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Living Inside a Bubble: Power, Influence, and Perceptual Filtering in Entrepreneurial Leaders

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Cover Page Footnote

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INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurial leaders, like all human beings, are subject to perceptual filters. Perceptual filtering is a process through which people amplify certain relevant stimuli while ignoring or attenuating other irrelevant information (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). However, in reality, individuals do not always know what is relevant, and sometimes may make errors in perception. Some of these errors include biases, being influenced by extraneous information, interference between simultaneously competing messages, and noise (Sage, 1981). For these and other reasons, entrepreneurial leaders' experiences could be deceptive and lead to inaccurate perceptions and poorer decisions based on these perceptions. One mechanism that mitigates inaccurate perceptions is that the accuracy of leaders' perceptions can be tested, because perceptions validate or invalidate themselves when people interact with their environments (Ittleson et al., 1976). But I suggest that some perceptions that would invalidate themselves in one environment might not do so in another, and that an entrepreneur's microenvironment is one such environment. The environment within an entrepreneurial leader's organization is, in some sense, created by and for the leader. Consequently, I submit that the influence of entrepreneurial leaders' power, status, and desires positively biases the feedback they receive from their firm and its employees, thus corrupting the perceptual testing process, such that perceptions that are inaccurate appear to be accurate in the microenvironment. One illustration is that of John Schnatter, founder of Papa John's Pizza, who was ousted from the company he founded after using a racial slur on a conference call. Prior to this, he faced criticism for his comments about football players kneeling in protest of racial injustice during the national anthem (Otts, 2021). The recorded comments of Papa John's public relations firm are illuminating: "No one has said to him, 'dude, are you really not getting it? You are out of touch.' Everyone, including us, are pandering a little bit to him. No one is saying to him, 'you are actually out of touch. You cannot say these things'" (Otts, 2021). These words indicate that this entrepreneurial leader found himself in a perceptually filtered bubble that left him without the critical negative feedback that could have benefitted him and the company—even as the PR firm acknowledged that they and others were pandering to him.

This paper contributes to research on entrepreneurial leadership by conceptualizing how perceptual filtering influences entrepreneurial decision making. Where prior literature has conceptualized perceptual filtering in regards to recognizing opportunities (Baron, 2006; Baron & Ensley, 2006), this conceptual work extends perceptual filtering to the relationships that entrepreneurial founders have with their employees and the organizations they operate in. I submit that entrepreneurial leaders have misperceptions and misjudgments that can negatively impact their businesses and careers because they often find themselves in a bubble—a perceptual filter that is created for and by them that leaves them out of touch with the true state of the world. In this paper, I integrate research about power, influence, and leadership to explain why the pitfalls of power and leadership can affect entrepreneurial leaders more acutely. Specifically, I theorize that entrepreneurial leaders' judgments and decision-making are especially susceptible to perceptual filters for several reasons. First, the nature of founding entrepreneurs' power and position influences the content and framing of the information they receive. Second, while entrepreneurial leaders are very influential within their organizations, their power also makes them a target of influence attempts from other members of their firm. Some of these employees are part of an *entrepreneurial entourage*, a group of people who help build and sustain entrepreneurial leaders' perceptual bubbles. Finally, entrepreneurs are often characterized by

individual differences that distinguish them from the larger population, and these traits and characteristics may also make them more susceptible to environments that encourage perceptual errors. To that end, I begin with a review of leadership and social power, as it may be a central starting point for perceptual filtering and influence processes.

THEORY AND PROPOSITIONS

Power and Leadership in the Entrepreneurial Context: Constructing and Maintaining Perceptual Filters

Five Bases of Social Power

A well-established concept in organization theory is that there are five bases of social power: reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent power, and expert power (French & Raven, 1959). Although business leaders may possess some or all of these kinds of bases of power in varying degrees, entrepreneurs who found and lead their businesses may have more of this kind of power relative to their organizations. Reward power is based on one's ability to provide rewards in exchange for behaviors and may include raises, promotions, recognition, or access to opportunity. Coercive power describes the ability to administer punishment for failures to conform to a leader's behavioral influence attempt. In organizational contexts, these punishments could include oral and written reprimands, suspension, and even employment termination (Butterfield, Trevino, & Ball, 1996). Legitimate power exists when a follower believes that a leader has a legitimate right to influence them, and that they have an obligation to accept the influence (French & Raven, 1959). In many ways, it is the power of position: that a leader has the right to exert influence and expect that the influence will be accepted precisely *because* they are they leader. Referent power, which is influence based on emotions and feelings of personal acceptance, reflects the degree to which a follower identifies (or desires to be identified) with a leader's personal qualities (French & Raven, 1959; Kudisch, Poteet, Dobbins, Rush, & Russell, 1995). Finally, expert power describes an individual's possession of superior expertise, knowledge, and talent (Wagner & Hollenbeck, 2020) on which others depend.

Entrepreneurial leaders, who are at the top and center of the organizations they found, are likely to derive elevated levels of power from each of these bases. While CEOs enjoy legitimate power as a result of position, founders who are entrepreneurial leaders are even *more* powerful, as the entrepreneur is the most important individual and has a disproportionate influence on the organization's outcomes and strategic decisions (Miller, 1983; Adams, Almeida, & Ferreira, 2005). While the CEO position could be held by many others over time, no one but the founders can ever be the founders. Thus, entrepreneurial leaders not only occupy the position of being at the top of the organization, but also the position of being the first of the organization. The identity of "firstness" can also indicate that the entrepreneurial leader has expert power: entrepreneurial leaders demonstrate the vision and intellect to identify opportunities and the expertise, skill and talent to successfully exploit them (Ireland & Webb, 2009; Shane & Venkatarman, 2000). Entrepreneurial leaders' power may allow them to act unilaterally to reward or punish individuals. An endorsement from a leader may open up doors, while falling out of favor with a leader may stigmatize an employee, resulting in the employee's loss of legitimacy, reputation, and opportunities, and making the employee more likely to experience social rejection and even harassment or bullying (Paetzold, Dipboye, & Elsbach, 2008).

Entrepreneurial leaders may also enjoy additional referent power, as entrepreneurs are frequently viewed as cultural heroes (Pilotta, 2016) or even saviors (Sørensen, 2008), worthy of admiration, respect, and emulation. Summarily, while leaders in general are necessarily influential and thus powerful, entrepreneurial leaders are often even more so.

Proposition 1: Entrepreneurial leaders wield particular power, such that the general effects of influence, power, and leadership on other individuals within the organization are magnified in an entrepreneurial context.

Entrepreneurial Leadership and Influence

While leadership has been conceptualized as a trait, ability, skill, behavior, and relationship (Barker, 1997), leadership is fundamentally a social influence process (Northouse, 2021, p. 6; Bryman, 1986; Parry, 1998). Leaders use both power and intentional influence over other individuals to pursue and achieve goals (and to structure the activities and relationships in an organization or group (Yukl, 1994, p. 3; Northouse, 2021, p. 6). Influence attempts, however, can be accepted (through commitment or compliance) or rejected (through resistance) by the target of influence (Falbe & Yukl, 1992). Thus, understanding the relation of power to influence is key: power is the ability to influence the behavior of others, and resist unwanted influence in return (Wagner & Hollenbeck, 2020). Therefore, one way to view the relationship between power and influence is that people who are most powerful in an organization are those whose influence attempts are most difficult to reject and the most likely to be accepted. While leaders in general have significant organizational influence, I theorize that entrepreneurial leaders are likely to have particularly strong influence in their organizations because they are likely to have strong connections to each of the five bases of social power. Perhaps a reflection of the effectiveness of their influence efforts, prior research reveals that entrepreneurial leaders have immense influence on decision making, strategy, and other behaviors in their ventures (Hitt et al, 2011, Harms et al, 2012, Ireland et al, 2003).

Influence is directional: not only are leaders able to exert influence downward toward their followers, but followers can also exert upward influence on their leaders (Mowday, 1978). Prior research suggests that followers have good reason to engage in upward influence tactics: when followers successfully exert influence on leaders, the leaders like them more, perceive the follower as more similar to themselves, and rate their interpersonal skills more highly (Wayne et al., 1997). Moreover, individuals engaging in upward influence may be motivated by a desire for power or to attain specific goals in the workplace (Mowday, 1978).

For a follower or employee in a firm, there is perhaps no better person to have influence over than the entrepreneurial leader. Entrepreneurial leaders are often high in centrality within the organization (Kelly et al., 2000). Specifically, founder centrality reflects high levels of betweenness, closeness, and connectivity with members of the organization. Put another way, founders have high ability to exercise power, to regulate discourse within top management, to act more unilaterally because they depend less on others' opinions, and have short paths of connectivity between themselves and any other member of the organization, including its most powerful members (Kelly et al, 2000). Because entrepreneurial leaders are so central, powerful, and influential in their businesses, individuals' motivation to upwardly influence them and shape their perceptions is likely to be high. Summarily, being part of the "entrepreneurial entourage"—a group of people who influence the entrepreneur, cater to their wishes, and maintain the bubbles

in which perceptions are filtered—can have significant benefits, and thus, entrepreneurial leaders are frequently attractive targets of influence tactics. Entrepreneurial entourages, as conceptualized here, are an outcome of mutual influence actions: employees are influenced by the power of the entrepreneurial leader, which in turn motivates employees to influence entrepreneurs in ways that are positively biased or that confirm leaders' existing beliefs—ostensibly pleasing to the entrepreneur and beneficial to the entourage member. Thus, I propose the following:

Proposition 2: Entrepreneurial leaders are frequent targets of upward influence attempts by employees in their organizations.

Proposition 3: The nature of entrepreneurial entourages' influence attempts is often biased in positive and/or confirmatory ways.

Perceptual Filtering in Entrepreneurial Leadership

As a consequence, the people, processes, and organization that make up the entrepreneurial founder's environment reflect the entrepreneur's influence, and the entrepreneur is reciprocally influenced by the environment they have created. As shown in Figure 1, an entrepreneur's perception becomes a localized reality, and thus the perceptual testing that might otherwise reveal perceptions' incongruence with general reality is inhibited. However, I suggest that when the entrepreneur operates outside of the bubble circumscribing perceptual filters, the perceptual testing may yield different results, including negative reactions, critical feedback, and negative consequences that may be surprising to the entrepreneurial leader. The nature of leadership, power, and influence in organizations creates conditions especially conducive to creating environments for systemic perceptual errors in entrepreneurial leadership.

Silencing and Isolating Effects of Leadership

Leadership can have silencing and isolating effects. American film producer and entrepreneur Sam Goldwyn famously said, "I don't want any yes-men around me. I want everybody to tell me the truth even if it costs them their job," while organizational philosopher Charles Handy said, "The world may admire truth-tellers, but few will want to employ them" (Reitz & Higgins, 2017). These two quotes insinuate the concerns followers might have regarding speaking truth to power or voicing disagreement. Employees are often silent, withholding valuable input or thoughts they would like to express, due to social norms and pressures, the desire to maintain group cohesion, or fear of punishment (Morrison & Milliken, 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Consequently, leaders receive information that is limited, filtered, and positively biased, as World Bank President James Wolfensohn experienced when he realized that he was only being shown successful projects and happy people when he went to visit developing countries to determine if the projects the bank was funding were successful (Ashkenas, 2017). Information is filtered especially when the news is bad, and for good reason: individuals who deliver bad news might become the target of retaliation and anger (Tripp & Bies, 2009), and might even be blamed for the bad news, resulting in a loss of organizational legitimacy (Salanick & Meindl, 1984) or even one's job (Gamson & Scotch, 1964). Even at the highest levels, employees are deferential, sometimes holding back

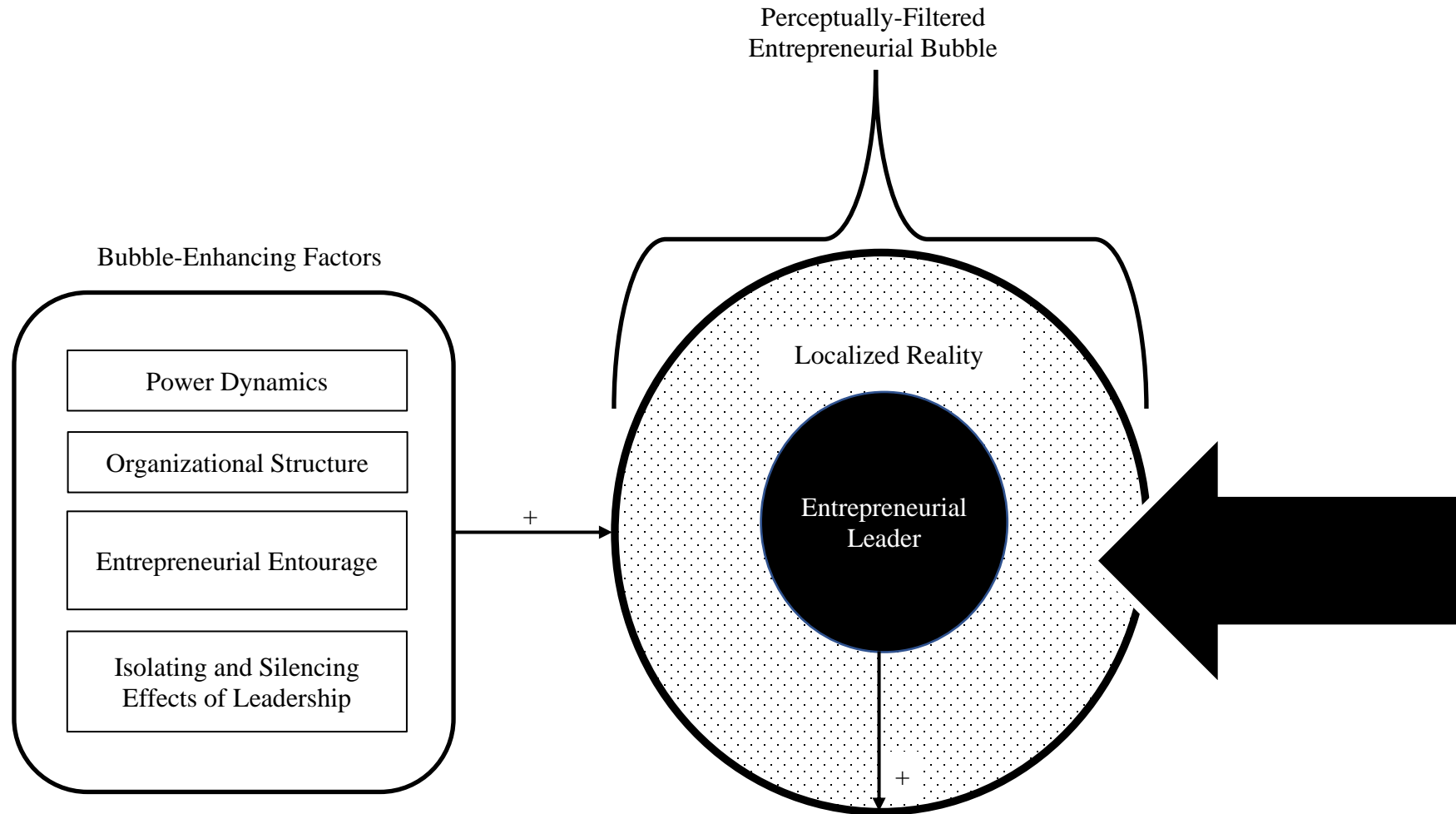


Figure 1. The Perceptually-Filtered Entrepreneurial Local Environment

opinions and feelings that they believe could irritate or contradict the boss (Ashkenas, 2017). These phenomena are likely to be magnified in the case of entrepreneurial leaders. As a result, I formally propose the following:

Proposition 4: Entrepreneurial leaders, who often have more power to act unilaterally, may be particularly susceptible to silencing and isolating effects of leadership.

Individual Characteristics Make Entrepreneurs Susceptible

Finally, there are some individual characteristics of entrepreneurs that might make the leaders of entrepreneurial enterprises especially susceptible to bubbles that maintain perceptual filters. Entrepreneurs are more optimistic than the general population (Koudstaal, et al., 2015), and often extremely optimistic (Cooper et al., 1988). This may make them less suspicious of positively-biased information that confirms their own prior beliefs. Moreover, entrepreneurs have been shown to possess a self-serving attribution bias about the factors that help or impede the success of their businesses (Rogoff, et al., 2004). Confident in their own knowledge and ability, powerful entrepreneurs may ignore advice from knowledgeable subject matter experts (Tost et al., 2012). Combined with entrepreneurs' tendency for confirmation bias—the tendency to seek and over-weight evidence that confirms one's own belief and discounting information that contradicts it (Sánchez et al., 2011)—entrepreneurial leaders might find themselves seduced by the siren's song of sycophantic employees and the comforting embrace of an environment that seems to confirm that all of their instincts and beliefs are correct. And, the more capricious or insecure the leader is, the more fearful employees become, thereby magnifying the effects of entrepreneurs' most maladaptive characteristics (Ashkenas, 2017).

Impacts on Entrepreneurs and Enterprises

Leaders make errors. One taxonomy of leader error types suggests that some of the errors leaders make are errors in searching for, acquiring, organizing, and evaluating information, as well as paying attention to feedback and using information to solve problems (Hunter et al, 2011). Entrepreneurial leaders regularly make important decisions based the information they have. But if they are missing information, have misinformation, or miscalculate the information they employ in their decision-making, the quality of their decisions is diminished. Thus, an entrepreneurial leader's errors or limitations in perception can lead to errors in judgment and decision making, and consequently suboptimal outcomes (Carr & Bletner, 2010). Consequently, mechanisms or structures that systematically suppress, filter, contort, or positively bias the information and feedback that entrepreneurial leaders receive can be expected to diminish entrepreneur performance and enterprise performance. Perceptual filters, and the entourages that maintain them, the organizational culture that sustains them, the power and influence that creates them, and the biases that result from them are all examples of such mechanisms and structures. This is particularly true because these perceptual filters create illusions about entrepreneurs' own control, ability, influence, and about the true state of their business and the environment; these illusions can breed overconfidence, inflated evaluations of one's performance and ventures, a culture in which employees are less likely to accept responsibility, and diminished decision-making quality (Cialdini & Pfeffer, 1998; Carr & Bletner, 2010). Overall, positively-biased feedback toward entrepreneurial leaders, including ingratiation, flattery, and opinion conformity

can lead to strategic inertia, poorer firm performance, and increased risk of an ousting of the entrepreneur (Park et al, 2011).

DISCUSSION

In sum, this paper proposes that entrepreneurial leaders co-create an environment which facilitates perceptual filtering via positively biased information and feedback from people, processes, and the organization itself. Entrepreneurial entourages create and maintain this filter through the influence they exert on the entrepreneur both directly through influence tactics, and indirectly through the buffering, framing, and filtering of information and negative feedback. The nature of power and leadership in organizations reinforces the perceptual filter, such that the use of power in the form of downward influence by the entrepreneurial leader reinforces the nature of the upward influence by followers. While aspects of this phenomenon can happen with leaders and chief executives in any kind of organization, this paper argues that the characteristics of entrepreneurial founders makes them and their organizations particularly and acutely susceptible.

This conceptualization of perceptual filters in the entrepreneurship context offers an avenue for future research. While cognition has long played a role in understanding an entrepreneur, future research might examine how perceptual filters influence entrepreneurial decision-making more broadly. The ubiquity of perceptual filtering suggests that it influences every stage of the entrepreneurial process and every facet of the venture through behavioral channeling. Empirical examination of perceptual filters offers a more granular approach to understanding entrepreneurs and the businesses they create. Relatedly, examining the social network of an entrepreneur might facilitate a more fine-tuned understanding of entrepreneurial decision-making. So far, research has theorized that an opportunity that is discovered is the result of an individual's perception. However, scholarship might examine to what extent does an individual's social network, whether weak ties or strong ties, influence entrepreneurs' perceptions of opportunities they might discover and exploit. Additionally, perceptual filtering is likely to influence how entrepreneurs act on and react to business failure, and future scholarship should examine failure in light of perceptual filtering.

Future research could empirically examine the formation, function, and composition of entrepreneurial entourages. Questions about entrepreneurial entourages could shed some light on the ways in which entrepreneurs build their early-stage teams, and what factors determine whether these individuals provide accurate reporting and honest critical feedback or whether they pander to the desires of the entrepreneur. Along these lines, research could examine entrepreneurial entourage membership, exclusion, and exit from the attraction-selection-attrition perspective. Scholars could also examine whether presence of an entrepreneurial entourage could predict the failure of the entrepreneur or of the enterprise. But perhaps paradoxically, if the presence of an entourage predicts failure of the entrepreneur individually, might the career derailment of the entrepreneur actually save the enterprise?

Finally, while entrepreneurial leaders might be susceptible to working and living in a perceptually filtered bubble, bubbles are known for their tendency to eventually burst. Future research might consider what kinds of critical events lead to the bursting of a perceptual bubble, and whether these events can come from places within the organization as well as outside of it.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the nature of entrepreneurial leaders' power means that the ultimate responsibility for preventing the kinds of pandering and filtering that creates perceptual bubbles falls on the entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs must actively work to establish cultures and processes that support transparency, honesty, and critical upward feedback. This means avoiding policies that stifle honest and earnest dissent and uncomfortable conversations and acknowledging one's own limitations, biases, desires, and tendencies. Entrepreneurs might be well-served by seeking dissenting views when they engage in decisions or behaviors, leaving themselves open to honest feedback about any and all of their behaviors that could negatively impact the company, and ensuring that neither they nor their organization punishes individuals who voice concerns and criticism in the best interests of the firm.

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