perpetuated for a variety of reasons, such as the comfort derived from the belief that the person we have elected to make decisions is the most intelligent of the group, is wholly capable, and has everyone’s best interests in mind.

Unfortunately, the heroic leadership bias may result in a false sense of comfort and security. Leaders are not immune to mistakes, and there is evidence that the complexity of their decisions may make them more prone to errors than the rest of us (Finklestein, 2003; Hunter, Tate, Dziewecynski, & Bedell-Avers, in press). This complexity is compounded by high stress and demanding environments where leaders are asked to make decisions under severe time constraints (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005; Hunter et al., in press). Moreover, given their wide range of influence, their errors tend to be more impactful and visible than those of non-leaders (Finklestein, 2003). A recent historiometric analysis of leader errors, for example, examined the biographies of eighty 20<sup>th</sup> century leaders and revealed that even outstanding leaders (e.g., presidents, military commanders) committed a substantial number of errors throughout their careers (Bedell-Avers, Hunter, & Mumford, 2008). The study found that cognitive errors occurred most frequently, but relationship errors resulted in the greatest loss of support from subordinates. Moreover, the greatest number



of mistakes were committed in the “pinnacle of power” stage for leaders, rather than during their rise from power or fall from power. Thus, within the limited research conducted, it appears that errors may be an inevitable part of leadership.

Given that errors are simply a part of rather than a digression from leadership, the emergent question becomes how leaders should respond in order to maximize recovery efforts. Tucker, Turner, Barling, Reid, and Elving (2006) describe errors as an opportunity to “construct” leadership and develop the relationship between leaders and subordinates. Although errors are an opportunity to build trust, a leader must utilize the correct error recovery tactic to regain the most trust from subordinates. In the present effort, I will examine the differential effects of leader recovery tactics on subordinates. We begin with a discussion of the range of definitions for leader errors.

### *Defining Errors*

The most widely used definition of an error is a mental or physical activity that fails to achieve its intended outcome (Reason, 1990). Errors can be the result of inaction, such as not sharing an important piece of information (Van Dyck, Frese, Baer, & Sonnentag, 2005) or an action, such as pursuing a failing product line. However, errors do not necessarily generalize across domains. Senders and Moray (1991) suggest that researchers should develop taxonomies for classifying types of errors. More specific to the present study, a leader error occurs when an avoidable action (or inaction) is chosen by a leader that results in an initial outcome outside of the leader’s original intent, goal, or prediction (Hunter, Tate, Dziewezynski, & Cushenbery, in press). The high stakes environments that leaders often encounter produce mental distractions that compete with rational thought in

decision-making (Beilock & Carr, 2005), contributing to the likelihood of cognitive errors. In addition, leader errors have the potential for far reaching impact on organizations, teams, subordinates, and stakeholders. Thus, leader errors are distinct from general errors and include contingencies that may not be present in other contexts.

### *Impact of Leader Errors*

In their positions of power, leader decisions, and thus leader mistakes, have the potential to influence a broad range of people. Kenneth Lay, CEO of Enron, provides one such example of an influential mistake. The company's bankruptcy resulted in the loss of 4,000 jobs for its employees, 28,000 jobs at Enron's auditing firm, and the retirement savings of thousands of ordinary Americans who had no direct connection to Enron (Sridharan, Dickes, & Caines, 2002). Other examples of highly impactful corporate failures include United Airline's labor dispute that resulted in thousands of canceled flights as well as injuries from Ford and Bridgestone/Firestone's tire failures (Mills, 2001). Additional far-reaching errors have been made by political leaders, (i.e., George Bush's mishandling of relief efforts after hurricane Katrina), religious leaders (i.e., The Catholic Church's reassignment rather than removal of priests accused of molestation), and even prominent researchers (i.e., rape therapy that implanted false memories). Thus, leader mistakes are much more visible and consequential than the mistakes of ordinary people.

Some have argued that errors are not necessarily negative and can sometimes lead to positive outcomes such as innovation or organizational learning (Van Dyck et al., 2005; Reason, 1990). In addition, sharing the experience of errors can prevent others from making similar mistakes, as demonstrated by the Federal Aviation Administration's

program that allows pilots to report mistakes without punishment (Senders & Moray, 1991, pp. 34). However, there is evidence that positive outcomes of leader errors are an exception rather than the rule (Bedell-Avers et al., 2008). Particularly, as described in the following sections, errors can result in a loss of subordinate trust and willingness to help the organization.

*Perceptions of the leader.* As discussed by Lord and Maher (1994), subordinates often develop leadership perceptions through automatic processing rather than a conscious evaluation of their behaviors. When simultaneous events place demands on our attention, we tend to attribute causality to the most salient factors available. A subordinate's perceptions of the leader's competence as well as their willingness to follow the leader are susceptible to these automatic processes and thus can be transformed by leader error and error recovery. For example, Kim et al. (2006) explain that a single event, whether performed poorly or well, is often enough for others to form a general perception of someone's competence.

Over time, these perceptions of the leader's behaviors are the foundation for subordinate trust, an important component of leader-subordinate relationships. Social exchange theory posits that supervisor behaviors that build trust will determine a subordinate's level of investment into the leader-follower relationship (Deluga, 1994). Subordinate trust in their leader can have many tangible outcomes. In a meta-analysis of trust literature from the past forty years, Dirks and Ferrin (2002) have demonstrated that subordinate trust in a leader contributes to the leader's success. Trust was positively related to job outcomes such as job performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and commitment to the leader's decisions, and was negatively related to

variables such as turnover intentions. In addition, Dirks and Ferrin (2002) found that trust predicts subordinate organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), another subordinate outcome that may be highly sensitive to leader errors and error recovery strategies.

*Organizational Citizenship Behaviors.* While subordinates are expected continue to perform their job duties regardless of their relationship with their leader, they still have some discretion over performing tasks that are above and beyond what is expected of them. Organizational citizenship behavior is defined as extra-role behaviors and is correlated with subordinate performance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrack, 2000). There are three facets of OCB: 1) helping behavior, 2) sportsmanship, and 3) conscientiousness (Deckop, Mangel, & Cirka, 1999). Although there has been research on predictors of OCB such as procedural justice, community context, and coworker behavior, there are relatively few studies considering the influence of leaders on employee OCB (Tomlinson, Dineen, & Lewicki, 2006). Podsakoff et al. (2000) called for more research on leader influences on OCB. More specific to the present study, there are few, if any, studies of the effect of leader error recovery on OCB.

OCB is influenced by work perceptions and attitudes. Organ and Ryan's (1995) meta-analysis of 55 studies of OCB suggest that job satisfaction and perceived fairness were correlated with OCB at approximately the same magnitude. In contrast, the meta-analysis showed that individual personality traits such as conscientiousness, agreeableness, positive affectivity, and negative affectivity were all unrelated to OCB. The results of this meta-analysis suggest that employee OCB is influenced more by contextual variables than employee individual differences. As an important component of the subordinate's context, leaders can potentially influence the frequency of employee OCB.

Recently, a couple of studies have supported leadership as a predictor of OCB. Using employees from Chinese organizations, Wang, Law, Hackett, Wang, and Chen (2005) found that positive perceptions of and trust in leaders were related to a greater tendency to perform OCB. The authors argued that Leader-Member Exchange predicts OCB because OCB fulfills the reciprocity norms created by high LMX relationships. Similarly, an application of social exchange theory (Deluga, 1994) predicts employees will do more OCB for a leader that has treated them well. Not only does OCB fulfill the exchange relationship, but the subordinate trusts that the leader will continue to provide benefits because of the leader's adherence to values such as fair treatment (Roderick & Cook, 2007, pp. 28). Other forms of leadership have also been shown to predict OCB. A study interviewing leaders from 91 German companies found that transformational leadership is correlated with subordinate OCB (Boerner, Eisenbeiss, & Griesser, 2007). More specifically, this study found that the inspirational motivation component of transformational leadership, which urges followers to place collective needs over their own, is related to subordinate OCB. Collectively, these studies underscore the leaders' ability to influence OCB through interactions with subordinates that build trust.

Although the previous studies illustrate leader influence on increasing subordinate OCB, leaders can also have a negative impact on subordinate behavior. In a study of over 1,100 bank employees, Tomlinson et al. (2006) showed that employee OCB was lowest when supervisors did not exhibit the behavior that they asked others to do. Supervisors who did not model positive standards of behavior influenced their employees to do the same. This study suggests that a leader who is perceived as blaming others for personal

gain or not taking responsibility after the occurrence of an error may result in lower levels of employee OCB.

Although it is clear that leader errors have important consequences to subordinates, there is variation in the types of errors that leaders commit. The following section differentiates between higher impact and lower impact errors and proposes that the severity of an error can influence subordinate reactions to leader mistakes.

### *Higher Impact and Lower Impact Errors*

Tucker et al. (2006) called for more research on the effect of error severity on leader recovery tactics. The effectiveness of a leader recovery tactic may be moderated by how much the error impacts subordinates. For example, a leader who apologizes for an error that is not important to subordinates may be seen as weak and insecure, which is detrimental to authority. In contrast, a leader who ignores an error that is important to subordinates may be seen as insensitive. The impact of the leader's mistakes on subordinates is an important variable to consider and may have implications for the most effective method of error recovery for the situation.

In a study of airline passengers whose flight was delayed, Folkes, Koletsky, and Graham (1987) presented a mediated model where the relationship between the impact of the airline error (how important it was for the passenger's flight to land on time) and passenger outcomes (desire to complain and intention to repurchase from the airline) were mediated by anger. Anger was highest for passengers that said it was important to them that their flight was on time.

In addition to influencing anger, higher impact and lower impact errors can differentially impact the cognitive process by which subordinates perceive the error. Tucker et al. (2006) state that individuals become more cognizant of others' behavior when trying to make sense of an abnormal situation, particularly the behavior of those in positions of authority. More specifically, Wright's (1974) experimental investigation of decision-making under stress reveals that a stressful environment increases a person's negative perceptions about a situation. Wright manipulated time pressure and distractions during a lab task where students made hypothetical decisions about buying cars based on a list of positive and negative factors. According to Wright, the decision maker simplifies information received in stressful contexts by excluding data he would otherwise consider during less stressful times, focusing attention on only the most relevant aspects of the data. The study found that people tend to accentuate negative information when they are in high stress situations. Thus, a subordinate who witnesses an error that has a more direct impact on him may perceive a leader more negatively because the leader's error affected him directly.

Lower impact errors may also have implications for leader recovery strategies. Leaders often make minor mistakes that subordinates can easily relate to, and the leader's response to these small mistakes are an opportunity to build trust with their subordinates. Confidently handling these small errors may show subordinates that the leader is capable of being calm in an unexpected situation. In these low stress situations, ignoring a minor error may be the most appropriate strategy for a leader because it is the least disruptive course of action. Subordinates may not have even noticed that the error occurred, in which

case calling attention to the error could needlessly evoke negative perceptions of the leader.

Conversely, a leader's response to a higher impact mistake may have polarizing effects on subordinates. An apology is more meaningful in a critical situation (Tucker et al., 2006), but if blaming someone else is perceived as sincere then the leader can deflect all responsibility away from himself. A response that damages subordinate trust, such as ignoring the mistake or blaming others, can influence not only trust but the subordinate's willingness to perform extra-role behaviors for the leader. As evidenced in the next section, subordinates base attributions about the leader's actions on several factors.

### *Mechanisms of Error*

What determines how subordinates perceive a leader's attempt at recovering from an error? One explanation is the fundamental attribution error (Heider, 1958), specifically the actor-observer bias. The actor-observer bias suggests that actors are more likely to attribute their own behavior to environmental causes, while observers are likely to attribute the actor's behavior to stable internal traits. Thus, subordinates are likely to attribute mistakes to the leader's personality or internal state. Meindl and Ehrlic (1987) argued that people are particularly susceptible to making both positive and negative external attributions about leaders because of a strong belief in the importance of leadership factors for organizational functioning. For example, when observers were asked to explain either high or low levels of an organization's performance, people tended to view leadership as the dominant cause without evidence for the explanation (Meindl et al., 1985).



A leader's position of power makes his subordinates more susceptible to the fundamental attribution error when considering the reasons for his actions. As argued by Berscheid, Graziano, Monson, and Dermer (1976), a leader's ability to control the perceiver's rewards and punishments makes their behavior more important to the perceiver. The perceiver is more likely to try to understand why the leader makes the choices they do so that they can predict the leader's future behavior. This gives the perceiver more motivation to analyze the causes of the leader's behavior and thus more likely to make the fundamental attribution error when there are no clear determinants for leader behavior. The fundamental attribution error is particularly likely to occur in events that are important or surprising (Martinko, Harvey, Douglas, 2007), such as when a leader makes a mistake.

When there are no clear determinants for the causes of errors, subordinates are left to make individual judgments of the leader's behaviors (Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987). In times of stress or change, subordinates become more perceptive of details they normally would not notice (Martinko et al., 2007). When considering the previous work describing leadership, it is clear that attributions are an integral part of making judgments about leader error recovery.

### *Error Recovery*

Having established that errors are a part of leadership and that their impact on subordinates can be substantial, we turn now to what leaders might do to recover from previous mistakes. This recovery, moreover, may not simply return subordinate perceptions about the leader to pre-error baseline levels, but may increase positive

perceptions in the leader. That is, it is possible for error recovery to change the results of an error from negative to positive. For leaders, skillful error recovery may provide an opportunity to enhance subordinate trust.

For example, in a study conducted by Maxham and Netemeyer (2002), banks that successfully recovered from an error had higher customer satisfaction than if an error did not occur. However, this recovery paradox only yielded gains for the short run. When multiple errors occurred, they were compounded to reduce trust and customers lost faith in the organization. Similarly, Mittal, Ross, and Baldasare (1998) demonstrated that negative performance has a greater influence on satisfaction and purchase intentions than positive performance. Each additional unit of positive performance had diminishing value. Although these studies were in customer service environments, the findings may be applicable to apply to leader and subordinate relationships. Thus, each error a leader makes has a greater impact than the last, and the negative impact of an error is greater than the impact of a positive leader decision.

Despite the importance of error recovery for leaders, there is relatively little empirical literature examining techniques for regaining the trust of subordinates. There is, however, some guidance provided by those in the applied community. For example, lawyers regularly advise their clients to avoid apologies for fear that they will be held liable for their actions (Mills, 2001). However, Hickson, Clayton, Githens, and Sloan (1992) found that 24% of malpractice suits for perinatal injuries were motivated by suspicions or recognition of a cover-up. Hospitals are now encouraging medical practitioners to be more candid about their mistakes.

Zhao and Olivera (2006) identified several behavioral responses to errors using attribution theory as well as literature from various research domains including medicine, safety climate, and emotions research. If the individual chooses to report the error, they can report it accurately, rationalize the error, or blame someone else for the error. If they choose not to report the error, the leader can try to cover it up, handle the error on their own, or ignore it all together. Error reporting, from a leadership standpoint, requires more than just conveying information about the error to subordinates. The information that the leader chooses to include, as well as the internal or external attribution they invoke in their explanation, can influence subordinate perceptions. The present study investigates four of these responses to error: apology (internal attribution), blaming the context or blaming a specific other person (external attributions), or ignoring the error altogether (no information given to subordinates). The following sections will explain these error recovery mechanisms in detail.

*Apology.* An apology is defined as a statement that acknowledges responsibility and regret for a trust violation (Kim, Dirks, Cooper, & Ferrin, 2006). Unlike causal accounts that attempt to deflect blame, an apology is an internal attribution for wrongdoing. In the past, apologies were considered a sign of weakness for leaders, but there is some evidence that this is not always true (Tucker et al., 2006). An apology may be interpreted as a sign of moral superiority instead of defeat. In this view, a strong person is no longer someone that is never wrong but someone who is wise enough to admit and to learn from their mistakes.

Previous research has suggested several other positive outcomes for apology, including forgiveness, restoring trust, reducing aggression, enhancing future relationship closeness, and promoting well being (Tucker et al., 2006). Van Dyck et al. (2005) list

several ways that apologies can be beneficial for managers and subordinates. First, a leader's apology is an invitation to talk about an error openly with subordinates, increasing understanding of high risk situations and effective error handling strategies. Discussing errors also creates an opportunity for others to help the leader manage their error through advice, time, or resources. Further, a manager's quick response to an error may reduce the negative consequences associated with it and set a good example for subordinates.

However, negative effects of apologies have also been identified. Although an apology is meant as an attempt to repair the trust in a relationship, it is also an admission of guilt and therefore a signal that the person apologizing may not be trustworthy (Kim et al., 2006). Consequently, there is often a tradeoff when choosing between admitting full responsibility for an error and deflecting the blame on other people or circumstances.

The effectiveness of apologies can differ depending on the attributions made about them. For example, a person may apologize sincerely or out of true remorse, out of concern for public image, to avoid punishment, or for many other reasons (Philpot & Hornsey, 2008). The perceptions for why the person is apologizing may influence forgiveness even more than the words the person chooses when apologizing.

It is evident that the information available between leaders and subordinates will influence how subordinates perceive an apology. In more equal-status relationships, two parties may start their relationship with ambivalence about whether they can trust each other but become more trusting as positive interactions with the other accumulate (Bottom, Gibson, Daniels, & Murnighan, 2002). However, the relationship between leaders and subordinates begin with more information than may be present at the start of other relationships. The subordinate assumes the leader's role is evidence of expertise and is

representative of the organization's goals. And although this provides the subordinate with more information to develop trust, it also increases their expectations for the leader. Those in the highest positions have the furthest to fall.

In a relationship where power is equal among both parties, either person may initiate the repair attempt after an error is made (Bottom et al., 2002). However, subordinates may not feel that it is their place to question a leader's actions, so the leader should initiate the repair attempt. Thus, the act of apologizing may have subtle differences for leaders and followers than in other relationships.

The trade-offs associated with apologies have also been examined in practical settings. In medicine, apologies are risky because a doctor's admission of guilt may be grounds for a malpractice suit. However, the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Lexington, Kentucky has implemented an apology policy for doctors who make medical errors. The policy urges doctors to discuss errors with patients even if the patient was previously unaware that anything went wrong. Shortly after the commission of this policy, a study examined the 1990-1996 time period and found 88 malpractice claims filed against the medical center. The average resolution was only \$15,600. In contrast, the national mean malpractice judgment was \$270,854 in 2001 (Rainey, Chan, & Begin, 2008).

The policy makers believe that if doctors admit that they made a mistake, patients would be more forgiving and understanding. This may be in part because, as suggested by Philpot and Hornsey (2008), the effectiveness of apologies stems from the perception that someone who apologizes is less likely to repeat the same offense. This policy was so successful that 24 states have now passed apology laws that "allow doctors and health care providers to apologize and offer expressions of grief without their words being used

against them in court” (Rainey et al., 2008). In addition to the decrease in lawsuits, another benefit to admitting mistakes in medical settings is learning from others’ errors and thus increasing organizational effectiveness (Zhao & Olivera, 2006). As figures of authority, doctors who made mistakes have had some success with apologies. It is reasonable to suggest that the same could also be true for leaders and their subordinates.

In an experimental study examining apologies, Kim et al. (2006) asked college students to make hiring decisions based on videos of accountants who discussed a mistake they made at a previous company. The results suggested that when a person’s mistake was due to incompetency, taking responsibility for the mistake resulted in higher trust than blaming others for the mistake. Thus, an apology is often the best strategy for regaining trust from subordinates.

As discussed previously, the level of impact of the leader’s error on subordinates will influence subordinate expectations and, consequently, their appraisal of the leader’s error recovery. In situations where the error was very important to the subordinate, an apology should yield the highest levels of subordinate trust in the leader and OCB behavior. The leader’s admission of guilt implies that he respects subordinates enough to discuss the error and will make an effort to prevent similar errors in the future.

*Hypothesis 1a: In the higher impact leader error condition, a leader’s apology will result in the most positive perceptions of the leader and greatest willingness to engage in OCB.*

However, the Kim et al. (2006) study and other studies where apologies had positive outcomes did not consider the error’s impact on the subordinate. When subordinates do

not feel the leader's error is important to them, they will likely not seek out an apology. In fact, bringing attention to the mistake may actually result in a loss of trust for the leader. In this situation, a leader who apologizes unnecessarily will be seen as weak and insecure, undermining his authority and status as the leader.

*Hypothesis 1b: In the lower impact leader error condition, a leader's apology will result in more negative perceptions of the leader and less willingness to engage in OCB.*

Leaders sometimes use other recovery tactics besides apologizing for errors. Choosing to deflect blame or ignoring the error altogether may also have positive outcomes for both the leader and the organization. The next two sections examine these strategies more in depth.

*Blame.* Previous studies have focused on apologies where the attribution of blame was focused internally, so that the apologizer takes full responsibility for the actions that occurred (Kim et al., 2006). However, the person responsible for an error may believe that a more effective strategy would be to shift blame away from oneself. As described by Bies, Shapiro, and Cummings (1988), there are two goals in making excuses. The first goal of an excuse is to explain why the action occurred, and the second goal is to make the action appear appropriate under the circumstances.

Managers do not want subordinates to feel resentment towards them and instead provide causal accounts for their actions. Causal accounts shift blame from oneself to one's circumstances (Lee & Robinson, 2000). By providing an explanation for why a course of action was unavoidable, the manager can reduce perceptions of injustice. People are more

punitive towards those who cause negative outcomes if they believe they could have done otherwise than when situational constraints are responsible for their actions (Folkes et al., 1987). Causal accounts can restore the manager's image, minimize the severity of the situation, and imply that the error will be rectified as conditions improve (Lee & Robinson, 2000). More importantly for the manager, excuses have been shown to reduce subordinate anger towards the boss and complaints to the manager's superiors (Bies et al., 1998).

Other reasons for giving an excuse are self-motivated. An excuse can also help the leader see himself in a more positive light. Excuses can help a person overcome self-doubt and concentrate better on their current task (Snyder & Higgins, 1988a). The excuse contributes to an increase in confidence that transfers to performance results. According to Pontari, Schlenker, and Christopher (2002), those who are given the opportunity to make excuses perform better on tasks.

Although it may help a leader to save face by blaming others, attributions of blame may have important organizational outcomes. Folkes (1984) asked people to remember when they were unsatisfied with their food. Attributions of blame toward the restaurant strongly influenced whether customers believed that they deserved apologies or refunds (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002). However, excuses for an organization's low performance were better perceived by both managers and shareholders (Lee & Robinson, 2000). They can improve morale in an organization during difficult times such as budget cuts or layoffs (Pontari et al., 2002).

In particular, excuses have important impacts on social situations and relationships. Excuses are an explanation for breaking a social contract and therefore an admission that a mistake was made. For example, Weiner, Amirkhan, Folkes, and Verette (1987) found that



giving a good excuse for coming late to an experiment resulted in other participants judging the excuse giver as more considerate, rational, and responsible than those that gave no excuse or bad excuses for coming late. Subordinates may also react in a less conflict-inducing way if they believe that the manager's mistake was unintentional (Bies et al., 1998).

A study by Lee and Robinson (2000) contradicts the notion that managers are likely to blame others for their mistakes. In a study of 30 managers, the researchers found that when participants imagined explaining a negative event to both subordinates and leaders, participants were more likely to give explanations that were internal and controllable rather than blaming others. The authors suggest that this is because the participant wants to appear in control of important decisions and resources, and an external account would undermine their credibility in getting things done in the future (Lee, 1997). The study's results show that when high status individuals gave excuses to lower status receivers, external explanations were especially ineffective. High status individuals have more stringent role expectations in regard to their control over decisions and resources, and should be more likely to use internal attributions (Lee & Robinson, 2000).

Kim et al. (2006) found that the opposite is true for opinions of competence: positive competence evaluations have more weight than negative competence information. This distinction may be in part because we believe that competence can be learned but honesty is a stable trait. Thus, when an error will undermine a leader's integrity they are advised to shift blame onto others. Merely apologizing is not enough to regain trust; it is more important not to have lost trust initially, and one way to accomplish this is not to take responsibility for the error.

Nevertheless, shifting blame away from oneself is risky because it can be perceived to be dishonest, and those that make excuses may be seen as deceptive (Schlenker et al., 2001). For a leader who has not yet built a foundation of trust, this strategy may backfire. Kim et al. (2006) notes that people give more weight to negative information about a possible integrity transgression than they would give to positive information that could increase the perception of the leader's integrity. For a leader, it is more important to avoid instances where integrity is questioned than to spend time building a positive image or simply remaining neutral. It is clear to subordinates that the leader would have much to gain from shifting blame onto someone else, and blaming others can be detrimental to trust if the perception of dishonesty is present. As noted by Benoit (1997), the actual events of an error do not matter as much as the victim's perceptions of them.

The causes described in an excuse can be separated into two categories: blaming a specific other person or blaming the general context of the situation. When blaming the context, a leader is taking some responsibility for the error but describes the contextual factors that influenced the situation. For example, a leader may explain his poor performance by saying he had a stressful week or by blaming the sinking economy. Context excuses are vague and non-specific – no one is really at fault and instead it was the circumstances that resulted in the error. In low error impact situations, subordinates may even feel sorry for the leader and work harder as a result. In higher impact situations, the excuse may not be enough to explain the error but is still an admission of guilt and is less disruptive than other recovery tactics.

*Hypothesis 2a: In the lower impact leader error condition, a leader blaming the context will result in more positive perceptions of the leader and higher subordinate willingness to engage in OCB.*

*Hypothesis 2b: In the higher impact leader error condition, a leader blaming the context will result in neutral levels of subordinate perceptions of the leader and neutral levels of subordinate willingness to engage in OCB.*

When blaming others, the excuse giver is shifting responsibility to a concrete source. In lower impact error conditions, making excuses may give the impression that the excuse giver is petty. Blaming others may reduce trust in subordinates because they may perceive that the leader cares more about protecting his image than about his relationships with other people. In addition, blaming others may be the worst recovery tactic for promoting OCB because it is the most disruptive to the social exchange between leader and subordinates. Thus, we propose the following:

*Hypothesis 3a: In the lower impact leader error condition, a leader blaming others will result in more negative perceptions of the leader and lower subordinate willingness to engage in OCB.*

In contrast, higher impact situations may yield a different outcome for blaming others. Blaming another person, if delivered in a sincere way, gives subordinates a clearer explanation for what happened than a vague reference to contextual factors. If

subordinates believe the excuse, the leader can effectively shift blame away from himself and thus regain trust.

*Hypothesis 3b: In the higher impact leader error condition, a leader blaming others will result in more positive perceptions of the leader and higher willingness for the subordinate to engage in OCB.*

*No Response to Error.* In some situations, there is no response when an error is made. This response may be a purposeful effort not to draw attention to the problem. The leader can also attempt to focus attention on other issues (Benoit, 1997). Making an error is embarrassing and leaders avoid reporting information that may make them appear incompetent. As described by Heimbeck, Frese, Sonnentag, and Keith (2003), errors are an accurate form of negative feedback and as such can reduce performance. Individuals who perceive errors as negative may choose to ignore them as a way of coping with unpleasant circumstances. Alternatively, there may be no response simply because the leader is not aware that his or her actions resulted in error (Zhoa & Olivera, 2006).

However, it is important to understand that no response is a response in itself. Weiner et al. (1987) found that providing no excuses for coming late was rated similarly as giving a bad excuse. By not addressing a situation where a leader made a mistake, they are giving the impression that a problem had not really occurred and is an ordinary behavior for them. When leaders do not take the opportunity to regain trust, relationships with subordinates may be permanently damaged.

It may be especially harmful to ignore an error when the event is important to subordinates. Benoit (1997) described recovery tactics used by businesses to respond to public accusations. He writes that “if a charge is important to the audience, or if it is repeated enough by the attackers, a business may well be forced to deal with that accusation” (Benoit, 1997, p. 183). This stresses the importance of acknowledging an error in a high stakes situation. Since ignoring an error in such a situation is risky and potentially very damaging to subordinate trust, we propose the following.

*Hypothesis 4a: When the leader ignores error in the higher impact condition, subordinate perceptions of the leader and willingness to engage in OCB will be lower.*

Alternatively, subordinates may not feel the need to have an error addressed for a lower impact error. The leader’s recovery attempt may cause a disruption that impedes performance. The leader would be calling attention to an error unnecessarily, and it is possible that the error would have gone unnoticed otherwise. Benoit (1997) suggests that it is not always necessary for businesses to respond to accusations, and can instead attempt to refocus attention on other matters. Similarly, leaders may choose to ignore an error so that is not perceived to be greater than it actually is.

*Hypothesis 4b: When the leader ignores error in the lower impact condition, subordinate perceptions of the leader and willingness to engage in OCB will be neutral.*

## Method

With such mixed accounts for the usefulness of blame for mitigating the effects of leader errors, the present study used an experimental method to study leader errors in two contexts: situations that subordinates viewed as higher impact and situations that subordinates viewed as lower impact. After committing the error, the leader used one of four recovery tactics: apology, blaming the circumstances, blaming others, or ignoring the mistake altogether. Subordinate OCB, attributions, perceptions of leader competence, and willingness to follow the leader were measured after the leader's recovery attempt. In addition, several exploratory measures were examined. These variables were derived from participant qualitative responses that were coded at the completion of the study.

The study is a 2 (impact) by 4 (recovery tactic) between-subjects design. There was also a control condition where no error was made, resulting in nine total study conditions.

### *Participants*

Students were recruited from the psychology department subject pool of a large Northeastern university and randomly assigned to conditions. There were 365 students that started the experiment and 353 students that completed it. Notably, several students became upset by the higher impact error manipulation and left the study before dependent variable data were collected. Thus, this condition had missing data that might have created stronger effects. All participants were given extra credit as compensation. The average participant age was 20 ( $SD = 2.4$ ). Participants were 80% Caucasian, 6.3% African American, 3% Hispanic, 7.4% Asian, .5% Pacific Islander, and 1.9% indicated that they were in an "other" category.

## *Procedure*

To control for potential differences, the same experimenter conducted all study conditions. As suggested by Hunt, Boal, and Dodge (1999), a student can suffice as a leader in an experimental setting and actors are not necessary. Researchers decided on a male student to act as the experiment leader. As evidenced through research by Schein (2007), the majority of US business managers are male (only 14.7% of US board seats are held by women), and samples of both managers and students believe that management characteristics are more likely to be held by men in general than by women in general. Thus, when people think about managers, they tend to think of males. Although this is an unfortunate stereotype, the authors chose an experiment leader that had prototypical manager characteristics in order to enhance the external validity of the study.

At the beginning of each study condition, the experimenter identified himself as the leader of the group. Participants completed a covariate questionnaire composed of scales measuring demographics and personality variables. Next, the leader made a five-slide PowerPoint presentation summarizing the rules and schedule for the experiment. Specifically, the PowerPoint explicitly stated that the subordinates would be watching a video and reading an abstract from an article that would help them complete a quiz about actions they can take to help the environment. The PowerPoint also explained that participants would be completing another questionnaire at the end of the study. This presentation was intended to be long enough for subordinates to have some interaction with the leader, but not too long that confounds could be introduced. In addition, the presentation enhanced the subordinate's understanding of the intended order of the study so that they would be aware when an error occurred.

Next, the experimenter explained again that participants would watch a training video from the Environmental Protection Agency that would help them complete the next task. In all error recovery conditions, the leader then discovered that he forgot to bring the DVD that was necessary for the experiment. The leader reacted with some surprise to emphasize that this event was not planned and was an error. At this point, the leader excused himself to call his lab supervisor to discuss what to do. He left the room for exactly two minutes in each condition.

In all error recovery conditions, the leader returned to explained that the study can still proceed, but the participants would have to read the entire meta-analysis on environment regulations rather than just the summary page that was mentioned in the PowerPoint. The leader acknowledged that the meta-analysis article was difficult to understand than the material in the video, but urged participants to try their best.

### *Manipulations*

*Error Severity.* In the low error impact condition, the participants were told to read the entire meta-analysis paper rather than watching the video that was planned. The high error impact condition also included these directions, but with one addition. Participants in the higher impact condition were told that in order for them to receive credit for the experiment, the lab supervisor said they would all have to come back the next morning to watch the video. All studies were run on Friday mornings, so the next morning was always a Saturday.

*Recovery type.* The leader made one of four error recovery attempts: apologizing, blaming non-specific circumstances, blaming the previous experimenter, or ignoring the



error. In the apology condition, the leader made an internal attribution similar to Kim et al.'s (2006) competence violation condition and took responsibility for the events.

Specifically, the leader said, "I'm truly sorry for not having the video, and it is my fault that you have to read this entire paper instead of just the abstract that we had planned. I just realized that I didn't pick up the video this morning like I was supposed to, and I feel really bad."

In the blame context condition, the leader did not apologize or take responsibility for his behavior. Instead, he discussed how the incident was the result of a series of unlucky events. This approach is similar to Kim et al. (2006)'s apology with external attribution, but with more emphasis on the context. The leader said, "It's unfortunate that you have to read this paper instead of watching the video, and I can't believe that this has happened after such a hectic day. I have had some car trouble this morning and was running late, and because of that I just realized that I didn't pick up the video for the experiment today. You'll have to read this entire meta-analysis instead of the abstract as we originally planned."

In the specific blame condition, the leader took no responsibility for the error and shifted all blame onto a fellow researcher. The leader said, "It's unfortunate that you have to read this paper instead of watching the video, and I can't believe that the last experimenter didn't put the video in my mailbox like he was supposed to. You'll have to read this entire meta-analysis instead of the abstract as we originally planned."

In the condition where the leader ignores the error, the leader only said, "Well, I don't have the video. You'll have to read this entire meta-analysis instead of the abstract as we originally planned." No extra explanation or apology was given.

Finally, the control condition did not have an error. The leader merely mentioned that previous sessions had watched a video, but the participants in the current session would be reading a meta-analysis instead.

After all the participants finished reading the meta-analysis and completed a letter-writing task, they were asked to complete a series of questionnaires to measure their perception of leader competence, their willingness to follow the leader, and their willingness to volunteer for another study without credit (a representation of organizational citizenship behavior).

Finally, participants were given a complete debriefing at the end of the experiment. They were informed that the leader's error was an intentional manipulation of the study. A great deal of effort was also put forth to ensure that participants in the high impact condition were properly debriefed. These participants were told at the end of the experiment that they would not have to return the next day to receive credit for the experiment. An email was also sent after each session to remind participants that they did not have to return the next day. In addition, a couple of research assistants were stationed outside the study location to debrief any participants who left the experiment early. The research assistants gave participants a written debriefing statement and also explained the study. These precautions ensured that all participants were debriefed.

### *Measures*

*Covariates.* Demographic variables included participant age, race, and the number of psychology experiments that they had previously participated in. Participants were also asked to complete the 44-item Big Five personality inventory (BFI) as controls for the

study. Participants rated items for extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness, and neuroticism on a scale of 1-5 (1=disagree strongly, 5=agree strongly). The scale has an internal consistency alpha of .83 and is a standard measure of personality. For more information about the scale's validity, see Pervin and John (2001). We predicted that conscientiousness would moderate the relationship between error recovery type and the outcome variables, especially willingness to follow the leader. As an exploratory variable, we expected that people who are conscientious would require the same from their leader, and would be more upset by the leader's error than those who are low on conscientiousness. However, there is no known evidence of the effect of subordinate conscientiousness on the perception of leader errors.

Liking is influenced by similarity between people on variables such as attitudes, personality, and demographics (Liden, Wayne, & Stilwell, 1993). It is reasonable to suggest that subordinates will be forgiving of far more impactful mistakes by a leader they like than minor mistakes by a leader they dislike. In addition, Brown and Keeping (2005) found that 22% of the variance in a measure of transformational leadership were explained by subordinate liking of the leader. Hunter, Bedell-Avers, and Mumford (2007) also supported the use of liking as a control variable in leadership studies, noting that often leadership studies do not take subordinate liking into account. Liking was measured using two items from Wayne and Ferris' (1990) Member Liking of the Leader scale. The items are "I like my supervisor very much as a person" and "I think my supervisor would make a good friend." These items are rated on a 1-7 scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree) and summed to form a composite, and internal consistency alpha for the scale was .86.

*Perceived leader competence.* This scale was adapted from Kim et al.'s (2006)

measures of perceived leader competence, which originated from the Mayer and Davis (1999) leader ability scale. The scale consists of three items: “The experiment leader is very capable of performing his or her job; The experiment leader has much knowledge about the work that needs to be done on the job; and I feel very confident in the experiment leader’s skills.” Respondents rated items on a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree). Chronbach’s  $\alpha$  for the scale was .85.

*Organizational Citizenship Behavior.* In a meta-analysis of the OCB literature, LePine, Arez, and Johnson, (2002) found no meaningful differences in OCB dimensions. The authors suggested that OCB is a latent construct and should be redefined as a general tendency to be cooperative and helpful in organizational settings. As such, the present study created a measure of OCB that is relevant for the laboratory experiment. Participants were asked to what extent they would be willing to participate in an additional laboratory study in the future, although they may not be able to receive credit for it. Further, the participants were asked to provide their email address as an additional indicator that they would be willing to participate in the future study.

*Attributions.* Two items created by Hunter, Cushenbery, Bedell-Avers, and Waples (2008) were used to measure attributions of the leader’s behavior. Items were “to what extent do you think the leader’s performance may be attributed to things occurring outside of the leader’s control?” and “To what extent do you think performance may be attributed to the leader’s behavior?” The participants rated these items on a 1-5 scale (1=disagree strongly, 5=agree strongly).

*Willingness to follow the leader.* This six-item measure was created by Hunter, Cushenbery, Bedell-Avers, and Waples (2008) based on work by Burke et al. (2007).

Sample items include, “I would enjoy working with this leader” and “I would request to work with this leader.” Chronbach’s  $\alpha$  for the scale was .91.

*Exploratory Variables.* After completing the measures for the quantitative dependent variables, participants were asked two qualitative items about their experiment leader. The first question asked participants to provide comments about the leader, and the second question asked participants to describe an error that the leader made if one occurred.

Responses to these two questions were coded as a single set and were rated on four dimensions by three raters. These ratings included positive or negative affect of the response, whether the subordinate seemed to attribute the error to the leader or external circumstances, whether the subordinate mentioned positive or negative personality traits about the leader, and whether the subordinate indicated that the leader’s abilities were low or high. Inter-rater reliability was sufficient for all four dimensions, including affect (ICC = .89), blame (ICC = .92), personality (ICC = .81), and ability (ICC = .86). For all rating variables, subordinates who did not specifically mention the rating category in their response received a neutral rating of 3 on a 5 point scale. Subordinates that did not provide a qualitative response were not rated.

*Manipulation Check.* Participants were asked a series of questions to determine if they perceived their experimental condition as intended. The first questions are regarding the type of error that occurred: How important was the video to the experiment? (Rated 1-7, where 1 is “not at all serious” and 7 is “extremely serious”). The second question asked about the recovery mechanism: How did the leader respond to their error? (apologized/blamed someone else/blamed on a series of events/no response/no error). As

described by Kim et al. (2006), the way an error is perceived to be framed will influence how the error recovery is judged.

### *Analyses*

A series of Analyses of Covariances (ANCOVAs) were conducted to test for the effects of leader error recovery type and error severity on leader competence, willingness to follow, and an indicator of OCB variables. A second ANCOVA assessed the effects of leader error recovery type and error severity on ratings of qualitative subordinate reactions to the leader. A logistic regression was used to examine the dichotomous indicator of OCB. Finally, given the high intercorrelation among two dependent variables, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to determine the appropriateness of analyzing the dependent variables independently.

### Results

Means, standard deviations and correlations of study variables are presented in Table 1. There was a high correlation between subordinate perceptions of leader competence and subordinate willingness to follow ( $r = .71, p < .05$ ), suggesting that these two variables may be representative of a single, higher order construct.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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To test for discriminant validity between these measures, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted in Lisrel using all three items of the leader competence measure and all six items of the willingness to follow measure (see Table 2). The goodness of fit was estimated

using the Chi Square, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) with confidence intervals, the comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean square residual (RMR), and the non-normed fit index (NNFI). Results indicated that the correlated two-factor solution shows the strongest fit, the one factor solution was second, and the uncorrelated two factor solution had the weakest indices of fit. The three factor solution also appears to have adequate fit indices, but we chose the two factor model because it showed greater conceptual and empirical parsimony. Although some caution is warranted in the interpretation of the factor analysis, these results suggest that willingness to follow and leader competence are constructs that are correlated but unique enough to justify independent examination.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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### *Manipulation Checks*

Because the subordinate perceptions of the leader's behavior after an error has implications for error recovery, it was critical to examine the accuracy and impact of the manipulations. Overall, the participants indicated consistent responses with their error recovery condition at a rate greater than chance ( $\chi^2 = 35.90, p = .00$ ). Additionally, Cohen's Kappa was .41, suggesting moderate agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Overall, 95.2% of participants in a condition where an error occurred chose one of the error recovery condition categories. However, only 31.7% of participants in the control condition accurately indicated that the leader did not make an error. The apology condition was the most salient for participants, who correctly identified that the leader apologized in the

apology condition 92% of the time. Interestingly, half of all participants perceived that they were in the apology condition (49.9%), even though only 21% of participants were in this condition. This may mean that even when a leader blames others or makes excuses for his or her error, subordinates mistakenly remember the leader apologizing. For a full list of error recovery manipulation check percentages, see Table 3.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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A manipulation check was also conducted for the higher impact/lower impact/no error conditions. Participants were asked to rate how serious the error was on a scale of 1-7, where 7 is a very serious offense and 1 is not at all serious. A univariate ANOVA shows significant mean differences between groups for ratings of error severity ( $F(2, 251) = 15.33, p \leq .05$ ). More specifically, the mean rating of error severity was highest in the higher impact condition ( $M = 5.13, SE = .12$ ), second highest in the lower impact condition ( $M = 4.43, SE = .13$ ), and lowest in the no error condition ( $M = 3.78, SE = .25$ ) thereby supporting the perception of error severity as a successful manipulation.

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Insert Table 4 about here

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To test whether participants' inaccurate recollection of the leader's recovery method would influence the study results, we ran another set of ANCOVAs including only the participants who correctly identified their study condition. The results were consistent with those from the full set of participants. Even though the participants could not



remember how their leader responded to the mistake, they still had the same general response to it as those who accurately reported their study condition.

### *Covariates*

All covariates were entered into an ANCOVA and assessed for their applicability for inclusion into the final analyses. Two covariates with significance levels of  $p < .05$  were retained in the final analyses to maximize degrees of freedom. Subordinate liking of the leader was used as a covariate for the leader competence ( $F(1, 352) = 92.56, p \leq .05$ ) and willingness to follow variables ( $F(1, 352) = 249.75, p \leq .05$ ). However, liking was not a significant covariate for subordinate OCBs. Instead, the number of psychology experiments the participant had previously participated in ( $F(1, 352) = 10.65, p \leq .05$ ), impacted their willingness to perform OCBs. None of the Big 5 personality variables were retained as covariates.

### *Dependent Variables*

*Perceptions of Leader Competence.* Higher impact errors were detrimental for subordinate perceptions of leader competence ( $F(1, 352) = 3.55, p \leq .05$ ). As predicted, leader competence was highest in the no error condition ( $M=3.65, SE=.11$ ), second highest in the low impact error condition ( $M=3.62, SE=.06$ ), and lowest in the high impact errors condition ( $M=3.40, SE=.06$ ). Subordinates tended to view the leader as less competent when he made bigger mistakes.

Subordinate perceptions of leader competence were also significantly influenced by the leader's error recovery tactic ( $F(3, 352) = 11.25, p \leq .05$ ). As depicted in Figure 1,

perceptions of leader competence were highest in the no error condition ( $M=3.65, SE=.12$ ) and the ignore condition ( $M=3.60, SE=.08$ ). Post hoc tests indicate that the apology, blaming others, ignoring, and control conditions had significantly different effects for perceptions of leader competence (see Table 5). This finding suggests that leaders who point out their own mistakes are seen as less competent than those who ignore the error or do not make a mistake. Thus, hypotheses 1-4 were not supported in terms of leader competence.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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Insert Table 5 about here

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*Willingness to Follow.* There was a main effect for error severity on willingness to follow ( $F(1, 352) = 11.73, p \leq .05$ ). However, unlike the findings for perceptions of leader competence, willingness to follow was highest in the low impact error condition ( $M=3.31, SE=.05$ ) and second highest in the no error condition ( $M=3.19, SE=.09$ ). Willingness to follow was lowest in the high impact error condition ( $M=3.08, SE=.05$ ). Subordinates were more willing to follow a leader who made a small mistake than a leader who made no mistake.

Although leader competence was highest in the no error and ignore conditions, subordinate willingness to follow the leader was highest when the leader blamed someone else for their mistake and lowest when he apologized. Interestingly, blaming others was so effective that subordinates were more willing to follow the leader in the blaming others

condition ( $M = 3.60, SE = .08$ ) than in the control condition with no error ( $M = 3.19, SE = .10$ ). Post hoc analyses indicate that blaming another experimenter was significantly different than apologizing or blaming the leader's circumstances (see Table 5).

Consequently, hypotheses 1-4 were not supported for willingness to follow. In addition, higher impact errors were more detrimental to subordinate's willingness to follow ( $M = 3.32, SE = .05$ ) than lower impact errors ( $M = 3.08, SE = .05$ ). Post hoc tests confirm the differences between high and lower impact error groups (see Table 5).

*Organizational Citizenship Behavior.* Participant OCB was measured using two different variables. The first asked participants how likely they would be to participate in another experiment with this leader, and the follow up question asked participants to provide their email if they would like to participate. For the item about participating in another experiment, higher impact errors were detrimental to subordinate organizational citizenship behavior ( $F(1, 352) = 9.65, p \leq .05$ ). Participant organizational citizenship behavior followed similar trends to willingness to follow. OCB was highest in the low impact error condition ( $M=2.99, SE=.07$ ), second highest in the no error condition ( $M=2.95, SE=.14$ ), and lowest in the high impact error condition ( $M=2.68, SE=.07$ ).

Leader error recovery tactic, however, did not produce a significant effect. This was consistent with the second OCB variable that asked participants to provide their email if they would like to volunteer to participate in another study. Since there were more than two levels of the independent variable for the dichotomous OCB dependent variable, a logistic regression was conducted. Results for the dichotomous OCB measure were not significant for any of the five leader error recovery conditions.

*Exploratory Qualitative Ratings.* Participant qualitative responses were rated for several variables, including whether the response indicated positive affect toward the leader, whether the participant made an external attribution for the error, and whether the participant perceived the leader as having high ability. As shown in Table 6, error severity impacted affect ( $F(1, 352) = 6.02, p \leq .05$ ), attribution ( $F(1, 352) = 16.63, p \leq .05$ ), and ability ( $F(1, 352) = 3.82, p \leq .05$ ). Error recovery tactic influenced external attribution ( $F(1, 352) = 31.20, p \leq .05$ ), and mean ratings are shown in Figure 2. Post hoc tests indicated significant differences between all error recovery groups except two. Apologizing was not significantly different from blaming circumstances, and the control condition was not significantly different than the ignore condition (see Table 5).

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Insert Table 6 about here

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Mean ratings for external attribution have trends similar to subordinate willingness to follow. For example, blaming others results in the highest external attribution and the highest subordinate ratings of willingness to follow the leader. These exploratory analyses support the willingness to follow findings, which suggest that a leader who uses recovery tactics that shift blame away from him is more effective at error recovery.

### Discussion

The goal of the present effort was to determine whether a leader's choice of apologizing, blaming others, or ignoring an error would influence subordinate perceptions of the leader. The results of the study reveal two primary findings that add substantively to the literature on leader error recovery. First, higher impact errors may produce lower

subordinate perceptions of leader competence, willingness to follow, and organizational citizenship behaviors than lower impact errors. Second, counter to prediction, blaming others can be the most effective method for leader error recovery while apology, at times, may be the least effective. We explore these findings in greater detail below.

### *Study Findings*

*Error severity.* The study results indicate that all errors are not equal. Subordinates are less forgiving of errors that directly affect them, and the outcomes of an error are important for subordinate perceptions of competence as well as their willingness to follow the leader. These results are consistent with Walster's (1966) findings that people were more likely to assign a victim greater responsibility for an accident as the severity of the accident increased. Walster argued that participants had this tendency for one of two reasons: either 1) the victim appeared more careless in a severe accident than a smaller accident, or 2) the victim seemed responsible for the accident because believing that the accident was beyond anyone's control would mean that the accident could also happen to oneself. Likewise, subordinates in the present study assigned greater responsibility to the leader when the outcome of the leader's error was more severe. When others make mistakes, we want to feel that we are dissimilar to them – a point that might also explain the significant effect of liking as a covariate, as liking for another person is often a reflection of feelings of similarity.

Moreover, the severity of a leader's mistake can influence subordinate behavior and not just their perceptions of the leader. Error severity had a significant impact on participants' willingness to volunteer for another experiment with their leader, a scale used as an indicator of organizational citizenship behavior. The likelihood of volunteering was

significantly lower in the higher impact error condition. In other words, the bigger the mistake made by the leader, the less likely participants were to volunteer for another study with that leader. Notably, the higher error impact condition resulted in fewer OCB behaviors *regardless* of the error recovery tactic that the leader used. When a leader makes a larger mistake, subordinates no longer want to go out of their way to help him or her, even if a repair attempt is made. Subordinates lose faith that future experiences would go as planned under the direction of their incompetent leader.

*Error recovery tactic.* Although the customer service literature predicts that apologizing for a mistake is generally the best error recovery tactic (Hocutt, Bowers, & Donavan, 2006; Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002; Wirtz & Mattila, 2004), apologizing may actually be the worst tactic for leaders. Instead, blaming others was the most effective recovery method and resulted in the greatest subordinate willingness to follow and perceptions of leader competence. This finding is consistent with Weiner, Amirkhan, Folkes, and Verette's (1987) conclusion that people who give excuses are viewed as more responsible than those who did not. Perhaps blaming is an effective tactic because a person's attribution for the mistake seems to be a key deciding factor for how that person reacts to the mistake. More specifically, blaming others effectively shifted the responsibility for the mistake away from the leader. In contrast, apologizing for the mistake made the leader's role in the error more salient. These findings suggest that leaders should consider that it is not always necessary to take responsibility for a mistake. Subordinates respond more favorably to a leader when they believe that the mistake was someone else's fault.

The mechanism behind the success of the blaming tactic can be understood through examination of the exploratory qualitative data, coded for internal and external attributions of the error. Again, results revealed that participants in the blame others condition were the most likely to perceive the error as external to the leader's control. Therefore, leader accounts of others' roles in their errors can make a leader appear less responsible for the mistake. This shift in responsibility may explain why subordinates perceive leaders who blame others as more competent than those who apologize.

Interestingly, a subordinate's perception of the leader's competence does not wholly determine whether they want to continue working with the leader in the future. Although perceptions of leader competence were highest in the control condition, willingness to follow was highest in the blaming others condition. In other words, subordinates were more willing to follow a leader who made a mistake than a leader who did not make a mistake, despite their diminished perception of the leader's competence. Perhaps this is because people are more willing to follow someone who is not perfect, who exhibits more "human-ness", and in general is more like them. Kusy and Essex (2007) call this phenomenon the "strategic pitfall effect." They discuss several media examples of error recoveries that resulted in greater public approval after the error, such as John F. Kennedy's miss-handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Anne Lander's divorce, and Martha Stewart's time in prison. Clearly, subordinates understand that errors are a natural part of leadership and actually prefer their occasional occurrence even though they perceive leaders who make no mistakes to be the most competent. As suggested by Tucker, Turner, Barling, Reid, and Elving (2006), errors can be an opportunity to enhance relationships

between leaders and subordinates rather than an incident that should be avoided at all costs.

This strategic pitfall effect was so strong for the leader in this experiment that participants were not only willing to forgive the mistake, they trusted the leader enough to believe his account of what happened. Notably, this trust was not based on a previous history between the leaders and subordinates since the error happened early on in the experiment. In fact, subordinates trusted this leader despite the fact that he blatantly shifted blame to someone else and accepted no responsibility. Rather than question this leader's account of the mistake, subordinates were more willing to follow the leader that blames others than in any other condition.

There are several mechanisms that may help explain why blaming is an effective leader error recovery tactic. As suggested by Bies, Shapiro, and Cummings (1988), providing specific accounts can reduce conflict between leaders and subordinates. Blaming others may be a useful approach because it gives subordinates a clear, plausible explanation for what happened. The association with the error is shifted away from the leader and onto a specific other person. The simplicity of the explanation allows subordinates to return back to their task without dwelling on what the leader could have done to prevent the mistake. Instead, a vague "other" person was blamed for the mistake, and since subordinates had no information about this person they did not have much substance for further contemplation of the error.

Alternatively, blaming another person can place the leader as a victim rather than the perpetrator of the error. While the leader who blamed his circumstances may have also portrayed himself as a victim, these circumstances may have nonetheless been perceived as



preventable. However, a leader who was wronged by a specific other person may be much less at fault for the error. The high ratings of leader competence for the blame condition may have also represented the leader's perceived ability to recover from situations that were caused by others, a desirable quality in a leader. The leader may have benefitted from his new role as someone who would lead the participants out of their current crisis, which he had minimal responsibility in causing.

### *Theoretical Implications*

Given that leaders make mistakes and these mistakes have far-reaching consequences, leadership researchers have an obligation to understand their occurrence as well as the best way to repair these mistakes. The results of this study underscore the importance of examining the impact of errors and error recovery tactics on perceptions of the leader – namely on key outcome variables such as perceptions of competence and willingness to follow the leader. As suggested by Hunter, Tate, Dzieweczynski, and Cushenbery (in press), our views of leadership should be expanded to include negative leadership behaviors in order to gain a more comprehensive view of leadership. If leadership research continues to focus solely on positive behaviors such as transformational and charismatic leadership, leaders will lose the opportunity to benefit from the mistakes that will inevitably occur throughout their leadership roles.

Moreover, the study findings suggest that it is critical that we expand our conceptual frameworks of errors. Specifically, this study presents a mistake that even the best leaders could make because the mistake was unintentional. While previous literature on forgiveness focused on adultery in marriages (McCullough et al., 1998), this study

replicated a mistake that is likely to occur more frequently at work: a simple misplacement of an important item needed for the experiment. Perhaps this is the reason that blaming others was so effective – while admitting wrong doing is important for people whose behaviors were reprehensible, a mistake that was unintentional, even if it had a high impact outcome, may be best dealt with by blaming someone else and moving on.

More importantly, when these mistakes inevitably occur, leadership research should provide guidance for how best to proceed. This study was one of the few empirical tests of recovery tactics for leaders. While other studies have examined the presence of apology, they have not compared this tactic with other types of recovery. Researchers should not focus on a single method of leader error recovery as the best method for every circumstance.

The results of the study also highlight the importance of considering methodology in the development and refinement of future theory on leader error and error recovery. Specifically, the laboratory methodology applied in the present effort was useful for studying leader recovery because it allows us to show how recovery tactics can influence the outcome of a single error. In contrast, qualitative accounts of managers' mistakes are prone to bias. According to Tykocinski (2001), people who look back on negative events tend to see their outcomes as inevitable. Consequently, leaders in qualitative studies may falsely report that the error recovery tactic that they used was the best action they could have taken at the time. In addition, leaders can never know for certain if they took the correct action after their mistake. Even if the outcome of their error recovery was neutral or even positive, they have no way of knowing if an alternative recovery tactic would have resulted in a more positive outcome.

Another important theoretical implication for this study is the context of the error. Leadership-subordinate relationships vary, and not all leadership positions require leaders to know subordinates on a personal level. This study tested leader error recovery within a very early stage of a leader-error subordinate relationship. Even for leaders who have long-term, personal relationships with subordinates, they typically begin their relationships by slowly building trust. It is critical that leadership scholars be open to considering various forms of leadership as well as leadership in its beginning stages.

Finally, the results of this study indicated that liking was a strong covariate in subordinate perceptions of leaders. These findings correspond to those of many other studies that have suggested that subordinate liking of leaders should be measured and accounted for (Brown & Keeping, 2005; Hunter, Bedell-Avers, & Mumford, 2007; Liden, Wayne, & Stillwell, 1993). Researchers should not discount the effect of liking and should continue to use it as a covariate in leadership studies.

### *Practical Implications*

Recognizing that leader errors are inevitable, it is imperative to understand how error recovery tactics can improve subordinate perceptions of the leader. One of the most salient outcomes of this study for managers is that apologies are not always the best approach for recovering from mistakes. In fact, apologizing can sometimes be the worst action immediately following the mistake. This finding is in direct contrast to the advice found in most management books and trade publications, which instruct leaders to apologize, offer empathy, and discuss what will be done to prevent the mistake from happening in the future (Kador, 2009). Although it may be true that an apology is necessary

and even expected in some situations, when there is no history between leaders and subordinates it is safest for leaders to shift responsibility for the error away from themselves in order to protect subordinate's perceptions of them as a leader.

In addition, this study found that they types of errors that leaders make are important. Leaders should recognize that some of their mistakes are more impactful than others. Small errors are less influential on subordinate perceptions and behaviors, while larger errors seem to carry much more weight. Thus, recognizing the type of error a leader makes may be the first step in determining their future actions. Leaders may want to focus their efforts on recovering from mistakes that were more directly impactful on subordinates.

Finally, practitioners should note the differences between subordinates' willingness to follow and their perceptions of leader competence. Although subordinates may perceive a leader as competent, they may not be as willing to follow him or her. The strategic pitfall effect suggests that subordinates like to follow someone who is not always perfect. This has important implications for recovery tactics, which should focus on repairing the leader-subordinate relationship rather than repairing subordinate perceptions of competence. After an error, a leader should concentrate on the needs of the subordinate. Although the occurrence of an error may be difficult for leaders to overcome because of their high need for achievement, the leader should not focus only on behaviors that confirm his or her skills or intelligence. This will not be enough to win back the trust of their subordinates.

## *Limitations*

While these study results have a range of implications, there are also several important limitations to keep in mind. The first set of limitations are associated with creating a leader-subordinate relationship in a controlled laboratory setting which limit the generalizability of the findings. The second set of limitations discuss the variables chosen and the internal validity of the study.

*Limitations of generalizability.* As suggested by Mook (1983), we can demonstrate the power of a phenomenon by showing its occurrence despite unnatural circumstances that are likely to prevent them. Since this leadership simulation was constructed in the laboratory, subordinates had no prior experiences with the leader, and the leader's task was to administer the experiment. However, Colquitt (2008) argued that lab studies can promote psychological realism by creating situations that are real rather than hypothetical, using vivid manipulations, and using real stakes in the manipulation so that participants become engrossed in the situation. In addition, laboratory studies allow for more control over extraneous variables. This is especially important for errors because extraneous variables can influence how a situation is perceived and remembered.

Another limitation with conducting a laboratory study instead of a field study is that higher impact errors in this study may not be as powerful as an error in a business situation. Subordinates in this study understood that the leader had no real power over them and they were likely not to see him again. However, we believe the higher impact error was very strong for the undergraduate participants, especially considering that twelve participants left the experiment immediately after the error severity manipulation because they were angry that they were being asked to come back on another day. As long

as the error is important to the subordinates and is made by a person in a position of power over them, it should generalize to a business sample.

While this study is beneficial in understanding error recovery at a basic level, it should be noted that there are several boundary conditions that limit the generalizability of the findings. First, the leader's account in the blame others condition was plausible; participants had no reason to reject his account as false or even misleading. In contrast, when subordinates are certain that the leader was responsible for a mistake, they may be less apt to believe an account that blames someone else. Second, the sincerity with which the response to an error is delivered may be an important moderator in subordinate perceptions of the leader. For example, a leader who seems truly remorseful for his or her actions may be viewed more positively by subordinates than someone who is apologizing without sincerity. Likewise, the timing of a recovery tactic is also crucial. In this study, the leader responded immediately after the mistake was made. However, a response to a mistake is often delivered too late and subordinates are no longer receptive to hearing the leader's account of the event. Finally, the leader-subordinate relationship in this study was intended to be short-term. The subordinates understood that it was likely that they would not interact with this leader again in the future, which may have led them to have lower expectations for the leader's error recovery attempt. It is possible that subordinates would be less amiable to a leader who blames others if they expected to have a long-term relationship with the leader.

*Threats to internal validity.* In addition to the limitations of the laboratory setting, the error recovery tactics presented in this study are a subset of the range of leader behaviors that are possible after an error. For example, a leader who makes a mistake

could ask for suggestions from subordinates about what to do or could try to make a joke about the error to ease the tension. More importantly, the leader could use any of the repair tactics together, or could use a combination of all of them. This is especially true for apology, which often occurs in conjunction with another explanation such as blaming circumstances. In order to understand what effects each of the recovery tactics have separately, it was necessary to tease apart the different error recovery conditions.

A final limitation that should be noted is the difficulty in ensuring that the leader made no errors in the control condition. In laboratory studies as well as in most situations, it is unlikely that all aspects of a procedure will be completely error-free. Indeed, the error recovery manipulation check response rates for the control condition had the lowest accuracy. In other words, participants in the control condition were less likely to correctly identify their study condition out of all the experimental conditions. However, participants in the control condition did not report any other leader errors in their qualitative responses. If other errors did occur, it appears that they were not salient enough for participants to remember and report them at the end of the experiment. In contrast, the majority of those in the experimental condition did report that the leader forgot the video. Furthermore, random assignment ensured that additional errors could have appeared in any condition.

### *Future Research*

While there is still a great deal of research that can be done in the area of leader recovery, there are three general paths to take. First, more research is needed to more substantially understand how subordinates perceive leader errors. The judgment of others

is a complex process that involves the person's environment, previous history, and the potential for a future relationship with him or her. Second, leaders need to know what they can do immediately following an error for the least amount of damage possible, and this advice should be based on empirical evidence. Finally, researchers should consider how a leader's public responses to their errors influence the leader's subsequent behavior. For example, how does blaming someone else make a leader approach the same problem in the future? In addition, how does blaming someone else change the way the leader will interact with that particular subordinate?

*Understanding subordinate perceptions of errors.* Although some research has found that subordinates are more sensitive to relationship errors than task errors (Cushenbery, Thoroughgood, & Hunter, 2009), more research is needed to understand the specific types of errors that are important to subordinates. There is an important distinction between what subordinates perceive and what is actually happening, and much of their information is coming directly from their leader. Since subordinates are often not in a position to ask for all relevant facts from their leader when a problem occurs, their perceptions of an event are often based on incomplete information. Future research should seek to understand what subordinates need from leaders in times of uncertainty.

Future research should also consider how subordinate discussion of the error recovery amongst their coworkers can skew their perception of the leader. The impact of leader errors can be magnified by other subordinate's negative or positive reactions. Leaders often have a key group of subordinates who they go to when they seek advice or suggestions, and these subordinates may have a different perspective of the leader because they have more information about his or her environment (Mumford, 2005). It is possible



that a single subordinate could influence others to support or disapprove of the leader after he or she makes a mistake.

*Types of error recovery.* There is a need to understand how leaders can effectively use blame as an error recovery tactic. Clearly, it is not necessary for leaders to take responsibility for every mistake. However, it is unclear which situations are the most suitable for blame, as higher impact and lower impact errors are both conducive to this strategy. The leader's behaviors can also influence how the recovery attempt is perceived. More research is needed to understand whether the authenticity of the leader's account is important for leader error recovery; for instance, can leaders use this tactic even if they believe that the error was their fault?

The occurrence of multiple errors may also change a leader's error recovery strategy. It would be difficult to keep blaming others after a leader makes several errors, especially if there was evidence that this tactic was insincere. In addition, a previous history with subordinates can complicate the decision for which recovery method to choose. A leader's previous reaction to errors made by his or her subordinates could also be a consideration for how to act after making a mistake. Although the occurrence of multiple errors has been studied in the customer service literature (Maxham & Netemeyer 2002; Mittal, Ross, & Baldasare, 1998), the salesperson-customer relationship is different than the leader-subordinate relationship.

*Effects of error recovery for leaders.* Although apologies are not the most effective form of error recovery from the subordinate's perspective, they may have some alternative benefits for leaders. For example, an apology can make a leader feel relieved that they have done something to repair their mistake. The leader may also be less likely to avoid the

subordinates that he or she hurt, enabling the leader to move on from the mistake more quickly. Future research should examine how leaders perceive their own errors and whether their recovery tactics influence these perceptions.

Error recovery attempts can have broader implications for leaders as well. Future research should focus on long-term results of leader error recovery tactics. For example, a public apology from a leader can push the leader to improve behavior because they are held accountable or feel they are held accountable for their behavior. Bringing attention to the error could reduce the probability of a similar error happening in the future by both the leaders and the subordinates. While subordinate's initial appraisal of the situation may be negative, they may come to realize that the leader's apology communicates to subordinates that their well-being is important, strengthening the long term leader-subordinate relationship. Finally, a leader's admission of guilt and honest appraisal of the events leading up to the error could galvanize discussions for improving organizational procedures and policies.

### *Concluding Comments*

Leader error recovery is a complex process, but this study has made some contributions to our understanding of this process. First, impactful errors result in more negative subordinate perceptions of the leader as well as reduced intentions to perform OCBs. Also, blaming others is an effective way for a leader to shift subordinates' focus away from an error. This study is also an example of how leadership behaviors can be manipulated in a laboratory environment. Finally, several suggestions for future research

are presented to further our understanding of leader error recovery. The intent of this study was to further this knowledge and we hope that this study is a step in this direction.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations for Study Variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1 Leader Recovery Condition	2.84	1.31	1.00																
2 Error Impact (high/low)	1.37	.68	<b>-.39</b>	1.00															
3 Leader Competence	3.50	.84	<b>.16</b>	<b>-.18</b>	1.00														
4 Subordinate Trust	2.83	.54	.09	-.06	<b>.43</b>	1.00													
5 Liking of Leader	3.43	.68	.01	-.04	<b>.45</b>	<b>.40</b>	1.00												
6 Willingness to Follow	3.19	.79	.08	<b>-.12</b>	<b>.71</b>	<b>.55</b>	<b>.64</b>	1.00											
7 Subordinate OCB	2.84	.95	-.01	<b>-.15</b>	<b>.23</b>	<b>.24</b>	<b>.21</b>	<b>.25</b>	1.00										
8 Subordinate gave email for OCB	1.30	.46	-.07	.01	<b>.16</b>	<b>.17</b>	<b>.16</b>	<b>.17</b>	<b>.63</b>	1.00									
9 Extraversion	3.45	.70	.03	.04	.01	.09	.10	.07	.01	-.01	1.00								
10 Conscientiousness	3.65	.55	.05	-.09	.06	.01	.10	.08	-.05	-.04	<b>.19</b>	1.00							
11 Agreeableness	3.76	.56	.08	-.05	<b>.11</b>	<b>.11</b>	<b>.15</b>	.10	.00	.02	.06	<b>.36</b>	1.00						
12 Neuroticism	2.96	.60	.00	-.04	-.04	-.01	-.01	.00	-.04	.00	-.10	<b>-.18</b>	<b>-.21</b>	1.00					
13 Openness	3.53	.52	.02	-.06	-.05	-.04	.04	-.02	.07	.06	<b>.13</b>	.06	<b>.12</b>	-.05	1.00				
14 Locus of Control	2.48	.55	.05	-.07	.02	.02	-.04	-.02	.03	.03	<b>-.11</b>	<b>-.39</b>	<b>-.25</b>	<b>.29</b>	<b>-.19</b>	1.00			
15 Age	19.17	2.40	-.01	.01	.03	.01	-.02	-.01	.07	.02	-.06	-.02	-.10	-.04	.04	-.06	1.00		
16 Race (0=white, 1=nonwhite)	.19	.39	.02	.03	.01	-.08	<b>-.17</b>	-.05	-.01	.00	-.08	<b>-.12</b>	<b>-.11</b>	.06	.03	.09	.00	1.00	
17 # of previous psych experiments	4.31	1.82	.03	-.02	.01	.00	-.01	-.03	<b>-.17</b>	-.06	.06	<b>.15</b>	.03	.04	-.02	.02	.04	-.09	1.00

\*Note: All correlations above an absolute value of .11 significant at  $p \leq .05$

Table 2: *Confirmatory Factor Analysis for Willingness to Follow and Leader Competence Scales*

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One Factor	Chi Square	297.953
	Chi Square DF	27
	RMSEA	.175
	Confidence interval	.158; .192
	NNFI	.917
	CFI	.938
	RMR	.057
Two Factor Uncorrelated	Chi Square	459.651
	Chi Square DF	27
	RMSEA	.195
	Confidence interval	.180; .211
	NNFI	.823
	CFI	.831
	RMR	.276
Two Factor Correlated	Chi Square	153.645
	Chi Square DF	26
	RMSEA	.117
	Confidence interval	.099; .136
	NNFI	.960
	CFI	.971
	RMR	.036
Three Factor Correlated	Chi Square	149.371
	Chi Square DF	22
	RMSEA	.127
	Confidence interval	.108; .147
	NNFI	.952
	CFI	.971
	RMR	.035

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Table 3. Manipulation Check: Participant perceived condition by experiment condition

		<i>Participant Perceived Condition</i>					
		Apology	Blame Circumstances	Blame Others	Ignore	No mistake	<i>Total</i>
Apology	# of participants	69	1	4	0	1	75
	% of responses	<b>92.0%</b>	1.3%	5.3%	0.0%	1.3%	100%
Blame Circumstances	# of participants	27	32	4	8	3	74
	% of responses	36.5%	<b>43.2%</b>	5.4%	10.8%	4.1%	100%
Blame Others	# of participants	19	2	54	1	5	81
	% of responses	23.5%	2.5%	<b>66.7%</b>	1.2%	6.2%	100%
Ignore	# of participants	46	0	9	21	6	82
	% of responses	56.1%	0.0%	11.0%	<b>25.6%</b>	7.3%	100%
Control	# of participants	15	0	0	13	13	41
	% of responses	36.6%	0.0%	0.0%	31.7%	<b>31.7%</b>	100%
<i>Total</i>	# of participants	176	35	71	43	28	353
	% of responses	49.9%	9.9%	20.1%	12.2%	7.9%	<b>100%</b>

Table 4: Summary of Univariate Analysis of Covariance for Dependent Variables

	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta^2$
<u>Leader Competence</u>				
<i>Covariates:</i>				
Liking	92.56	1	.00	.21
<i>Main Effect:</i>				
Error Recovery Condition	3.55	3	.02	.03
Error Severity	11.25	1	.00	.03
<i>Interaction:</i>				
Error Recovery Condition * Error Severity	1.44	3	.23	.01
<u>Willingness to Follow</u>				
<i>Covariates:</i>				
Liking	249.75	1	.00	.42
<i>Main Effect:</i>				
Error Recovery Condition	3.42	3	.02	.03
Error Severity	11.73	1	.00	.03
<i>Interaction:</i>				
Error Recovery Condition * Error Severity	.14	3	.94	.00
<u>Organizational Citizenship Behavior</u>				
<i>Covariates:</i>				
Number of previous psychology experiments	10.65	1	.00	.03
<i>Main Effect:</i>				
Error Recovery Condition	.45	3	.72	.00
Error Severity	9.65	1	.00	.03
<i>Interaction:</i>				
Error Recovery Condition * Error Severity	.67	3	.57	.01

Note: *F* = F-ratio, *df* = degrees of freedom, *p* = significance level,  $\eta^2$  = partial eta squared effect size

Table 5. *Pairwise Comparisons*

Condition		Leader Competence			Willingness to Follow			External Attribution		
		$\bar{X}$ Difference	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	$\bar{X}$ Difference	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	$\bar{X}$ Difference	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Apology	Blame Circumstances	-.12	.12	.31	-.02	.10	.87	-.31	.20	.11
	Blame Others	-.35	.12	.00	-.27	.10	.01	-1.69	.19	.00
	Ignore	-.31	.12	.01	-.15	.10	.14	-1.03	.19	.00
	Control	-.37	.15	.01	-.13	.12	.30	-.86	.24	.00
Blame Circumstances	Apology	.12	.12	.31	.02	.10	.87	.31	.20	.11
	Blame Others	-.22	.12	.06	-.26	.10	.01	-1.38	.19	.00
	Ignore	-.19	.12	.11	-.13	.10	.20	-.72	.19	.00
	Control	-.25	.15	.09	-.11	.12	.37	-.54	.24	.02
Blame Others	Apology	.35	.12	.00	.27	.10	.01	1.69	.19	.00
	Blame Circumstances	.22	.12	.06	.26	.10	.01	1.38	.19	.00
	Ignore	.03	.12	.78	.13	.10	.20	.66	.19	.00
	Control	-.02	.15	.87	.15	.12	.23	.84	.23	.00
Ignore	Apology	.31	.12	.01	.15	.10	.14	1.03	.19	.00
	Blame Circumstances	.19	.12	.11	.13	.10	.20	.72	.19	.00
	Blame Others	-.03	.12	.78	-.13	.10	.20	-.66	.19	.00
	Control	-.06	.15	.69	.02	.12	.87	.18	.23	.45
Control	Apology	.37	.15	.01	.13	.12	.30	.86	.24	.00
	Blame Circumstances	.25	.15	.09	.11	.12	.37	.54	.24	.02
	Blame Others	.02	.15	.87	-.15	.12	.23	-.84	.23	.00
	Ignore	.06	.15	.69	-.02	.12	.87	-.18	.23	.45
Lower impact	Control	-.04	.13	.76	.10	.11	.39	.18	.22	.40
	Higher impact Error	.27	.08	.00	.23	.07	.00	.56	.14	.00
Higher impact	Control	-.31	.13	.02	-.13	.11	.23	-.37	.21	.08
	Lower impact Error	-.27	.08	.00	-.23	.07	.00	-.56	.14	.00
Control	Lower impact Error	.04	.13	.76	-.10	.11	.39	-.18	.22	.40
	Higher impact Error	.31	.13	.02	.13	.11	.23	.37	.21	.08



Table 6: Summary of Univariate Analysis of Covariance for Qualitative Response Ratings

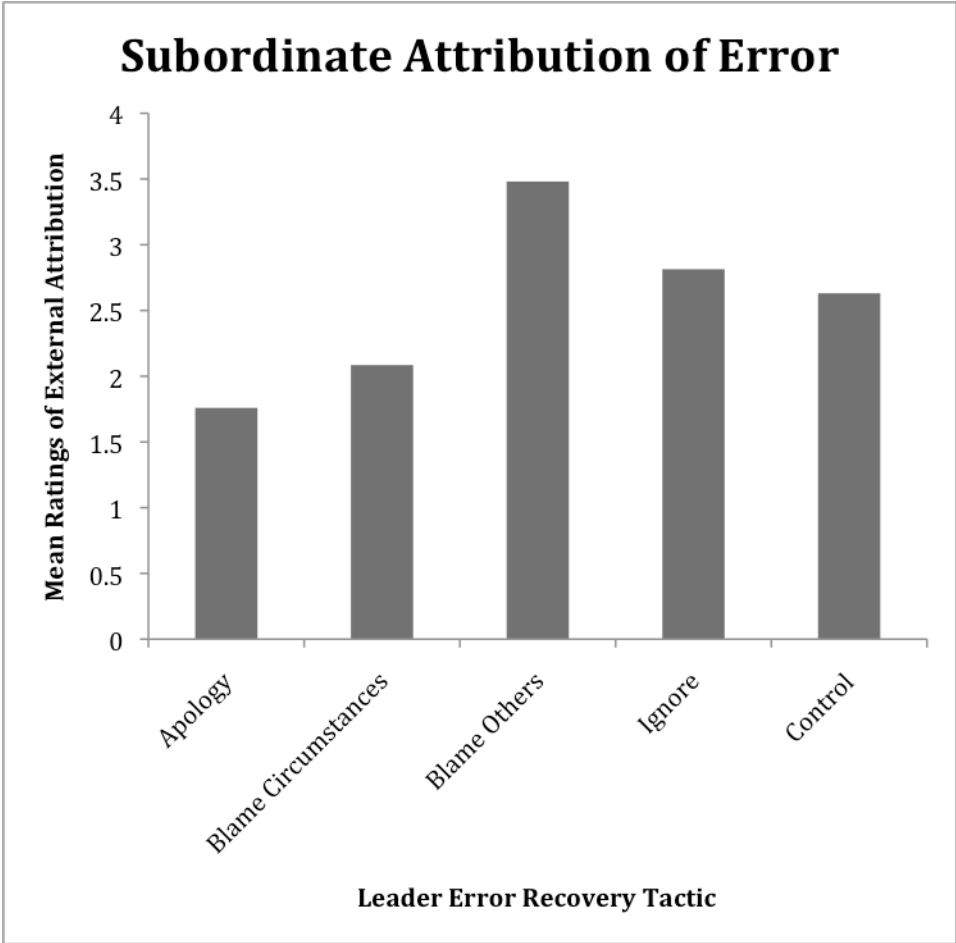
	<i>Affect</i>				<i>External Attribution</i>				<i>Personality</i>				<i>Ability</i>			
	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta^2$
<u>Covariates</u>																
Liking	27.81	1	.00	.08	14.83	1	.00	.04	.55	1	.00	.15	47.79	1	.00	.13
Word Count	13.03	1	.00	.04	.18	1	.68	.00	1.85	1	.18	.01	.13	11	.72	.00
<u>Main Effect</u>																
Error Recovery	.46	3	.71	.00	31.20	3	.00	.22	.59	3	.62	.01	1.64	3	.18	.02
Error Severity	6.02	1	.02	.02	16.63	1	.00	.05	.03	1	.87	.00	3.82	1	.05	.01
<u>Interactions</u>																
Error Recovery * Error Severity	.43	1	.73	.00	2.44	1	.07	.02	1.87	1	.14	.02	.96	1	.41	.01

Note: *F* = F-ratio, *df* = degrees of freedom, *p* = significance level,  $\eta^2$  = partial eta squared effect size

Figure 1: Estimated Marginal Means of Willingness to Follow and Leader Competence by Error Recovery Condition



Figure 2: Estimated Marginal Means of External Attributions of the Leader’s Error in Coded Participant Qualitative Responses



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## Appendix A: Covariates

### Demographic

Age

Ethnicity

Number of psychology experiments participated in

### Big Five Inventory (Pervin & John, 2001)

Here are a number of characteristics that may or may not apply to you. For example, do you agree that you are someone who likes to spend time with others? Please write a number next to each statement to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with that statement.

Strongly Disagree                  Disagree                  Neutral Agreement                  Agree                  Strongly Agree

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

### I See Myself as Someone Who...

1. Is talkative
2. Tends to find fault with others
3. Does a thorough job
4. Is depressed, blue
5. Is original, comes up with new ideas
6. Is reserved
7. Is helpful and unselfish with others
8. Can be somewhat careless
9. Is relaxed, handles stress well
10. Is curious about many different things
11. Is full of energy
12. Starts quarrels with others
13. Is a reliable worker
14. Can be tense
15. Is ingenious, a deep thinker
16. Generates a lot of enthusiasm
17. Has a forgiving nature
18. Tends to be disorganized
19. Worries a lot
20. Has an active imagination
21. Tends to be quiet
22. Is generally trusting
23. Tends to be lazy
24. Is emotionally stable, not easily upset
25. Is inventive
26. Has an assertive personality

27. Can be cold and aloof
28. Preserves until the task is finished
29. Can be moody
30. Values artistic, aesthetic experiences
31. Is sometimes shy, inhibited
32. Is considerate and kind to almost everyone
33. Does things efficiently
34. Remains calm in tense situations
35. Prefers work that is routine
36. Is outgoing, sociable
37. Is sometimes rude to others
38. Makes plans and follows through with them
39. Gets nervous easily
40. Likes to reflect, play with ideas
41. Has few artistic interests
42. Likes to cooperate with others
43. Is easily distracted
44. Is sophisticated in art, music, or literature

Liking (Wayne & Ferris, 1990).

Measured on a 1-7 scale where 1=strongly disagree and 7=agree

1. I like my supervisor very much as a person.
2. I think my supervisor would make a good friend.

## Appendix B: Dependent Measures

Indicate the degree to which you agree with each statement by using the following scale:

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral Agreement      Agree      Strongly Agree  
1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Think about your experiment leader. For each statement, write the number that best describes how much you agree or disagree with the statement.

Perceived Leader Competence (adapted from Kim et al., 2006)

1. The experiment leader is very capable of performing his or her job
2. The experiment leader has much knowledge about the work that needs to be done on the job
3. I feel very confident in the experiment leader's skills.

Subordinate Trust in Leader (adapted from Mayer & Davis, 1999)

1. If I had it my way, I wouldn't let the experiment leader have any influence over issues that are important to me. (Reverse Code)
2. I would be willing to let the experiment leader have complete control over my future in this university.
3. I wish I had a good way to keep an eye on the experimenter. (Reverse Code)
4. I would be comfortable giving the experimenter a task or problem which was critical to me, even if I could not monitor their actions.

OCB

1. How willing would you be to participate in an additional lab study in the future? Please note that we may not be able to provide credits or compensation for it. (Rate 1-5).
2. If you are willing to do an additional study, please provide your email address so we can contact you with further information: \_\_\_\_\_

Attributions (from Hunter, Cushenbery, Bedell-Avers, & Waples, 2008)

1. To what extent do you think the leader's performance may be attributed to things occurring outside of the leader's control?
2. To what extent do you think performance may be attributed to the leader's behavior?

Willingness to Follow (from Hunter, Cushenbery, Bedell-Avers, & Wapels, 2008)

1. I would like to work with this leader on future projects
2. I would be willing to serve under this leader
3. I would enjoy working with this leader
4. If given the choice, I would rather not work with this leader (R)
5. I would be unhappy if I was required to work with this leader (R)
6. I would request to work with this leader