

HOW GLOBAL LEADERS GAIN POWER THROUGH DOWNWARD DEFERENCE AND REDUCTION OF SOCIAL DISTANCE

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Abstract

We theorize about how people with positional power enact downward deference—a practice of lowering oneself to be equal to that of lower power workers—based on a study of 115 top global leaders at a large U.S. company. These leaders were charged with advancing organizational goals in foreign markets. We find that some leaders enacted downward deference when they recognized that they had less expertise, networks, and influence relative to their local subordinates. This manifested in two ways: 1) attempts to *reduce social distance*, which involved seeking connection, earning trust, and participating in adjacent collaboration with local subordinates; and, 2) *yielding to subordinates' expertise* by privileging their judgement, transferring influence to them, and conforming to their local hierarchical expectations. Our supplementary quantitative analyses showed that previous experiences in foreign cultures, both in terms of total time spent abroad and exposure to cultures that were distant from their own, correlated with adopting downward deference. Those leaders also had higher job performance ratings, and were promoted to higher executive levels over time compared to their counterparts who did not practice downward deference. Our study expands our understanding of positional power, social distance, and the conditions under which actors practice downward deference.

Power is an integral element to achieve organizational goals. Organizations rely on people's positional power—the right to command, direct, and evaluate subordinates' work by virtue of their structural rank in a defined hierarchy (Astley & Sachdeva, 1984; Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Weber, 1947)—as a lever for organizational performance (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Van de Ven, Delbecq, & Koenig, 1976). Individuals often work better together when one is dominant and others are submissive because the defined roles help resolve disagreements and facilitate coordination (Tiedens, Unzueta, & Young, 2007). The behavior that helps constitute and reinforce the relationship between these two positions—dominant and submissive—is *deference*. We define deference as the tendency to accommodate or submit to others (Goffman, 1956; Rucker, Galinsky, & Magee, 2018). Upward-flowing displays of deference are deeply engrained in dominant and submissive relationships (Keltner et al., 2003). People, for example, use more polite language when they address superiors than when they address inferiors (Holtgraves & Yang, 1992). Similarly, lower-ranking individuals tend to speak at lower volumes, interrupt less, and keep greater physical distance than their higher-ranking counterparts (Hall, Coats, & Smith LeBeau, 2005). Conversely, subordinates who fail to demonstrate deference to superiors may suffer negative consequences such as ostracism or sanctioning (Westphal & Khanna, 2003).

However, formal hierarchy has limitations (e.g., Lee & Edmondson, 2017). It may not function under conditions where there is uncertainty, requiring employees to adapt their task execution and decision-making more quickly on their own (Grant & Parker, 2009). Thus, organizational realities can call for upward-flowing displays of deference to reverse and flow downward. Global expansion is one context in which power hierarchies can reverse as leaders

from corporate headquarters seek to penetrate and cultivate non-native markets where they have limited expertise. Local markets come with distinct stakeholders, languages, cultural norms, and regulatory frameworks that leaders from headquarters often do not fully understand (Reiche, Bird, Mendenhall, & Osland, 2017). Local subordinates can possess the expertise, influence, and political skills to appraise specific data, solve problems, provide direction to others, plan complex projects, make decisions, and execute critical tasks. In short, global leadership can occasion the experience of people with positional power having to rely on subordinates with relatively low power to get work done.

Thus, global leaders might have to adopt approaches that deemphasize organizational hierarchy in order for subordinates to speak up with their expert advice (see Detert & Burris, 2007). We label this downward-flowing form of deference herein as downward deference, and define it as the practice of submitting to individuals with lower positional power. This submission does not mean practicing diminution below the position of those in lower standing. Rather, it means reducing one's own position relative to the other to be equal. Downward deference differs from the more concertive approaches to leadership and decision-making that are integral to less-hierarchical forms of organizing, including post-bureaucratic organizations, humanistic management, and organizational democracy (e.g., Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Turco, 2016). For example, self-managed teams have been used to grant formal authority to groups of individuals with expertise in the work tasks that need to be advanced on behalf of the organization (Barker, 1993; Hackman, 1986). While these approaches are structural or normative, downward deference is a personal and informal behavior that an individual leader may or may not choose to enact.

In the present paper, we examine the scenario in which leaders have to rely on their subordinates to bridge gaps that would allow them to advance their organizational goals. Yet, there are competing explanations for when and how individuals with positional power deal with a lack of knowledge and expertise. Scholars who examine the psychology of power have suggested that superiors might find it difficult to defer to those with lower power. Magee and Smith's (2013) social distance theory of power proposes that power invokes social distance, defined as the degree of understanding and intimacy which characterize personal and social relations (Parks, 1924). We know from the literature that those in power prefer independent activities that create or maintain social distance towards others (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2012; Lee & Tiedens, 2001), reducing their capacity for empathic concern or consideration of others' perspectives (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006; Magee & Smith, 2013).

In their seminal work, French and Raven (1959) conceptualized five principal sources of power: coercive power (i.e., the threat of punishment), reward power (i.e., the promise of monetary or nonmonetary compensation), legitimate power (i.e., drawing on one's structural right to command), expert power (i.e., relying on one's superior knowledge and expertise), and referent power (i.e., based on the target's identification with the influencing agent). These five types of power can be categorized into a broader binary of structural versus personal power. Whereas coercive, reward, and legitimate power are derived structurally from an individual's formal position and authority in the organization, expert and referent power arise from individuals' personal characteristics, such as superior knowledge, experience, background, and mutual relationships (Raven, Schwarzwald, & Koslowsky, 1998; Yukl & Falbe, 1991).

While expert power often tracks with formal organizational hierarchy (Bass, 2008; Van Vugt, 2006), individuals may hold more expert power than their position reflects, or vice versa (Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Mechanic, 1962). In fact, research on knowledge-based work, in which expertise constitutes the main sources of value creation, has established that individuals with positional power are unlikely to possess the full expertise and skills necessary to solve organizational problems (e.g., Abbott, 1988; Barley, 1996; Shi, Johnson, Liu, & Wang, 2013). Consequently, studies have shown how people with positional power intentionally act contrary to traditional theories of power by subverting hierarchy and deferring to lower-ranking individuals for their expertise (e.g., Detert & Burris, 2007). At the same time, evidence suggests that those with positional power continuously attempt to wrest control from experts (e.g., Huising, 2014; Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013; Waring & Currie, 2009) and may even discount advice from individuals with high levels of expertise (Tost, Gino, & Larrick, 2012). In short, the theoretical and empirical literature to date suggests competing explanations for when and how individuals with positional power deal with a lack of knowledge and expertise, especially if this expertise fills a deficit for advancing work goals.

Our study of a large U.S. based high-tech company provided a fruitful opportunity to examine three interrelated research questions: Why and under which conditions do those with positional power defer to lower-ranking individuals? And to the extent that they do, what behaviors do those with positional power adopt to practice downward deference? What role does social distance play to enact downward deference? To answer these questions, we conducted a field study of 115 top global leaders who were charged with advancing organizational goals in non-native markets where they had less expertise, networks, and influence than their subordinates. The leaders were all long-term veterans with an average of 22 years of tenure,

which had accustomed them to more directive forms of leadership. We draw on theories of power and social distance to understand why, when, and how the global leaders we studied practiced downward deference and, based on this understanding, develop a framework of power and downward deference.

METHODS

Research Setting

This study draws primarily from qualitative data collection that we triangulated with company archival data and secondary sources. Specifically, there were three data sources: (1) 115 semi-structured interviews with global leaders, (2) company archival data on job performance, internal career promotion, prior work history, and previous international experience from a random subset of 61 global leaders, and (3) other secondary sources such as company documents and internal websites.

We conducted our study at WorldTech (*pseudonym*), a large technology consulting organization headquartered in the U.S. with over \$80 billion in revenue and operations in 170 countries. WorldTech was an ideal setting to examine our research question focused on the work of top global leaders in non-native contexts as the key area to study. Both WorldTech and the global leaders' seniority present extreme cases that allow a better understanding of the phenomena and the theory that we are building. For several reasons, they make the processes that we are examining easier to observe and tease apart (Eisenhardt, 1989). First, the company is large, and ten years prior to the time of our study, had adopted a global strategy that sought to locate the vast majority of its employees and leaders outside of its U.S. headquarters with the aim of staffing international client projects quickly. For this reason, global leaders were regularly asked to lead in contexts in which they had relatively limited leadership experience. Leaders

from one country could easily be called on to serve in another country. According to a leading executive, the global workforce exploded after they laid out their global strategy to deliver their services from countries around the world to countries around the world. They did not strictly deliver into India from India, or into France from France. In line with this perspective, the purview of the leaders in our study was managing subsidiaries that were culturally and nationally non-native to them. The size of the company was also beneficial because it gave us access to a large group of leaders—115 in total—who were based in countries different than their own, such as Australia ($N = 3$), Brazil ($N = 20$), China ($N = 24$), France ($N = 8$), Germany ($N = 6$), Italy ($N = 12$), Japan ($N = 20$), Korea ($N = 6$), Mexico ($N = 1$), Russia ($N = 4$), Singapore ($N = 1$), Spain ($N = 2$) and the U.S. ($N = 8$).

Second, WorldTech has a history of grooming leaders from within the organization. Therefore, people had long tenures at the company versus shorter run times that might be expected in some high tech firms. This is particularly important for our study because the organizational context for global leaders or informants (we refer to global leaders as informants interchangeably hereafter) in our study remained constant; this included successive CEOs, corporate and competitive strategies, and organizational culture. All of our informants were therefore subject to the same organizational features longitudinally. In addition, the average age of the study participants was 49 years ($SD = 5.23$). 88 of them were men and 27 were women. Their average tenure at WorldTech was 22 years ($SD = 7.44$), they held high levels of leadership—vice presidents, managing directors, and chief operating officers—within the organization, and were within four job grade levels of the CEO. Job responsibilities among participants involved management of all lines of business within a particular country, or a broader geographic region such as Asia Pacific. WorldTech was known to be a hierarchical

organization with a centralized approach to coordination, communication, and control. As a British informant put it, “The communication style of [WorldTech] is very top-down” (L72).ⁱ Consequently, the global leaders were accustomed to top-down forms of leadership, thereby increasing the potential asymmetries between positional power and expertise.

Third, and relatedly, the country work often involved developing markets by a common strategy of providing sequenced consulting services that entailed tailoring and implementing complex and often expensive technology systems that had multi-year service contracts. For example, a subsidiary had to design and implement a system for a shoe retailer chain with 8,000 stores. To be able to install complex systems at that scale, subsidiary members had to understand the customer needs and be able to draw effectively from WorldTech’s global operations. Leaders, for their part, had to ensure that subordinates had the requisite competence and ability to mobilize as a group within the subsidiaries to implement customers’ systems and provide ongoing support.

In sum, the informants in our study had to engage in global leadership cross-nationally, which is defined as “the processes and actions through which an individual influences a range of internal and external constituents from multiple national cultures and jurisdictions in a context characterized by significant levels of task and relationship complexity” (Reiche et al., 2017: 556). At WorldTech, the leaders had relatively less local expertise, networks, and influence vis-à-vis their subordinates on the ground. As we will later elaborate in the analysis section, the downward deference behaviors that we examined were contingent upon the informants’ role as global leaders; some adopted the behaviors while others did not. The WorldTech setting enabled us to identify the conditions under which leaders enacted downward deference behaviors.

Semi-structured interviews. A leader at WorldTech sent emails inviting the top 150 leaders of the company to participate in a study that we described as focused on understanding the experience of global leaders, including how to engage and motivate a diverse workforce that was embedded in markets that were non-native to the leaders. We interviewed all 115 of the leaders who accepted our invitation. This large number of voluntary interviewees is representative of WorldTech's top leadership group. Participants were assured that interviews were voluntary and anonymous. Following standard procedures for conducting qualitative semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), the protocol for our study was organized in two key sections. The first section covered detailed background information including demographic details, a description of current job roles, details on subordinates' work and geographical dispersion, and specific information on global responsibilities. In the second section (see Appendix A for excerpts of relevant questions), we posed open-ended questions to understand participants' experience as global leaders of markets in countries that were non-native to them. We sought to understand how the leaders approached their subordinates in contexts in which the subordinates held more knowledge and influence. For example, we posed specific questions on how the participants developed and maintained their relationships with their subordinates as well as how they motivated their subordinates to work toward set goals. We also posed grand tour questions (Spradley, 1979), asking leaders to provide detailed accounts of a typical workday and/or workweek to elicit details about specific behaviors that would help us identify the mechanisms that leaders employed to engage their subordinates. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. All interviews were conducted in English, WorldTech's lingua franca.

Company archival data. To enrich our qualitative analyses, we aimed to understand why some global leaders might enact downward deference while others do not, and with what consequence. Consequently, we collected additional quantitative data to explore potential correlates of global leaders' downward deference behaviors. WorldTech granted us access to archival company and demographic data for a random subset of 61 global leaders. These data included job performance ratings for two consecutive financial years and longitudinal data on leaders' career progressions at WorldTech. Further, we collected demographic data on the 61 leaders' detailed work histories including their previous international experience.

Other secondary data. We triangulated our interview data with publicly and privately available data. Data triangulation is a strategy we used to corroborate disparate materials with the aim of more fully depicting the nuances and complexities that invariably surface in a field study (Patton, 2002). Such data include external websites, investor relations sites, annual reports as well as internal websites and global strategy documents, reports on benchmarks against competitors, and social technology utilization statistics to better understand organizational cultural features (Yin, 2013).

Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis. Data analysis began by coding interview transcripts in an iterative fashion and following recommended practices for qualitative data analysis (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in NVivo, a Qualitative Research Software. We started with open coding, or the process by which data is "broken down in discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 102) to appraise the similarities among leaders who enacted downward deference.

If they did not enact downward deference, we examined the behaviors that differentiated those leaders. In total, we found that 49 out of 115 (42.6%) informants enacted downward deference.

We flagged every instance or captured descriptive codes when informants mentioned how they interacted with subordinates, including each mention of how they led, worked with, learned from, and engaged with subordinates. As we coded the emerging descriptive codes, we started to link those data fragments together from differing but related categories. We identified patterns in informants' narratives about diversity, sharing experiences, relying on the knowledge of their team, and information exchanges. For example, statements that reflected leaders' deferring to subordinates on local implementation decisions and seeking their guidance on local conditions led us to develop a category that we labeled "yielding to subordinates' expertise." During this stage, we moved back and forth between data analysis and the literature to help make sense of the emerging concepts, as well as to refine our coding scheme. We then cycled back through the data, the descriptive codes, and themes until we reached theoretical saturation, such that no new categories or concepts emerged.

We then investigated the underlying theoretical dimensions by assessing how the various themes interacted with and related to one another as we developed a theory of power and downward deference. For example, some themes were indicative of informants' desire to reduce social distance to their subordinates (e.g., "seeking connection," "earning trust," and "adjacent collaboration"). These themes explained how leaders demonstrated that they valued and aimed to become closer to their subordinates. Other themes reflected informants' desires to yield to the expertise of subordinates (e.g., "privileging subordinates' judgment," "transferring influence," "conforming to local hierarchical expectations"). We evaluated multiple conceptual models to understand how these themes fit together, incorporating pertinent theories whenever possible. We

scrutinized potential models against the data to determine how well our emergent theoretical understanding explained our research setting (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2000).

Our analysis primarily concerned leaders who enacted downward deference, but we paid close attention to behaviors of leaders who did not. This examination sharpened our understanding of downward deference and provided us with counter examples in some instances. Overall, we learned that the leaders who did not practice downward deference had a materially different approach to meeting their organizational mandate. They undertook a traditional command and control perspective that was undeterred by the cross-cultural demands. This analysis suggested to us that downward deference was binary. We searched for thematic links among the individuals or the group who stood in opposition to the downward deference principles we had identified. We found that leaders who did not pursue downward deference practices primarily made decisions on tasks and processes.

Finally, to establish coding reliability, we had two research assistants independently code a random selection of quotations representing approximately 25% of the data we analyzed. Intercooder agreement on categorizing instances was very high (93.75%).

Quantitative analysis. To further probe why and when some global leaders enacted downward deference while others did not, and with what consequence, we drew on quantitative company archival data to explore potential correlates of global leaders' downward deference behaviors. Of the 61 global leaders for whom WorldTech granted us access to archival company and demographic data, 28 (45.9%) exhibited downward deference behaviors. The quantitative variables covered leaders' previous experiences in non-native contexts as well as their job performance and internal career promotions. We used three sets of measures of leaders' previous experiences in non-native contexts, defined as temporary work assignments in a foreign country

that lasted at least three months (Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, & Bolino, 2012). First, we coded the *number of foreign countries in which leaders had previously lived* (ranging from 0 to 3). Second, we operationalized *time spent in non-native contexts* by calculating the total number of months spent across all temporary foreign work assignments (ranging from 0 to 132 months). Third, we accounted for the *cultural richness* of global leaders' previous experience by summing up the time-weighted cultural novelties of all foreign countries in which they previously worked, consistent with previous research (e.g., Godart, Maddux, Shipilov, & Galinsky, 2015). We based our cultural richness measure on Hofstede and Hofstede's (2005) updated cultural dimensions, using the following formula:

$$\text{Cultural richness} = \sum_{\text{Foreign C.i}=1}^n (\text{Cultural Distance}_{\text{Home C.}-\text{Foreign C.i}} \times \text{Time in Foreign C.i})$$

We applied Kandogan's (2012) approach to calculate the cultural distance between a leader's home country and foreign country for all country dyads. This measure is a revised version of Kogut and Singh's (1988) method, which takes into account the correlations between the four dimensions of cultural distance (individualism-collectivism, power distance, masculinity-femininity, and uncertainty avoidance) in calculating the Euclidean distance. Hence, for each foreign country in which a leader worked, we multiplied the cultural distance score by the number of months spent in that location to arrive at an aggregate score of cultural richness. We also used an alternative way to calculate cultural richness drawing on Ronen and Shenkar's (2013) approach, in which national cultures are clustered along their attitudinal differences. Specifically, country dyads placed in the same cluster were counted as having a cultural novelty of 1, and for each boundary crossing between adjacent clusters, we added 1 to the cultural novelty. Because clustering was presented as a pie chart, the novelty between two countries

ranged from 1 to 6. Please note that results do not change significantly when using alternative measures of cultural richness that do not account for time spent in each foreign culture.

Further, we obtained *job performance* ratings for the 61 global leaders. These ratings covered the two consecutive financial years directly prior to commencing our interviews (T and T-1). The ratings were tied to financial and growth goals. Global leaders received a single score from direct managers on a five-point scale, with the highest value indicating excellence in performance and the lowest value indicating unsatisfactory performance. While it would have been preferable to collect job performance ratings after our interviews, our confidentiality agreements prevented us from gaining such access. Our interviews focused on global leaders' accumulated experience of engaging and motivating a diverse workforce in non-native markets, a responsibility these leaders had had for a long time. Research suggests that an individual's leadership approach develops over a relatively long period of time (e.g., DeRue & Ashford, 2010), suggesting that our global leaders likely developed the practice of enacting—or decidedly not enacting—downward deference before the time for which we have job performance ratings.

Finally, we assessed participants' internal career promotions, defined as the *number of progressions to executive ranks* that leaders had achieved up until three years *after* our interviews were conducted. At WorldTech, job levels range from 2 to 10, with 10 being the most senior non-executive level. Above 10, bands are assigned alphabetically from D to A, with A being the most senior executive in the organization under the CEO. As all leaders had risen through the ranks at WorldTech, we counted the progressions from level 10 onwards—i.e., progression into executive ranks—such that our variable ranges from 0 to 4.

Following the precedent set by prior studies that incorporate job performance ratings and interview data to corroborate findings (e.g., Reid, 2015), we used the nonparametric Mann-

Whitney U test to compare the performance ratings, along with the number of progressions to executive ranks and the variables related to leaders' previous experiences in non-native contexts across both groups of study participants. The Mann-Whitney U test for this comparison was particularly ideal because it allows for the comparison of two samples from the same population without the assumption that the samples have normal distributions (Nachar, 2008).

To check whether our subsample was indeed random, we were able to compare the job performance rankings of our 61 participants with 92 other WorldTech managers who were not involved in our interview study. Neither group of individuals differed significantly with regard to their job performance in T (Mann-Whitney test statistic $z = -.48, p > 0.05$) or in T-1 (Mann-Whitney test statistic $z = -1.03, p > 0.05$).

LEADING FOREIGN MARKETS

At WorldTech's various international locations, languages, cultures, and possibly physical distance further enhanced the chasm between the local knowledge needed to conduct business and what leaders could realistically offer. Such conditions led one leader to reflect: "The way you do business in Brazil, the way you meet clients in Brazil, the way you lead people in Brazil is different than in South Africa, is different in Russia, is different in China and is different in U.S." (L81). These dynamics led some—though not all—leaders to enact downward deference, a set of behaviors that we will elaborate on in the next section. Attitudes towards downward deference were in part predicated on differing beliefs about paths to performance, leadership, and power.

Global leaders at WorldTech who exercised downward deference recognized that they possessed less expertise with how business was conducted in the various localities than did native subordinates. Expertise refers to specialized skills and knowledge that a person brings to

team tasks (Bruns, 2013; Faraj & Sproull, 2000). Irrespective of their positional power or duration in their current foreign assignments, these leaders articulated their relatively limited knowledge of local cultures, relationships, and customer demands compared to their native teams, an acknowledgement that is supported by research pointing to the role of subordinate professionals who hold the expertise and networks to achieve the group's goal (Barley, 1996; Huising, 2014; Shi et al., 2012).

The following excerpt from a U.S. leader who was the head of the Southeast Asia operation—and who had multiple countries under his purview as part of his regional assignment—typifies sentiments of local knowledge limitations:

I didn't know the product set as well as I probably should have. I didn't really know the countries I was doing business in. I had been to Singapore before. So I had some idea of what to expect, but it was a regional role, so you've got nuances between Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, what was Southeast Asia at the time, India. So I didn't know the countries well, didn't know the cultures, certainly did not know the people. (L18)

He goes on to explain that “knowing the cultures, the language is one thing, but now you don't know the people as well.” He had to rely on local subordinates who knew the players well and could more readily access and influence the sales process. Such reliance was echoed by a Chinese leader who found it necessary to reframe his behavior patterns from someone who directed the work that he presided over to someone who could listen to his subordinates:

Instead of being critical or giving direction or telling others to always do things as in the Western countries, you just have to change. You have to be flexible and really listen to the local sales team or to the local manufacturing team, and listen to the people who are closer to the client, closer to where demands are. (L53)

As the quotation suggests, awareness of the knowledge gap is coupled with the understanding that he has to adjust his leadership process to learn from lower level employees who hold the necessary insights about the market. Another Brazilian leader based in Singapore told his team

that he felt like the roles were reversed. From the start, he said to his team, “Let’s invert the jobs here, right? You don’t work for me. I work for you” (L89). His candid statement was intended to highlight the reality that his team was competent to lead the charge locally; he understood his leadership role as supporting their local execution.

By contrast, the leaders who did not exercise downward deference were primarily directive in their approach. They viewed the path to success in any international market based on their ability to maintain a previously proven leadership style; namely, applying a standard approach despite cross-cultural contextual differences. Replicating, or as one leader put it, enacting a “cut-and-paste” leadership approach that had been well-established irrespective of the market that they managed was seen as the preferred and optimal path for success. The following excerpt elaborates on this sentiment:

I don’t adjust my leadership style by the market that I am trying to approach nor the people that I manage there. I will succeed in my role, based on my leadership style and my execution, which is going to need some adjustment from market to market, but at the end of the day, the core structure will be the same. So I don’t think my style changes in front of each market. (L28)

As evidenced by this Brazilian leader’s quote, the execution of the work is modified, but not other aspects of his leadership efforts. Another leader from Brazil explicitly noted that she did not pay particular attention to the local staff or to the culture from which they originated. She recounted:

I don’t pay as much attention to local staff as much as I do to external clients or partners. So of course, even when I’m not traveling, I have contact with my team day in, day out. So they know exactly who I am. And I keep the same profile when I’m there. It doesn’t matter what kind of culture. Sometimes gets me a little bit of trouble. (L21)

Notable in her narrative, as in those of many other leaders, is a recognition that not adapting cross-culturally or not seeking input from local staff could be a source of contention. Yet, that insight had not motivated changes to their leadership repertoire in any direction. Additionally,

what is notable is the frequency of contact this informant had with her local staff. She says that “they [local staff] know exactly who I am” (L21), implying that cultural and linguistic knowledge is one-way; the leader need not possess knowledge of her subordinates. This belief directly contrasts with the perspective that we analyzed among leaders in the downward deference category who interpreted their relative knowledge deficit as an area that they needed to fill through their local teams even if it meant making changes in their roles. Their leadership work, therefore, was rooted in *connecting* and *deferring* to their subordinates to guide the local work.

To further understand why and when some leaders enacted downward deference whereas others did not, we examined our quantitative data. We sought to understand if tenure, age, gender, nationality, or previous international experience was correlated with whether or not a leader practiced downward deference. What materialized was leaders’ past experience in non-native contexts. Specifically, for some global leaders, greater experience in foreign contexts seemed to increase their insights about the useful knowledge, expertise, and networks that local subordinates might access. This was not altogether surprising because transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978, 1991) would suggest that learning is triggered by disorienting experiences that interrupt an individual’s cognitive flow (Weick, 1995). In line with this research, we examined whether leaders’ previous experiences abroad—in terms of the number of foreign countries previously lived in, the length of time previously spent abroad, and the cultural richness of those experiences—may prompt leaders to enact downward deference.

We wanted to corroborate our findings by examining whether these experiences challenge leaders’ established views and behaviors and may trigger learning about how their perspectives and behaviors need to be adapted to remain effective. The upper half of Table 1

reports a series of nonparametric tests that compare leaders who display downward deference behaviors with those who do not across the experience-related variables. Our analysis shows that downward deference was associated with leaders having spent significantly more time in non-native contexts ($M = 26.57$ vs. $M = 9.33$) and—over the course of this time—having experienced foreign cultures that are more distant from their culture of origin, using both Hofstede’s ($M = 37.50$ vs. $M = 16.82$) and Ronen and Shenkar’s ($M = 85.43$ vs. $M = 26.45$) measures. By contrast, leaders who enacted downward deference did not differ significantly in the number of foreign countries they had previously lived in compared to leaders who did not enact downward deference ($M = 1.00$ vs. $M = .61$).

Insert Table 1 about here

ENACTMENT OF DOWNWARD DEFERENCE

In this section, we lay out the framework that we inductively develop from leaders who found it advantageous to defer to their subordinates. Two emergent theoretical dimensions captured downward deference behaviors: (1) reducing social distance, and (2) yielding to the expertise of subordinates. Below, we define and elaborate on each of these dimensions that characterize how leaders enacted downward deference behaviors (see Table 2 for representative quotes).

Insert Table 2 about here

Reducing Social Distance

Global leaders who practiced downward deference believed that managing employees in a foreign country required developing closeness between leaders and local staff. The closeness they sought is consistent with the social distance construct—the degree of understanding and intimacy which characterize personal and social relations (Parks, 1924). Social distance is a

natural but potentially detrimental aspect of cross-national collaboration (Chen, Kirkman, Kim, Farh, & Tangirala, 2010; Hinds, Liu, & Lyon, 2011). When members perceive a degree of intimacy between themselves and others, social distance is low, diminishing potential fissures (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Magee & Smith, 2013) while increasing mutual knowledge (Cramton, 2001). Social distance increases if members do not feel close to one another, and as a result, fissures can form and grow. Cross-culture work is a breeding ground for high social distance (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Kogut & Singh, 1988), especially when differences in leadership beliefs are central to a foreign country's cultural identity (Koch, Koch, Menon, & Shenkar, 2016). Global leaders who practiced downward deference sought to reduce their perceived social distance toward their local teams in three ways: 1) *seeking connection*, 2) *earning trust*, and 3) *adjacent collaboration with subordinates*. Identifying interpersonal distance as impediment to progressing with teams motivated leaders to shrink what they perceived to be a social gap.

Seeking connection to reduce social distance. Global leaders who practiced downward deference sought to form what we label as connection—establishing a personal link—with local team members by increasing their mutual familiarity. They perceived that acts conveying personal interests in subordinates' non-work lives helped form connections, which in turn would motivate the local subordinates to meet work goals. The leaders believed that finding common areas of interest through questioning and experimentation would ultimately reveal what motivated their workers, who would then exert maximal effort towards the common goals. Consider the following illustration of a U.S. leader, who likes to learn as much information as possible about his local employees to identify the common interests he might share in order to make a “personal connection,” particularly because he is in “their country:”

I like to know as much as I can about their background, where they grew up, where they went to school, do they have a family, what are their interests. Because I'm always looking for that one thing that I can make a personal connection. I always have to keep in mind that I'm in their country. (L3)

An Australian informant similarly searched for topics to discuss that would trigger a point of intersection that might prove to be of interest to his local employees on a wide range of subjects ranging from family to cars. He believed that connecting with subordinates would motivate their optimal performance. He explained his point of view as follows:

A lot of my conversations are in the same way that I would ask 50 inquisitive questions around a business, I would ask 50 inquisitive questions in a conversational mode. Hopefully not as I'm trying to interrogate someone, Spanish Inquisition. But just trying to understand what they're about, what they aspire to, what motivates them outside of work, and then how they see themselves as human beings. (L5)

He goes on to explain the instrumental motive for his interests:

But then I quickly flip back into the operational mode of running the business and focusing on what we need to achieve as a business. But I always have that individual insight in the back of my mind. Because you need to understand to motivate and drive people. I do try to understand the person that's presenting or talking to me. I do ask them about family situations, children, spouse, sporting interests, car interests, cooking interests, whatever interests them. Because I believe that, if you understand the person, then you will be able to get the best out of them. (L5)

Others sought a personal connection by demonstrating to local staff an interest in learning local culture and an effort at learning the native language, even though leaders recognized that they would not achieve linguistic fluency. One U.S. informant explained his attempt to use his local staffs' language as a gesture to pre-empt disrespect. He noted, "It's a bit disrespectful if I'm coming here and I haven't taken the time to at least learn the language, learn the culture, and apply that" (L3). Another Brazilian informant, in order to demonstrate her interest in the local community, spoke of how she encouraged her team, despite their initial reticence, to speak to her in Spanish (their native language) while she attempted to learn it. She went on to describe

the fast acceptance and connection she gained as a result of her observable interest in her local team's language:

Leaders that have a sensibility and understanding that it's important to create a deep connection with the community that you're in, understanding a little bit or showing interest in learning the language spoken in that particular community is the key to be regarded as someone showing personal interest to that community. (L4)

In sum, the above quotations illustrate that exhibiting interest in subordinates' non-work lives ranging from family, hobbies, cultures, or languages, enabled global leaders to look for the sparks that forged interpersonal connections between themselves and local staff. Leaders perceived that these interpersonal connections would enable them to both understand their local subordinates and elicit stronger work performance.

Earning trust to reduce social distance. A second instantiation of reducing social distance involved trust building within the local work context. Leaders perceived that they had to gain the trust of their teams by developing interpersonal relationships in which they could demonstrate that they could behave appropriately in local situations—especially situations that demanded cultural sensitivity—precisely because the global leaders had relatively limited experience in these markets. A precursor to trust is predictability centered on behaviors and capacity (Doney, Cannon & Mullen, 1998; Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995; Shapiro, Sheppard, & Cheraskin, 1992). Consider the explanation from an Italian leader who recognized local teams' initial skepticism of how members of headquarters would act in front of clients. The leader's response was to actively pursue trust-building practices such as demonstrating cultural adaptation, particularly around client situations, to build trust:

Gaining trust is always a challenge. When I say “gain trust,” I mean, having access to the clients with your team and making sure that you act in a very coordinated way is always a challenge when you start. Because cultures are different, and if you don't show the right adaptation, people react in a conservative way. I mean they tend to perceive you as “headquarters,” which means they tend to perceive you as someone that is there more to control than to help. But once you start to have good practices that you can share, people

become extremely responsive and helpful. So I think that trust-gaining is a process that needs getting into the content, getting into the real aspect of the human factors. Once you win the trust, though, then the communication is pretty smooth. (L96)

Leaders also sought to develop trust by demonstrating understanding of teams' local cultures and, when possible, continuing local cultural behavioral norms. For example, a French global leader noted that his subordinates "need to be confident in you and you need to be reliable, and they need to know that you will help" (L31). Another observation about gaining trust comes from a Brazilian leader who was charged with leading the South Korean territory, which was culturally different from his own. He explained:

Until you understand their [Korean] culture, they don't really trust you to put you in front of a customer in Korea, right? Because they don't want to run that risk. So after you get that [Korean culture], they start trusting you, they see that you can add value to them, that you understand the way they think, and you respect it. They start trusting you and getting you, and then you are able to help more, understand more, and help them be more successful. (L89)

This leader recognized that engaging with his local employees interpersonally would be instructive; he also understood the manner in which his subordinates could trust his understanding of the environment so that he could also be trusted to engage with customers productively. In sum, downward deference leaders perceived that to reduce social distance, they had to earn the trust of the local team by demonstrating confidence and commitment to the specific cultural mores of the local market.

Adjacent collaboration with subordinates to reduce social distance. A third instantiation of reducing social distance took the form of leaders working adjacent to or in tandem with group members. These leaders wanted to be seen as partners by their lower level employees. The goals for working alongside subordinates were twofold. First, it enhanced the collaborative relationship between leader and subordinates, which also reduced any perceived degree of social distance wrought by positional power differentials. Rather than say, "do this...to be more

collaborative rather than directive” as one Japanese leader explained, was a conscious decision (L29). Second, it produced desired performance results. The following quote from a Brazilian leader illustrates this point:

I need to lead them through the path to grow. We are in the same boat. I tell them that I’m going to be helping you guys to overcome the situation that you’re facing right now. Shoulder-to-shoulder. With you side-by-side. And here is how we are going to be able to transform this company, to deliver better results. (L57)

The imagery of “shoulder-to-shoulder” and “side-by-side” conjures a leader who is united with his subordinates toward a particular aim. Because the informant is unambiguous that the joint work was a conscious leadership act intended to sojourn through difficulty together, downward deference is construed as an optimal path towards success. Likewise, other informants expressed the value of working alongside their team—even on a mundane activity such as taking public transportation alongside team members to see a client—as an important element to bridge the distance. Assuming the same level as subordinates is tied to the perception that doing so will positively impact the subordinates’ regard and performance outcomes.

Another illustration that typified leaders’ intent to shrink distance between themselves and the local group involved mobilizing different perspectives in the team. A German leader, who was cognizant of the limits of her leadership prowess, explained that her logic centered on not only blending the right people demographically, but also ensuring that they are attuned to the common goals that mattered:

I really try to get the right talent together. I believe that not a single leader can make a difference. So for me it’s important to have diversity, but on the other hand make sure that a diverse team even has a common and a joint alternative or a goal, and a common understanding [of] what we want to achieve. (L60)

Notable in the quotation above, and also emblematic of the patterns in our data, is the belief that the global leaders find it imperative to create contexts of collaboration.

Yielding to the Expertise of Subordinates

The accounts of leaders who practiced downward deference suggested that they yielded to the expertise of subordinates such that local team members could influence decisions about local activities. Although similar to DeRue and Ashford's (2010) conceptualization of granting behaviors to bestow a leadership character onto someone, yielding to the expertise of subordinates is distinct in referencing the acts that a person takes to impart influence onto someone. At WorldTech, yielding to subordinates manifested in acts leaders took to 1) privilege subordinates' judgment, 2) transfer influence to act locally, and 3) conform to local hierarchical expectations. Together, these acts of downward deference were meant to give subordinate local teams the ability to exercise their expertise to advance the goals of their local markets.

Privileging subordinates' judgment. Leaders ceded to the guidance of the local team when necessary to advance local work requirements. A Chinese leader described the process of trusting the local team's judgment as an act of "sacrificing something of yourself" (L66) because it required relinquishing familiar behaviors that had been previously effective in native contexts, and instead consciously relying on judgments by those who possess genuine insights into how things worked locally. An illustration for this enactment comes from a U.S. leader who learned to privilege her local team's judgment during an occasion in China when it was discovered, after a Chinese client had left for vacation, that his signature was required for an important contract. The U.S. leader's instincts, honed from her previous experiences, were to send someone on a plane who would courier the contract to the client's vacation location and secure the last crucial signature to finalize the deal. However, before initiating her plan, and despite her urgency to act immediately, she consulted with her local team.

Her local team advised against her proposed approach, and instead strongly advised to wait on the final signature and call the client at the end of his vacation. To contact him at his vacation location, she learned from her subordinates, would be regarded as a serious violation of personal privacy that could sever the relationship. In her words,

I said, “Look. I am going to trust you, but I’m telling you, I’m just—I’m shaking about this. Because this is a very big deal. This is a commitment I made. This feels terrible to me to just sort of let it play out when I could actually do something; when I could go and get that signature.” And they said, “Please, just trust us.” And I said, “OK. I am going to trust you. I’m going to trust you. And you have to deliver for me.” And you know what? It happened exactly as they said. They made a phone call, they talked with him, they faxed the contract, he signed it, they sent it back, we were done... But it felt—you know, as an American, you go do something. Right? You don’t sit back and take a few breaths and see how it goes... everything inside of me was like, “This is terrible. This is a terrible plan.” (L70)

By following the local team’s advice to do nothing until after the client’s vacation rather than relying on what she thought of as standard practice, she yielded to lower level employees’ superior knowledge of the context, which led to a positive outcome—the signature was acquired without complications—and reinforced her judgment to cede to local guidance.

Conversely, those who did not privilege the advice of the local team were liable to experience a different fate. One Chinese leader described the failed leadership of a new hire from the U.S. who was not able to muster the trust necessary for downward deference.

I had a phone interview with him, and felt he was the right guy to join my team so I brought him into China... and he does not trust the whole team. So after one year, he had to go back to his own country. He talked too much, was like, “OK, I’m the expert because I have led so many things.” (L78)

Because the American leader believed that his extensive leadership experiences was sufficient to give him the expertise for any given situation, he was never able to gel with the local team or their clients. Importantly, keeping to a standard leadership approach, which relied on his own

expertise rather than privileging the expertise of his local employees, impaired his ability to learn.

Transferring influence. Consistent with their positional power, leaders set the goals for the local markets that they were responsible to grow, guided by growth expectations from U.S. headquarters. However, to reach those goals, they yielded to the expertise of others by consciously imparting influence to subordinates to act locally. Imparting influence mirrors aspects of delegation and is not uncommon (Klein, Ziegart, Knight, & Xiao, 2006; Yukl & Fu, 1999). What our analysis evinced, and which was uncommon from the extant literature, was the extent to which the leaders sought to transfer influence to their subordinates by *diminishing their own power, while elevating that of their subordinates*. For example, a veteran U.S. leader based in Japan described the manner in which he turned over full responsibility to his local subordinates after setting clear expectations:

Once they've demonstrated very quickly that they have a talent or ability to do something, I expand their responsibilities very quickly... And then I have very clear accountability to them and I give them a lot of empowerment. I try to minimize the meetings and the reviews and the inspections... Once I feel comfortable that they understand what needs to be done, I empower them and let them go and run. (L40)

The leader's assertion about minimizing meetings, reviews, and inspections shows his dependence on—and enabling attitude toward—his subordinates (and their influence), especially when coupled with the idea of empowering them. A French leader, who was frequently tasked with managing multiple geographies simultaneously, described her approach of giving up some of her own leadership rank as “put(ting) (her)self in the middle of the team, not on the top of the team” (L49). Placing herself within the team minimizes her own influence and allows it to transfer to other team members. Similarly, another leader from Japan spoke about deliberately transferring influence to team members as follows:

How do I support the environment so that my team members positively take action, challenge the issues? My leadership is to support team members, to motivate the positive thinking or positive action. I give most of my power to the direct members in order to share my goal, promote more positive action and leverage members' capability and actions to achieve the goal. (L106)

As this quote indicates, by transferring influence to his subordinates, he accesses—or “leverages”—the knowledge and skills of his subordinates necessary to achieve his organizational goals. Interestingly, he defines his leadership strategy as giving away most of his power and sharing his goals. As a final illustration, consider a German leader who acknowledged that by reducing the effects of the formal hierarchical structure, he learned new approaches to solving problems:

The goal of your leadership isn't in hierarchy... I think you really need to be interested in the ways of thinking of the people you lead and show them that you are really interested in understanding how they want to solve a specific issue. Then you are on the same level and you can also be a coach... Hierarchy is not a good approach anymore. (L94)

As in the previous examples, the German leader voluntarily diminished his own standing—calling himself a “coach” who is on the same level as his subordinates—and went so far as to dismiss the general usefulness of a hierarchy despite the higher power position he occupied.

Conforming to local hierarchical expectations. Another dimension that encompassed downward deference was leaders' conformity to local hierarchical expectations, characterized by behaviors that accorded with local social standards. Such adoptions emanate from people's desire to obtain social approval by following social norms (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). In our case, leaders sought to show respect and a willingness to adapt to the local environment, often as gestures of goodwill to subordinates, and sometimes out of necessity to achieve their goals. The vast majority of global leaders served markets whose hierarchical structures and norms differed from their native customs. In our data, the foreign, local

hierarchical expectations were primarily based on demographic factors, such as gender and age, and secondarily on organizational factors, such as positional rankings.

An illustration of following local hierarchical expectations comes from an accomplished female executive from the U.S.—accustomed to asserting her authority, and with more than a decade of international management experience across Asia, India, Australia, Africa and the Middle East—who intentionally and selectively adopted a traditionally submissive female role in order to advance her local work goal.

I will tell you very candidly when I went to some of the Arab and Middle Eastern countries—in order for a woman to be successful there you really start by being submissive. I had no problem with that. I had no problem putting myself in that role because that's what works to get me at the negotiating table. That style works for me to negotiate and close the deal. (L70)

Local hierarchical expectations influenced leader-subordinate interactions, such as asking questions, showing concern, or expressing disagreement. For example, an Australian leader who had spent more than a third of his 30-year tenure with the organization in overseas assignments explained the method he devised to follow local Thai expectations regarding the delicate process of 'saving face' while also ensuring that his subordinates' questions did not go unanswered.

Thais never ask a question. And that's not because they don't have questions. It's because it's hierarchical, it's perceived as being disrespectful, and there's a degree of personal pride that they don't want to be seen asking a silly question in a public forum. So you have to follow up those sort of organizational announcements with more personal visits... and you have to therefore nurture it out of them without making them feel like they're stupid in asking some very basic questions. For example, recently we made an organizational announcement, and it had to be followed up with visits on the ground and forums for the local leaders to ask questions in a private environment. (L5)

Another example addresses local hierarchical expectations concerning age. A Brazilian leader who managed an Asia Pacific group of teams from his base in Singapore found age to be an important indicator of status in interactions with his Korean team members when outside the office:

Sometimes you have people reporting to you that are older than you, which means when you are in the office, you are their boss... If they go for dinner after that, the position changes. And the respect is on age, not on position... So the boss serves the employee who is older, and in that position they [the employee] is superior. (L89)

In our analysis, we find that downward deference can be a form of influence consistent with Fragale and her colleagues' (2012) supposition. In their study of the relative hierarchical rank of message senders and message recipients in email communication, Fragale and her colleagues (2012) found that people of equal rank engaged in lateral deference to convey to collaborators that they would not threaten the others' positions. This behavior allowed collaborative work to proceed with more ease and productivity. Our study empirically extends this perspective by showing adherence to local hierarchical expectations as a mechanism for enacting downward deference in a context where individuals hold *higher* power vis-à-vis their subordinates.

The Absence of Downward Deference

Leaders who did not practice downward deference took on a different approach altogether. They looked for ways to ensure that subordinates complied to directives as fast and efficiently as possible. Those leaders seemed to need to be in control of subsidiary work and were concerned largely in having the staff simply do the work as directed. Leaders, therefore, kept a tight record of the operations and had little interest in gaining process or task-based contributions from subordinates. They mostly wanted the subordinates to follow directions unequivocally, as illustrated by a Korean leader:

I have a coercive style. I would set the direction very actively and drive the team to follow the direction I set. And I will not listen to the objections and opinions as long as I believe the direction I've set is right for the company or team. So I have some opponents in this company. And I don't like to compromise when I believe that direction is right. (L110)

The conviction that it was necessary to not compromise if the direction seemed right was not unique to this leader. Many informants attached coercion to their leadership style. They

described scenarios that could be considered dynamic or situational and might not objectively require a steady state of coercive behavioral styles. Nevertheless, their self-portrayal at times included the label “coercive” as a positive trait. For example, this Japanese informant described how and why coercion was necessary:

My base style is a kind of coercive. My base leadership style is maybe forcing someone to do. Just do it. When, you know, we are in a war, we cannot ask people what we have to do. The leader should make the decision of what the people do. That leadership is only effective in the situation of war. But the situation now, of course every day it's a war against our competitors. (L43)

In sum, leaders used their organizational power to coerce subordinates into action, which amounted to the local staff just doing the work that was set forth. The leaders' use of the term “coercive” suggests that subordinate acquiescence and/or compliance was desirable because it would ultimately result in the advancement of organizational goals.

In addition, leaders in this category had narratives that were replete with statements centered on confirming that their lower-level employees comprehended their directives. They used many methods to ensure that their directives were understood, which was especially important because of the English language fluency differences that existed between the global leaders and the subordinates with whom they often interacted. Some leaders repeated directions orally as noted by this British informant:

In my experience, particularly in this region, you tell them once, you tell them twice, you tell them three times, and you probably tell them a fourth time. And by the time you've said it four times, as long as you're consistent, then they get it. (L72)

Others followed up by confirming comprehension in writing or re-iterated their message as described by this French leader:

Well, of course I have to make sure that we're on the same page, and the same agenda, you know, and making sure that the person, the group of the person understand and will receive the message I wanted to deliver. So sometimes, well, I have to take time to re-explain the message. But this is the role of a leader and manager sometimes, to do that. (L2)

Whereas some leaders confirmed comprehension orally or in writing, others held discussions to surface potential gaps. For example, a Japanese leader explained how he posed many questions to have lower-level employees play back, in their own words, what they had heard and to prove to him that they grasped and accepted his directives:

I ask a lot of questions. “Do you understand what I mean?” or, “Please tell me your understanding of my explanations to you,” so that let him or let her express whether he or she has accepted or how he or she has listened to my instructions using his or her words. (L90)

As this example demonstrates, leaders in this category confirmed comprehension or looked for assurances that directives were understood, thereby increasing the likelihood that they would be followed as desired.

Taken together, the leaders who did not enact downward deference seemed to seek acquiescence and compliance—a top-down approach to ensure control in pursuit of work goals. They used the power and authority vested by their organization to demand that their subordinates execute on the agenda that they set. By contrast, informants who practiced downward deference trended in the opposite direction. These additional data provide a more complete picture and help situate further the enactment behaviors of the downward deference informants. In particular, the contrast between the two leader-groups provided us with insights that corroborated the evidence we gathered about the sources and mechanisms that made up the downward deference construct.

Differing Outcomes

We also probed whether leaders who enacted downward deference differed in work outcomes compared to those leaders that did not enact downward deference. Specifically, we would expect that by reducing social distance and yielding to subordinates’ expertise, leaders are able to better accomplish relevant work tasks. For example, the literature on transformational

leadership has shown that by emphasizing personal attention, leaders' individualized consideration towards their subordinates positively influences subordinates' task, contextual, and creative performance (Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011). Similarly, the literatures on trust and social exchange suggest that when subordinates believe their leader demonstrates trust, care, and consideration, they will reciprocate by spending more time on work-related tasks and being motivated to go "above and beyond" their job role (Konovsky & Pugh, 1994), thereby increasing subordinates' job performance both directly and indirectly through increased commitment and satisfaction (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002).

The lower half of Table 1 reports the nonparametric tests that compare leaders who display downward deference behaviors with those who do not across our job performance and career progress variables. Our analysis shows that downward deference was related with higher job performance evaluations from leaders' immediate supervisors. Performance ratings in T showed that leaders who exhibited downward deference ($M = 4.04$) were given significantly higher performance ratings than their colleagues who did not exhibit downward deference ($M = 3.44$). Similarly, ratings from the previous period T-1 demonstrated that leaders who adopted downward deference behaviors ($M = 4.04$) received significantly higher ratings from their supervisors than those that did not ($M = 3.48$). Finally, results revealed that leaders who displayed downward deference obtained significantly more progressions into executive ranks ($M = 2.43$) than those who did not display downward deference ($M = 2.00$).

DISCUSSION

In this study, we set out to develop theory about why, when, and how people with positional power enact downward deference toward subordinates with expertise. Rather than exercising leadership directives typically afforded by their formal rank in their more familiar

territories, some global leaders displayed downward deference: due to leaders' limitations in expertise, networks, and influence relative to what their local subordinates can contribute, they yielded to their subordinates' expertise by privileging subordinates' judgements, transferring influence to subordinates, and conforming to local hierarchical expectations. Our findings also show that leaders practiced downward deference to reduce social distance from their subordinates in contexts where cultural differences inhibit relational closeness to subordinates. Supplementary quantitative analyses revealed that previous experiences in foreign cultures—both in terms of total time spent abroad and aggregate exposure to cultures that were more distant from their culture of origin—correlated with whether leaders decided to practice downward deference or not. Further, our quantitative analysis revealed that those who enacted downward deference received higher job performance ratings and were promoted to higher executive levels over time compared to their counterparts.

Taken together, our analysis and findings suggest a theoretical framework that reflects why, when, and how people enact downward deference to respond to their lack of relevant local expertise, networks, and influence, and with what outcome (see Figure 1). Our framework suggests that leaders' recognition that they have limited expertise, networks, and influence relative to their lower-ranked subordinates is a necessary condition to practice downward deference. In this regard, leaders are more likely to adopt downward deference behaviors in their leadership approach given their own limitations when they have previously gained deep experience in foreign contexts. By deep experiences, we mean an intensity that enables learning of new behaviors after having been enmeshed in foreign contexts for a significant amount of time, or having had significant contact with foreign contexts that are substantially novel and that substantially differ in practice or assumptions from one's culture of origin (Adam, Obodaru, Lu,

Maddux, & Galinsky, 2018; Dragoni, Oh, Tesluk, Moore, VanKatwyk, & Hazucha, 2014). In turn, leaders who practice downward deference, which consists of reducing the perceived social distance towards and yielding to the expertise of their subordinates, will achieve higher job performance ratings and higher internal promotion rates. Below, we discuss the implications of our findings for theory and practice on power hierarchies, social distance, and leadership, as well as note the study's limitations.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Theoretical Contributions

First, our findings break from traditional social psychology-based theories of power and deference, which provide explanations for why individuals with positional power expect upward-flowing forms of deference while limiting their tendency to defer to lower ranking subordinates (Anderson & Brion, 2014; Keltner et al., 2003). Given the difficulties for people with positional power to enact downward deference, our findings provide an explanation for why and under which conditions such behavior may occur, especially in a context that is characterized by distinct stakeholders, languages, cultural norms, and regulatory frameworks. Social distance theory of power (Magee & Smith, 2013) holds that the powerful perceive themselves as distinct, independent, and separate from others, increasing leaders' preference for social distance from lower ranking individuals (Lammers et al., 2012; Lee & Tiedens, 2001). Previous research has suggested that positional power creates social distance more reliably than expertise does (Magee, Milliken, & Lurie, 2010). However, our findings also demonstrate that positional power may vary with respect to the propensity for leaders to create and maintain social distance. Specifically, leaders who enacted downward deference sought to *reduce* social distance to their local subordinates in order to become closer to them.

In addition, while the experience of social distance has been shown to increase the confidence in judgement and decision-making of the powerful (e.g., Nussbaum, Liberman, & Trope, 2006; Tost et al., 2012), some global leaders at WorldTech seemed to have learned from their previous experience in foreign contexts that social distance may impair their capacity to make judgements and accomplish work goals. In fact, previous experiences distinguished WorldTech leaders who practiced downward deference from those who did not. Our work suggests that experience with pronounced cultural social distance becomes salient and a trigger to adaptation. In the case of leaders who practiced downward deference, adaptation was part of their leadership behaviors that did not rely on positional power. Instead, they recognized the impact of the cultural differences and the need to rely on their subordinates to overcome their limited capabilities vis-à-vis their subordinates.

Relatedly, we contribute to the notion that contextual characteristics such as novelty and unfamiliarity may motivate people with positional power to improve their perception of those in lower ranks to meet task-related demands. The literature on power has suggested that, given the social distance, power decreases individuals' accuracy of inferring the thoughts and feelings of those with lower positional power (e.g., Magee & Smith, 2013). Such empathic accuracy is, however, influenced not only by the social, but also the cultural distance between two individuals (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2003). Our findings demonstrate that individuals with positional power seem to learn—due to their previous deep non-native exposure—to get closer to their subordinates to compensate for the drawbacks of decreased empathic accuracy that are integral to navigating a culturally novel and unfamiliar context. The literature also indicates that positional power reduces actors' motivation to accurately perceive the other party in the power

relationship (e.g., Georgesen & Harris, 2000). Yet, downward deference leaders in our study actively sought to learn about, connect with, and be guided by their subordinates.

Second, our study addresses recent calls for examining in more detail how international experience affects salient outcomes at work (Maddux, Lu, Affinito, & Galinsky, in press). Although leaders' international experience has been positively associated with firm performance (e.g., Carpenter, Sanders, & Gregersen, 2001), meta-analyses on the merits of international experience have been mixed. For example, international experience is often found to be insufficient to help individuals adapt in cross-cultural contexts, nor does it result in improved individual performance (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005; Takeuchi & Chen, 2013). Our findings, on the other hand, suggest that although deep non-native experience might not necessarily help leaders perform better themselves, leaders might draw on their learned experience to decrease the distance to their subordinates and facilitate a more proximate path to execute organizational goals, which ultimately entails secondary benefits for leaders themselves.

Further, Maddux and colleagues (in press) argue that the effect of multicultural experience is also a function of the positive or negative appraisal of the experience. While our study cannot speak to the valence of leaders' previous foreign experience, our findings suggest that for leaders to choose to exercise downward deference, a certain amount of deep non-native experience is necessary. In other words, rather than a positive or negative nature of global leaders' experience, downward deference is contingent on more radical experiences that prompt them to reevaluate the level of social distance suitable to accomplish work goals.

Third, our findings suggest that downward deference may entail both instrumental and communal bases. Our study thus expands theory on how individuals with positional power seek to maintain and extend their positional power (Anderson & Brion, 2014). While scholars have

primarily demonstrated that superiors use or exploit their hierarchical position to entrench themselves (e.g., Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Greve & Mitsuhashi, 2007; Pfeffer & Fong, 2005), we show when superiors may *disregard* organizational hierarchy and when they do not. Importantly, given the correlated positive performance and career implications in our study, downward deference may be an instrumental act to maintain positional power. This instrumental understanding of downward deference is in line with broader views that power primarily promotes agentic behavior (Magee & Smith, 2013; Rucker et al., 2018). Whereas research has highlighted conditions under which individuals with positional power may act in less self-interested ways, such as when they have a strong moral identity (e.g., DeCelles, DeRue, Margolis, & Ceranic, 2012), we suggest that both instrumental and communal motivations might be at play. A communal orientation values connecting with others, helping and grooming others, and an appetite or appreciation for collaboration (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). For example, leaders who practiced downward deference sought interpersonal connection, worked alongside subordinates, and identified opportunities for growth and soliciting their feedback and voice, many of which reach beyond immediate work goal achievement.

We also contribute to research on power more broadly. Whereas the literature in sociology and organizational theory has traditionally conceived of power as the obverse to dependence (Blau, 1964; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), scholars have long pointed out that an emphasis on domination and control offers an incomplete account of how power is enacted in organizations (Huising, 2015; Ocasio, Pozner, & Milner, 2020). Subsequent work has shown that direct positional power has increasingly been complemented by less-hierarchical and distributed forms of coordination and control, including normative (Kunda, 1992; Turco, 2016) and structural (Lee & Edmondson, 2017) approaches. However, while we know that leaders rely on subordinates

with expertise (Barley, 1996; Huising, 2014; Waring & Currie, 2009), our understanding of why some leaders may defer to lower ranking individuals while others choose not to is still scarce, especially if the leaders have operated in the same normative and structural organizational context for a long time. Although WorldTech was characterized by a strong hierarchical structure, our leaders differed notably with regard to whether they adopted traditional coercive approaches to enacting their positional power or, by contrast, proactively *sought* dependence to avail the organization of subordinates' resources. In other words, the leaders not only gave voice to their subordinates (Detert & Burris, 2007), but also actively nurtured reliance on their subordinates as a relational strategy to address the asymmetry between their positional power and expertise. The choice to enact downward deference rather than practice more antagonistic approaches discussed in the literature (Huising, 2014; Waring & Currie, 2009) was a function of an individual's previous exposure to radical experience.

Finally, our study provides new insights into research on leadership and how leaders motivate and engage subordinates. The focus of downward deference departs from notions of delegation, which concerns leaders assigning responsibility to subordinates and allocating the authority necessary to complete tasks that the leaders formerly handled themselves (Yukl & Fu, 1999; Yukl, 2006). The management literature tends to conceptualize delegation as a behavior that grants subordinates increased autonomy and decision latitude (Leana, 1986, 1987; Yukl & Fu, 1999). As such, it involves a "specific division of labor which is determined hierarchically" (Locke & Schweiger, 1979: 274). By contrast, downward deference consists of leaders disregarding hierarchy in order to learn from those with expert knowledge. Downward deference also moves beyond modes that empower subordinates with relatively high-rank leadership behaviors, such as participative decision-making and coaching (e.g., Bennis & Townsend, 1997;

Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006). Specifically, it constitutes instrumental behaviors unique to situations wherein leaders lack knowledge and expertise, and thus need to rely on their subordinates. However, downward deference potentially involves more informal acts of delegation and empowerment, and it may lead to the perception of empowerment among followers. We would encourage future research to examine these relationships in greater detail.

Practical Implications

Our findings also offer a series of managerial implications. The literature has shown that people with positional power convey less empathetic concern, are less likely to take another person's perspective, tend to ignore expert advice, and rely more strongly on stereotypes (see Magee & Galinsky, 2008). By contrast, downward deference behaviors serve to subvert organizational hierarchy and submit to lower-ranking individuals for their expertise and offer work-related benefits to leaders.

Our study suggests that downward deference behaviors might be important to assess and promote in global organizations' talent selection, internal promotion, and development decisions. For example, by offering developmental work assignments to non-native settings, organizations can provide their cadre of future global leaders with opportunities to learn and apply downward deference. In this regard, our findings seem to support previous indications (e.g., Adam et al., 2018; Dragoni et al., 2014) that extended immersion in unfamiliar, non-native contexts affords individuals with deep experiences that entail particularly valuable opportunities to learn new sets of behaviors and reflect on taken-for-granted assumptions about how to enact power for advancing individual and organizational goals.

In addition, leaders in domestic contexts might also be able to enact downward deference when they have to rely on their subordinates for their expertise or specific knowledge, such as in

the case of leading functional specialists or a tech-savvy millennial workforce. If assessed through performance management systems, downward deference may also serve as a selection criterion for filling leadership roles more generally.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this research provides valuable insights into downward deference and power in organizations, it has at least three limitations that future work could address. First, our choice of data collection and analysis procedures allowed us to examine the perspective of the leaders but not the subordinates. For this reason, we do not know whether subordinates were fully aware of the downward deference that was directed towards them and how they responded affectively, cognitively, and behaviorally. Future research on the experience of subordinates is warranted to sharpen our understanding of how recipients perceive downward deference.

The second limitation concerns the extent to which the leaders in our study may represent an extreme case because of their seniority levels within their organization; all were within four levels from the CEO rank with an average of 22 years at WorldTech. Although extreme cases allow a sharper understanding and corresponding theory building of the phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 1989), they limit the type of claims we can make. As our exploratory quantitative analyses seem to suggest, leaders in our study who exhibited downward deference behaviors were more secure in their professional trajectories (Abraham & Medoff, 1984) and their hierarchical positions (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), making them less susceptible to threats (Karremans & Smith, 2010) or contestation (Ocasio, 1994) of their power. It is therefore important to replicate the type of downward deference we observed with other, less senior leaders or in other settings. Research on the relationship between leadership and downward deference that might occur at multiple levels of an organizational hierarchy is also warranted.

Third, although we were able to generate theory using archival performance evaluations, career progression, and experience of a subset of global leaders who were associated with downward deference behaviors, our study does not allow us to test this theory. Comprehensive examinations involving experimental designs or data with systematic variability may help establish causality and determine the relationships among the constructs in our proposed model. We would also encourage scholars to further assess the emerging factor structure as well as the wider nomological network of downward deference.

Finally, a fruitful area of research might be to assess the role of gender in downward deference. In particular, future research can examine whether female leaders who practice downward deference might be penalized. Research on the double bind dilemma for women leaders suggests that women may experience perceptions of incompetence or fear of backlash if they defer to their subordinates (e.g., Akinola, Martin, & Phillips, 2018). Yet, deference might be advantageous to advance work. Additionally, it is unclear how this type of deference might unfold in various industries, such as those deemed as more masculine (e.g., offshore oil platforms) versus less masculine, for example. Systematic experimental approaches that can isolate causality might enrich our understanding of downward deference by gender and how to mitigate potential differences.

Organizational members can find that their positional power might not be sufficient to understand and advance their goals, necessitating downward deference practices. By understanding and attending to the experience of downward deference and the positive performance that can ensue, our study shows that organizations can better help their workers collaborate despite differences in power to gain a competitive advantage.

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FIGURE 1

A Framework of the Conditions, Behaviors, and Outcomes of Downward Deference

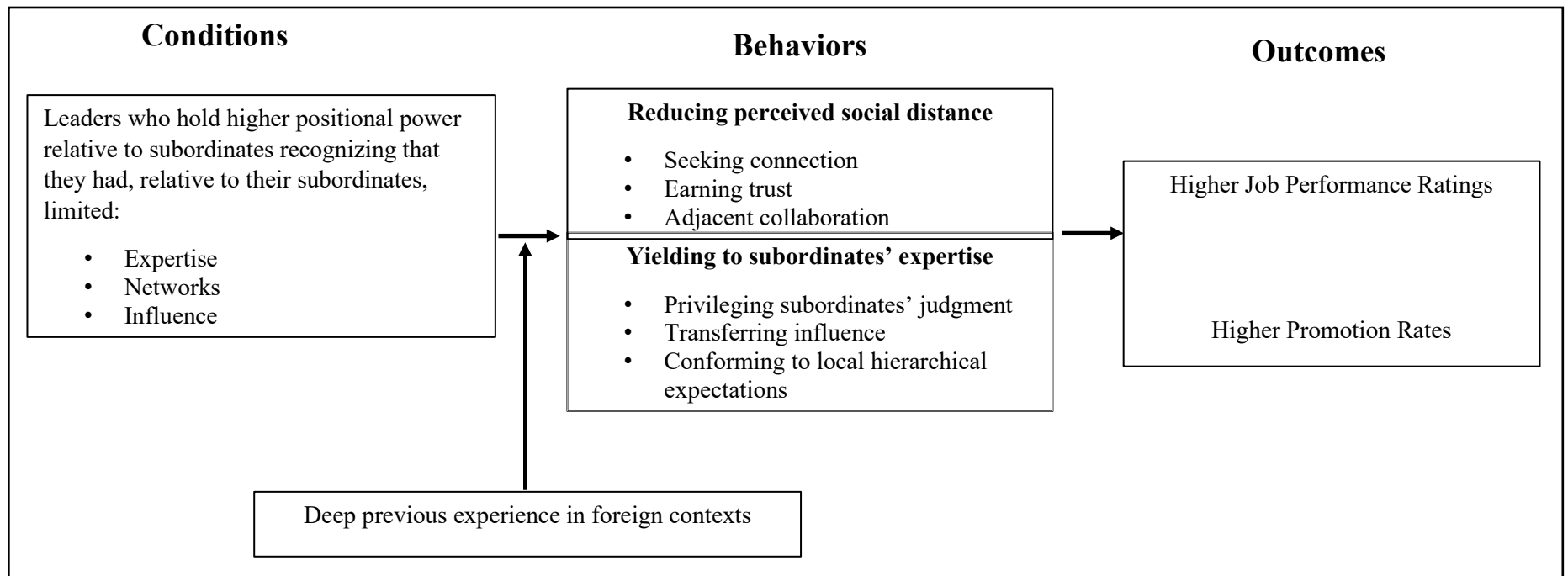


TABLE 1
Correlates of Downward Deference^a

Variable	Leaders who display downward deference		Leaders who do <u>not</u> display downward deference		Kruskal-Wallis test	Mann-Whitney test
	N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)	statistic (<i>df</i>)	statistic <i>z</i>
Number of foreign countries previously lived in	28	1.00 (.90)	33	.61 (.83)	3.22 (1)	-1.94
Time spent in non-native contexts	28	26.57 (34.00)	33	9.33 (17.74)	6.02* (1)	-2.58**
Cultural richness (Hofstede)	28	37.50 (38.32)	33	16.82 (29.41)	5.57* (1)	-2.50*
Cultural richness (Ronen & Shenkar)	28	85.46 (98.47)	33	26.45 (49.80)	7.13* (1)	-2.83**
Job performance T	28	4.04 (.69)	33	3.44 (.76)	7.23** (1)	-2.90**
Job performance T-1	28	4.04 (.51)	33	3.48 (.67)	9.15** (1)	-3.40**
Number of progressions to executive ranks	28	2.43 (.79)	33	2.00 (.87)	4.11* (1)	-2.16*

^a N = 61. SD = standard deviation, df = degrees of freedom.

*p < .05, **p < .01

TABLE 2

Representative Data of Downward Deference Behaviors

Mechanisms	Illustrative Quotes
(a) Seeking connection to reduce social distance	<p>“You have to find the common connection point. For example, like there might be certain festivals that would happen in [country], and I would always find something that was part of their culture... Things like that. When the sports were happening, I made a purposeful attempt at understanding who the stars were and finding a connection point to talk to them about, in a simple way, something that was easier for them to talk about like foods, something that was TV, something more social.” (U.S. Leader, L89)</p> <p>“You need to start knowing them; you need to start knowing their family, their friends, it’s making personal impressions, spending time with them outside work. That is great for them, you know, [they] are more inclined to collaborate and work with. As a basis, I try to understand his or her personality and their hobby and their daily life and past job experience. And then such kind of communication makes them comfortable to work with. I need to make a good relationship... Every occasion [possible] is a good opportunity for [us] to really understand each other in order to make a good team.” (Italian Leader, L68)</p>
(b) Earning trust to reduce social distance	<p>“They recognized my effort to try to learn their language, you know, to be able to communicate in Spanish with them. So that was a factor to make them easily trust me and start sharing things with me.” (Brazilian Leader, L107)</p> <p>“I have a one-on-one with each of my leadership team every week, and they’re all different relationships because everybody is different. But the base there is that it’s important to show personal interest, and build trust, and focus on the task at hand.” (Australian, L62)</p>
(c) Adjacent collaboration with subordinates to reduce social distance	<p>“I’m not standing at the top [of the team] and waiting that other people are doing it. I really try to collaborate with my teams, not the next level only, but also with the team [on] the ground... And to coach them, to guide them, to support them... [And] I also can really listen to feedback I get from the team... and try to adopt this... diverse feedback or diverse coaching/mentoring...” (German Leader, L60)</p> <p>“They also have to remember that I am a person working with you that not only machine [sales] results, and that’s also something that, when the team feels that, I think it also helps you to create a healthy environment. And I think at the end of the whole thing is working toward their success.” (Brazilian Leader, L33)</p>
(d) Privileging subordinates’ judgment	<p>“I asked my China team, ‘I’m going into this very big negotiation. Tell me how this should work. Tell me how I should engage with the senior executive. Tell me what will work with him. What will help him bring us together? What will help bring us together?’ And I listened to them. There are many times I make a decision to do something that is against what I would naturally do, because I trust the team understands better than I do how to handle these situations. It is their culture.” (U.S. Leader, L70)</p> <p>“A good global leader listens to the local market, listens to the clients, and tailors solutions to fit the different cultures, different territories, and different countries...you have to have an open mind and be ready to accept a way of doing business which is very different from your own culture or the way you do business. Instead of being very criticizing or giving direction or telling others the way you would in the Western countries, you just have to change. You have to be flexible and really listen to the local sales team or to local manufacturing team, and listen to the people who are closer to the client, closer to where the demands are. I think a global leader should acquire the capability to be open-minded, to be adaptable.” (Chinese Leader, L53)</p>
(e) Transferring influence	<p>“I work with my peers and the people reporting to me in a very open way... I wouldn’t say that I express my leadership imposing things or using my level of my experience. I really take the opportunity to learn from the others... I like a lot of reverse mentoring, for example.” (Italian Leader, L68)</p> <p>“My predominant style is player-coach style, where I’d rather work as a member of a group to help the group succeed. Another term I’d use for it is servant-led leadership.” (U.S. Leader, L10)</p>
(f) Conforming to local hierarchical expectations	<p>“There is a lot of sensitivities around hierarchy in China, there are sensitivities around not being overly aggressive and not being overly impatient as well... you do have to apply different leadership styles.” (U.S. Leader, L14)</p> <p>“I wouldn’t assign female executives (in the Middle East)... in Saudi Arabia and some other Middle East countries to fit the local culture.” (Japanese Leader, L113)</p>

Appendix A

Relevant Portions of Semi-structured Interview Protocol

1. Please describe what you currently do at [WorldTech].
2. What are the responsibilities of your position?
3. Where is your position located and how often are you traveling internationally?
4. How many direct reports do you have? Where are they located?
5. How does your role / business unit fit into the larger [WorldTech] organization?
6. Please describe your perspective on your role as a global leader. What does the term ‘global leadership’ mean to you? What responsibilities and tasks does it involve for you?
7. What is it like to lead in a non-native country/market? Please be specific.
8. How would you describe your leadership approach in a culture and language that is non-native serving non-native markets?
9. How do you motivate your subordinates?
10. How do you persuade your subordinates to achieve the goals you have set for your team?
11. How do you build relationships within your team?
12. Could you describe a typical day managing your team? Could you describe a typical week (if it makes more sense to change unit)?
13. What challenges do you feel have been unique for you as you led [subsidiary]? How have you overcome them?
14. How do you manage if your subordinates have more information, influence, relationships or connections on the ground than you?

Endnote

ⁱ Hereafter, we include identifiers for leaders that we quote using the letter “L” to denote Leader along with a unique number.