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# Pushing up to a point: Assertiveness and effectiveness in leadership and interpersonal dynamics

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## Abstract

Past work on interpersonal assertiveness and organizational effectiveness paints a mixed picture: some research suggests a positive link, other work highlights negative effects. This article reviews recent research and an account that stems from a different perspective, looking at assertiveness as a factor in leadership shortcomings and failure. This approach suggests that interpersonal assertiveness is a major factor and has a curvilinear, inverted-U-shaped relationship with leadership effectiveness. I review evidence for this effect as well as social and instrumental outcome mediators. I consider moderators and boundaries, sources of individual differences in assertive behavior, prospects for changing assertiveness, and factors in the perception of assertive behavior. Beyond the specific results I review, I argue that this program of work offers value by highlighting the lens of conflict as a generative perspective on leadership. Exploring how, and how hard, leaders fight pulls in insights from a variety of literatures and prompts new research that can help expand the scholarly portrait of leadership.

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## 1. Introduction

From Buddha's middle way to Goldilocks' porridge, cultural wisdom reflects the fact that some things are best in moderation. So it is, perhaps, with interpersonal assertiveness. "Be not too sweet, lest people swallow you . . ." an old proverb cautions, "yet not too bitter lest they spit you out." Leaders, subordinates, and colleagues vary in their assertiveness and, accordingly, most of us can think of yielding and passive coworkers who have been swallowed up as well as bullies and jerks who have been spit out. Yet anecdotes and proverbs go only so far in revealing the mechanics of leadership and interpersonal relations. What does social science have to say about the link between assertiveness and organizational effectiveness? Does it matter much how hard leaders push? Why do individuals display different levels of assertiveness—and what are their prospects for changing? What governs how assertive behavior is perceived? In various forms, these matters have interested scholars for generations, yet new answers to these questions have taken shape in recent research (e.g., Ames, 2008a). This article attempts to summarize a number of recent findings, put them in context, and extend the overarching story of assertiveness. In the end, I believe the account of assertiveness I present here enhances our understanding of management and leadership, challenges some past habits of organizational and behavioral research, and points toward potential interventions that can help individuals assert themselves in effective ways, for their own sake as well as for the people and organizations around them.

It is worth stressing at the outset that the conception of assertiveness at the heart of this account comes not so much from prior scholarly theories but from everyday perceptions people have of one another as managers and leaders in action and, especially, in conflict situations. As such, this chapter unfolds in a somewhat unorthodox way. I begin by fleshing out the everyday conception of assertiveness and continue by reviewing the basic account and empirical evidence for how it relates to leadership. With this established, I then put these ideas in the context of historical work. This review shows how elements of the account I offer were anticipated by past work and yet it also identifies reasons why the story of assertiveness and leadership may have been incompletely understood or mischaracterized previously. After reviewing past work, I press further up and down the causal chain, presenting arguments and findings on the sources of interpersonal assertiveness as well as how others perceive and react to it. I conclude by considering unanswered questions and future research directions.

## 2. Interpersonal assertiveness

As I use the term here, assertiveness is a characterization of how a person responds in a situation in which her positions and/or interests are, or could be, in conflict with others' positions or interests. That is, given some real or potential opposition, people must repeatedly grapple with a basic question: *How hard should I push?* I believe peoples' behavioral responses to this question are generally arrayed in the minds of both actors and observers along a dimension ranging from avoidance and passivity at one extreme to aggression and hostility at the other.

Some concrete organizational examples help to illustrate assertiveness as it is approached in this article. Imagine that a newly formed team of coworkers gathers to discuss their organization's strategy. In the first meeting, one member advocates entering a new geographic market, but another has recently analyzed the possibility and concluded with confidence that it would be a disastrous move. Does the skeptical member speak up forcefully in this new group, unequivocally disparaging the option, and championing her own ideas? Does she make a more diplomatic observation about the need for caution and analysis? Or does she hold back entirely, wishing to avoid confrontation and hoping that the truth will eventually emerge?

Imagine that the head of a marketing group discusses his unit's annual budget with the organization's CEO. On the line are his resources for buying advertising as well as funding his own people, including bonuses and new hires.

The CEO opens by giving the marketing group an ambitious market share goal and a paltry budget increase. Does the group's leader show resistance and push for additional resources, politely probe for areas of potential adjustment, or accept the goal and budget as given?

Lastly, consider a manager preparing to give a subordinate his annual face-to-face review. She is pleased with his work in some areas, but finds other parts of his performance appalling. Does she focus the conversation on a blunt and unflinching dissection of his problems and their costliness? Does she applaud his strengths, describe his shortcomings, and offer her support? Or does she avoid problem areas altogether, keeping the conversation short and positive?

These cases highlight the kinds of daily choices individuals and managers make in their interpersonal assertiveness toward peers, superiors, and subordinates. For this article, I define assertiveness as a dimension in everyday perceptions reflecting an individual's interpersonal willingness to stand up and speak out for their own interests and ideas, pursuing their objectives and resisting others' impositions. This spectrum is meant to reflect the folk construct that I believe is present in everyday judgments of interpersonal behavior, based on my experience in coaching professionals and executives and in my research on perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of organizational managers and leaders (cf Ames & Flynn, 2007).<sup>1</sup>

As shown in Fig. 1, one end of this spectrum entails passivity and yielding while the other end features aggression and hostility.<sup>2</sup> In between are gradations ranging from engagement and initiation to collaboration and resistance. The term *assertiveness* itself seems to do double duty in everyday use, referring to this overall spectrum of behavior (e.g., "He needs to decrease his assertiveness") as well as to a moderate or moderately high point on the spectrum (e.g., "She is assertive").

"Assertiveness" is frequently used to describe both behaviors and individuals. Throughout this article, labels such as "a highly assertive person" refer to someone who is seen by others as habitually acting in a highly assertive way. Note that assertiveness suggests some kind of tension between parties' interests, but it does not necessarily mean selfishness or self-serving behavior on behalf of an actor. For instance, a manager could be seen as an assertive advocate for others with little direct benefit for him or herself, such as when a mentor fights to get an attractive assignment for a junior colleague or when a group leader pushes against his or her superiors for resources for a work team.

### 3. The prevalent challenge of assertiveness

Priorities and desires are sufficiently varied from one person to the next that some degree of potential conflict is present in nearly every relationship and interaction. This is not to say that overt fighting is the natural condition of human relations; it is obviously not. Rather, one of the basic motivating observations for the work described here is that virtually every interaction in an organization or elsewhere is a kind of negotiation, however subtle, in which each party faces a recurring question: *How hard should I push?* (In context, this question takes on many specific forms: *Should I say no? Should I ask for more than I need? Should I disguise my anger? Should I give in?* and so forth.) Another basic motivating observation for the present work is that people often struggle to answer this question and end up behaving in a way that others see as wide of the mark. Put another way, regularly getting interpersonal assertiveness "right," at least in the eyes of onlookers, is both difficult and important; many managers and leaders fail at it, at least some of the time.

<sup>1</sup> Some scholarly accounts that deal with related behaviors posit multi-dimensional spaces defined by orthogonal constructs, such as dual concern theory (e.g., Carnevale & Pruitt, 1992) and the interpersonal circumplex (e.g., Wiggins & Broughton, 1985). The present account is not meant as a critique of multi-dimensional models; the distinctions they offer may have considerable scholarly value. Instead, the present account revolves around everyday perceptions of behavior from the perspective of both onlookers and actors. Based on my experience coaching and studying colleagues' feedback to coworkers, I believe there is something like a single dimension of assertiveness at the heart of many judgments, reflected in onlooker observations such as "She pushes too hard" and "He could be tougher" and in self-focused statements such as "I'm worried about asking for too much" and "I know I'm a pushover."

<sup>2</sup> The interpersonal behaviors shown across this spectrum differ not only in degree but also in kind. The focal dimension is the everyday perception of a given actor's behavioral assertiveness in the eyes of an actor or observer, given a situation of real or potential interpersonal conflict. In a negotiation, for instance, perceptions of increasing assertiveness could increase with degrees of behavior (e.g., when a seller makes a counter-offer at 10% more than a buyer's initial offer, she is seen as slightly assertive whereas when she makes a counter-offer at 100% more, she is seen as highly assertive). In the context of influence, though, differences in kinds of behavior might be associated with increasing perceptions of assertiveness (e.g., when a manager flatters and pleads with a colleague to adopt his proposal he may be seen as relatively unassertive whereas when he issues threats and ultimatums he may be seen as highly assertive). Such differences in kind capture the breath of the "assertiveness" construct as I have construed it.

|                   |                      |                      |                    |
|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| <i>Avoidance</i>  | <i>Initiation</i>    | <i>Collaboration</i> | <i>Competition</i> |
| <i>Withdrawal</i> | <i>Engagement</i>    | <i>Resistance</i>    | <i>Aggression</i>  |
| <i>Passivity</i>  | <i>Accommodation</i> | <i>Assertion</i>     | <i>Hostility</i>   |



| Domain                 | Illustrative behavior or style      |  |  |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Conflict</b>        | Avoidant,<br>trivializing           | Candid,<br>constructive                  | Belligerent,<br>demanding              |
| <b>Negotiation</b>     | Weak opening,<br>ready concessions  | Strong opening,<br>integrative solutions | Extreme opening,<br>aggressive tactics |
| <b>Teamwork</b>        | Silent with opinions,<br>conformist | Egalitarian, open,<br>engaged            | Confrontational,<br>dominance-seeking  |
| <b>Influence</b>       | Supplicant,<br>appeasing            | Active, forthright,<br>persuasive        | Bullying,<br>cajoling                  |
| <b>Decision making</b> | Equivocal,<br>indecisive            | Proactive,<br>inclusive                  | Unilateral,<br>self-serving            |

Fig. 1. Everyday perceptions of interpersonal assertiveness. *Note:* See Footnote 2 for comments on how behavior differs in both kind and degree across this spectrum.

Evidence for this idea comes from a series of recent studies in which workers provided reports on colleagues and managers. In one study (Ames & Flynn, 2007, Study 1), several hundred Masters of Business Administration (MBA) students gathered reports from former coworkers – including subordinates, peers, and managers – on their strengths and weaknesses as a colleague. We pursued quantitative text analyses, focusing on the frequency of dispositional adjectives in nearly 500 weakness comments (see Table 1 for example comments). This approach revealed that

Table 1  
Example comments about colleagues' and leaders' weaknesses.

| Comments about colleagues  | Comments about leaders   |
|--|--|
| X needs more proactive involvement in conflict situations.   | Completely disorganized, could not manage her own projects much less those of her subordinates. Poor sense of time management.   |
| He can be very disorganized and often procrastinates heavily. Accordingly, this can put his colleagues in a difficult situation should they not be able to work as quickly or efficiently as him (when he is focused). | X was at times not assertive as a leader, perhaps due to his proximity in age to those he managed. He would often discourage those he managed to dissent with senior management. |
| I think X is sometimes too considerate—she could defend her own positions more if she was a bit more assertive and direct.   | Not too knowledgeable about her field, not assertive enough, and not enough teambuilding within the team.  |
| Could be a little more succinct and to the point; “overthinks” issues.   | Somewhat instills fear in his subordinates. A bit chauvinistic. Does not take no for an answer. Demanding (sometimes overly).  |
| Lacks tolerance of others not as smart or quick as he is. Sometimes viewed as selfish—wants to get his objectives met first.   | Sometimes seems to lack charisma and other “people skills.”  |

*Note:* Comments about colleagues from Ames & Flynn, Study 1; comments about leaders from Ames & Flynn, Study 3.

adjectives related to assertiveness (such as aggressive, competitive, proactive, and direct) were relatively common, appearing significantly more frequently in weakness comments than adjectives related to dimensions such as intelligence, conscientiousness, and charisma. Indeed, the most frequently appearing dispositional adjective was *assertive*, found in over 7% of weakness comments, twice as common as the second most frequent adjective, *focused*.

Such text analysis, however, does not resolve the directionality of the comments, such as whether a reference to *assertive* indicates too much assertiveness or not enough. Further, this approach does not capture comments that indicate a dimension without using a relevant adjective (e.g., “She goes out of her way to avoid disagreements” or “He’s an idiot”). Accordingly, our research assistants, unaware of our predictions, coded the comments, assessing them for content as well as direction (“too much” or “too little” of a given quality). Again, assertiveness was a dominant theme in descriptions of weaknesses, appearing in over 50% of comments, considerably more than conscientiousness (18%), intelligence (under 1%), and charisma (under 1%). While references to these other dimensions as weaknesses referred overwhelmingly to “too little,” references to assertiveness were almost equally split between “too little” and “too much” assertiveness.

This initial study focused on MBA students as targets and on weaknesses as a colleague. A companion study focused specifically on leadership strengths and weaknesses of several hundred managers (Ames & Flynn, 2007, Study 3). Text and coding analyses were performed to gauge the prevalence of various themes in the comments (see Table 1 for example comments). Both approaches revealed that assertiveness was a dominant theme in informant reports of leader weaknesses. As in the study described above, assertiveness was mentioned more frequently as a weakness than conscientiousness, intelligence, and charisma combined. (I return to descriptions of strengths later in the article.)

While separating reports of strengths and weaknesses appeared to bring the role of assertiveness into focus as a common vulnerability, a potential criticism of these studies is that they reveal less about leaders than about everyday conceptions of what “counts” as a valid and reportable leadership weakness. An extreme form of this critique could suggest that the apparent prevalence of assertiveness in these comments was a methodological artifact: assertiveness is an acceptable answer to a specific question about weaknesses, but it does not factor centrally into overall impressions of failed leaders.

A study of failed leaders, revolving around general descriptions of leaders rather than focusing informant comments on weaknesses, casts doubt on this critique (Ames, 2009a). In this research, professionals described the worst leaders they had ever worked for (see Table 2 for examples). The resulting descriptions of over 250 failed leaders were coded for reference to a number of themes, including assertiveness, integrity, communication, intelligence, supportiveness, and self-discipline. Assertiveness emerged as the most common theme, appearing clearly in nearly half of failed leader descriptions, significantly more than the other themes. A quarter of the assertiveness references indicated under-assertiveness with others indicating over-assertiveness. These results suggest that assertiveness commonly plays a noteworthy role in overall perceptions of failed leaders.

Of course, it important to recall that perceptions of effective leadership may often be filtered through a “romantic” lens whereby certain traits may be ascribed to leaders by virtue of their success or failure, even though those traits may not be inherent in the leader him or herself (e.g., Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985). It is worth noting, though, that much of the work on such leadership attributions revolves around charisma as a central construct (i.e., successful leaders tend to be seen as charismatic; unsuccessful ones tend not to be). My work on everyday perceptions of leadership weaknesses and ineffective leaders has turned up comparatively few references to charisma and many descriptions of under- and over-assertiveness. This is not to say that perceptions of leaders are free from distorting and

Table 2  
Example descriptions of failed leaders.

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Example failed leader descriptions

He was rude, self-centered, and controlling. He thought he was the only one with anything valuable to say and would not listen to dissenting opinions. He had no time management skills, no planning ability, and was extremely condescending and dismissive.

She was actually very effective at managing; however, she was too scared to push for any kind of change or fight for her employees in terms of raises and promotions. Thus, many people left because they were not moving up.

Not a hard worker. Stayed home and worked from home computer often. Made promises that he didn't keep. Wasn't as smart as he thought he was. He was a complete bully. He focused on scaring people into believing they made critical mistakes more than helping people understand how to do things better. He had almost no interest in building a strong team to support him. Motivation by fear was his thing. Didn't work so well.

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romanticizing attributions; rather, it suggests that when failed leaders are de-romanticized, it is assertiveness, not charisma, that looms large in perceptions.

Overall, the research reviewed here illuminates the prevalence of assertiveness as an apparent interpersonal and organizational challenge. Assertiveness may be an essential component of effective leadership and a common – if not leading – culprit when leadership goes awry.

#### 4. Curvilinear effects, mediators, and situational fit

##### 4.1. Curvilinear effects

The research noted above suggests that, at least in the eyes of colleagues, assertiveness can go wrong in both directions. Some coworkers and leaders were singled out for being too assertive whereas others were seen as not assertiveness enough, implying an inverted-U-shaped relation with leadership and organizational effectiveness. This stands in contrast to other dimensions, such as intelligence, conscientiousness, and charisma, where “more” of these qualities was almost always seen as “better.”

The curvilinear effect implied by the text descriptions in our research has been borne out in studies using continuous measures of individual qualities. Various indices of manager and leader assertiveness have shown the expected curvilinear links with dependent measures including influence, managing conflict, leadership effectiveness, expected future leadership success, and a willingness to work for that leader in the future (Ames & Flynn, 2007). Those typically showing very high or low levels of assertiveness tend to be rated lower on such measures of leadership and effectiveness than those typically displaying a middle range of assertiveness (see the left half of Fig. 2).

A study contrasting reports of effective and failed leaders further illuminated the curvilinear effect (Ames, 2009a). Over 250 professionals rated their best and worst leaders on a series of measures, including assertiveness. The frequency distribution of effective leaders showed an inverted-U-shape, peaking at moderately high assertiveness. As shown in the right half of Fig. 2, the distribution of failed leaders was markedly different, showing a U-shaped distribution. Compared to effective leaders, failed leaders were considerably more likely to show extremely low or high levels of assertiveness. Some 35% of failed leaders were rated as occupying one extreme or the other for assertiveness, compared to 13% of effective leaders (Ames, 2009a).

##### 4.2. Mediators

In short, in terms of leadership and organizational effectiveness, pushing seems to help, up to a point. What accounts for the impact of assertiveness? To understand how increasing assertiveness can help, and then hurt,

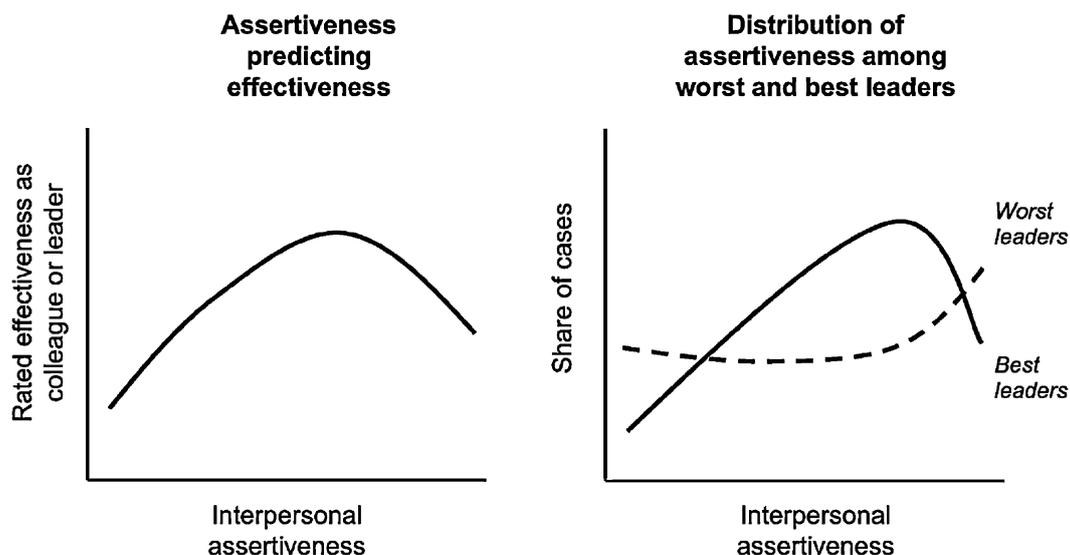


Fig. 2. Stylized relationship between assertiveness and effectiveness (left) and the distribution of effective and failed leaders across assertiveness (right).

leadership effectiveness, it is useful to decompose outcomes into social and instrumental domains. Social outcomes include positive relationships and being trusted—in effect, getting along. Instrumental outcomes include securing desired resources or task results and achieving favorable settlements or deal terms—in effect, getting one's way. In most cases, at least some success in each domain, both getting along and getting one's way, is arguably essential to sustained leadership effectiveness. However, if increasing levels of assertiveness yield tradeoffs between social and instrumental outcomes, identifying the apt level of assertiveness may be challenging. So, how does assertiveness relate to social and instrumental outcomes?

Past work has highlighted positive links between assertiveness and instrumental outcomes. This effect is clearly illustrated in the negotiations literature where assertive opening offers and a resistance to yielding to partners have been linked to favorable settlements (e.g., De Dreu, Weingart, & Kwon, 2000; Galinsky & Mussweiler, 2001; White & Neale, 1994). Prior work has also shown negative links between assertiveness and relational outcomes. For example, a number of studies on assertiveness training (e.g., Kelly, Kern, Kirkley, Patterson, & Keane, 1980; Kern, 1982) have shown that assertive people are seen as less likeable and friendly than unassertive people, even when their behavior is seen as effective and appropriate (Kelly et al., 1982). In organizations, those who attempt to influence others with aggressive tactics tend to be viewed poorly by peers and to evoke resistance (e.g., Case, Dossier, Murkinson, & Key, 1988; Falbe & Yukl, 1992). Assertive individuals are also more likely to elicit conflict with their exchange partners (e.g., Bono, Boles, Judge, & Lauver, 2002; Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Hair, 1996; Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980).

Given that instrumental and social outcomes sometimes diverge, it is important to understand how they combine in perceptions of leadership effectiveness. It might be that, as assertiveness increases, instrumental benefits offset social losses and these outcomes somehow cancel out. However, this would not explain the curvilinear effects of assertiveness on leadership effectiveness. Another mechanism may be at work. There are reasons to think that perceivers may pay more attention to the domain in which behavior is dysfunctional or costly. At low levels of assertiveness, perceivers may attend more closely to a leader's instrumental impotence than his or her relational success. At high levels of assertiveness, perceivers may attend more closely to a leader's social insufferability than his or her instrumental results. This would be consistent with past work on negativity effects, showing that perceivers focus more on negative than positive information when perceiving others, weighing it more heavily in their judgments (e.g., Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). If this is true, the factors that mediate the link between assertiveness and leadership effectiveness could shift across the assertiveness spectrum.

Results from a recent study of leadership evaluations are consistent with this pattern (Ames & Flynn, 2007; Study 3). At lower levels of assertiveness, instrumental outcomes, but not social ones, accounted for the link between assertiveness and leadership effectiveness. At higher levels of assertiveness, social outcomes, but not instrumental ones, accounted for the link. In other words, under-assertive leaders tend to be seen as ineffective because they cannot get their way; over-assertive leaders tend to be seen as ineffective because they cannot get along.

#### 4.3. *Situational fit*

As many scholars of leadership, and contingency theories of leader effectiveness, would be quick to point out, different situations call for different levels of assertiveness (e.g., Vroom & Jago, 2007; Zaccaro, 2007). Indeed, the results noted above do not suggest that effective leaders *always* show a moderate level of assertiveness, or that a moderate level of interpersonal assertiveness is always or even usually the ideal approach. Some situations clearly call for conciliation and accommodation; others call for vigorous resistance and competitiveness. It seems likely that leaders seen in general terms as moderately assertive may be more likely to show a greater range and situational appropriateness in their assertive behavior. Those seen as chronically low or high in assertiveness may have a more limited repertoire and fare worse at fitting their behavior to the situation.

Ongoing research (Ames, 2009b) is consistent with a contingency approach, suggesting that beyond a leader's average or typical level of assertiveness, the situational fit of assertiveness matters. I asked 74 working managers to identify their current leader or manager and rate his or her typical assertiveness and effectiveness, as in the research on curvilinear effects (e.g., Ames & Flynn, 2007). In this case, informants also identified the manager's assertiveness across a range of situations, including dealing with subordinates, superiors, customers, and suppliers. For each

domain, informants reported the manager's actual assertiveness, the normative or ideal assertiveness, and situational fit (i.e., whether the manager was under-, over-, or appropriately-assertive). Analyses replicated the curvilinear, inverted-U-shaped effect of typical assertiveness on effectiveness found in prior work. However, situational fit positively predicted effectiveness above and beyond these effects. In short, effectiveness is not simply a matter of chronically displaying a moderate level of assertiveness; calibrating assertiveness to the varying demands of interpersonal situations is a predictor of leadership effectiveness.

Having found evidence that situational fit for assertiveness matters to effectiveness, I turned to a related but separate question: How consistent are managers in their behavior? In the situational fit study just noted, I found marked consistency in informant ratings of managers across domains. For instance, on average across domains, those seen as over-assertive in one given domain (e.g., with customers) had a 60.3% likelihood of being seen as over-assertive in another given domain (e.g., with suppliers, superiors, or subordinates), compared to a 14.7% likelihood for those not seen as over-assertive in the initial domain. Across domains, ratings of the manager's assertiveness in a given domain (e.g., with subordinates) were systematically better predicted by ratings of the manager's assertiveness in *other* domains (e.g., with superiors) than by ratings of normative or ideal assertiveness for the given domain.

To gauge whether this consistency was simply in the eyes of the beholders (the informants), I conducted a follow-up study, analyzing whether ratings of MBA students' assertiveness and aggressiveness in one domain by one set of informants (i.e., work colleagues in their former workplace) were related to ratings of them by other informants in a different domain (i.e., school colleagues in their MBA program). Both within and across domains, informants showed considerable consistency in their judgments of targets; assertiveness and aggressiveness were judged at similar or higher levels of consistency as basic personality dimensions (including agreeableness, extraversion, emotional stability, openness, and conscientiousness; Ames, 2009b).

In sum, these results are consistent with past research on contingencies in leadership and managerial behavior: situations vary in the level of interpersonal assertiveness that is called for and fitting behavior to these different levels enhances effectiveness. However, there is also evidence that many managers struggle to calibrate their behavior in this way, often showing elevated or depressed levels of assertiveness across domains despite the apparent benefits of a contingent approach.

## 5. Assertiveness research in context

How does the work summarized so far relate to past and current thinking and evidence on leadership and associated traditions? In the sections that follow, I pursue three responses to this question. First, I discuss past work on related constructs. Second, I note two habits of past research that have likely had a limiting effect on the discipline's ability to elucidate the larger story of assertiveness. Third, I consider different "questions of leadership" and suggest that "how leaders fight" is a promising addition to the existing approaches to leadership.

### 5.1. Past work on related constructs

In the past 50 years, scholars of organizations and interpersonal relations have focused, conceptually and empirically, on a number of factors related to assertiveness. Among these is *dominance*, a motivation toward achieving positions of power, status, and control, arguably entailing a willingness to be interpersonally assertive. This dimension plays a defining role in the interpersonal circumplex (e.g., Wiggins & Broughton, 1985), a framework for describing the basic dynamics of interpersonal relations. Dating back at least to work using the California Personality Inventory (e.g., Gough, 1957, 1990), dominance has been repeatedly connected to leadership emergence. Several influential reviews of the leadership trait literature have singled dominance out as one of a handful of signature dispositions, often showing a positive linear association between measures of dominance and leadership emergence and effectiveness (e.g., Bass, 1990; see also Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). *Extraversion*, associated with verbal assertiveness (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1992), has been linked with leadership as well. In a recent meta-analysis, Judge et al. (2002) called extraversion "the most important trait of leaders and effective leadership" (p. 773) among the Big Five traits (which also include agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness). Another long-standing tradition of work has argued that *task* or *initiating structure* behaviors – including assertively defining goals and issuing work commands – are important for effective leadership (e.g., Stogdill, 1950). A recent meta-analysis by

Judge, Piccolo, and Ilies (2004) showed that such behaviors were positively and linearly predictive of leadership outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

Other approaches suggest a positive impact of seemingly less assertive styles and behaviors. For instance, recent work has identified a role for *self-sacrifice*, arguing that under certain conditions, leaders who forego personal interests and rewards are more effective (e.g., Choi & Mai-Dalton, 1999; De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2004). Elsewhere, Judge and colleagues' recent meta-analysis (2004) also showed that *consideration behaviors* – displaying concern and support for followers and their welfare – were positively associated with leader effectiveness (see also Footnote 2).

Researchers have also noted the ways in which extreme behaviors – both very low and very high assertiveness – can be ineffective or harmful. For instance, recent years have seen growing attention to *destructive*, *toxic*, and *abusive* leadership, with numerous articles and books highlighting the costliness of bullying and aggressive behavior (e.g., Kellerman, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Tierney & Tepper, 2007). At the opposite extreme of assertiveness, a meta-analysis by Judge and Piccolo (2004) of the past several decades of work on transformational and transactional leadership showed negative links between leadership effectiveness and both *laissez faire* and *passive* styles, including under-assertive leaders who avoid decisions and are reluctant to act.

To be sure, past work has not ignored assertiveness and related constructs. However, the overall image that emerges from this work can at times appear perplexing or even contradictory. There seems to be evidence that higher assertiveness constructs, such as dominance, meaningfully predict leadership effectiveness, and yet lower assertiveness constructs, such as self-sacrifice and consideration, are predictive as well. How are we to reconcile these ideas? The work outlined in the previous section suggests some possibilities. It may be that different constructs capture different portions of the assertiveness spectrum and the associated results shed light on a subset of the larger relationship. Such would be the case with destructive leadership, for instance, which arguably contrasts extremely high levels of assertiveness with other levels, or with *laissez faire* leadership, which arguably contrasts extremely low levels of assertiveness with other levels. It may also be that studies and models vary in their operationalization of effectiveness, with those finding positive linear effects of assertiveness stressing instrumental outcomes and those finding negative effects of assertiveness stressing social outcomes. Perhaps the recent work on assertiveness reviewed here does not so much overturn prior claims as it does integrate them, showing the impact of assertiveness across a broader range and in different outcome domains. In other words, the curvilinear model shows how it can be true that assertiveness is positively linked *and* negatively linked to effectiveness and that both highly assertive (e.g., destructive) *and* low assertive (e.g., *laissez faire*) leaders may be more likely to fail.

## 5.2. Habits of past research

In retrospect, two habits of scholarly thinking and research surface as explanations for why the curvilinear impact of assertiveness has been historically easy to overlook or mischaracterize, and why seemingly contradictory results have emerged. The first habit concerns a focus on linear effects (cf Simonton, 1995; Zaccaro, 2007). With a number of noteworthy exceptions (e.g., Fleishman, 1995; Simonton, 1985), most research on leadership dispositions has proceeded by measuring effectiveness and individual qualities across samples of leaders and then running correlations or linear regressions between the constructs. This approach certainly has merits, though revealing non-linear effects is not among them. Indeed, in the recent studies gauging both

<sup>3</sup> It is worth elaborating at least briefly on the similarities and differences between the present account and past and current work on consideration and initiating structure behaviors (e.g., Judge et al., 2004; Stogdill, 1950). At a very general level, these accounts seem to share a sentiment that overbearing managerial behavior risks being ineffective, as does a directionless style; effective managers tend to show some mix of getting along while also getting their way. However, the two accounts take different conceptual and analytical approaches. Work on consideration and structure grew from an analysis of which behaviors were associated with effective leadership. Two clusters of behaviors showed what seemed like special predictive promise, with behaviors such as “I am friendly and approachable” and “I do little things to make it pleasant to be a member of the group” falling under the label *consideration* and behaviors such as “I let group members know what is expected of them” and “I decide what shall be done and how it shall be done” falling under the label of *initiating structure*. In contrast, the present work revolves around everyday perceptions of managers' assertiveness rather than behavior frequencies. Put another way, the present account starts by assuming a manager faces a situation like those shown in Fig. 1 and focuses on how ordinary actors and observers view the behavioral response. The two accounts are not so much competing explanations as different perspectives on overlapping phenomena. Whereas the consideration–structure account addresses the framing question of “What do effective leaders do?,” the assertiveness research reviewed here addresses the framing question of “How, and how hard, do effective leaders push in conflicts?” One specific consequence that follows from the focus on assertiveness is that it has prompted research on how managers choose to behave in a more or less assertive fashion (Ames, 2008b).

assertiveness and leadership (e.g., Ames & Flynn, 2007), the linear effects of assertiveness were mixed and weak, easily dismissed by a reasonable observer as inconclusive.

A second habit of research and thinking has been a focus on leadership strengths and an understandable impulse to delineate the conditions associated with “great” leaders and effective leadership. If the portrait of failed leadership were simply the reverse of effective leadership, the question of focus would not matter much. Yet the evidence suggests otherwise. In the study of failed leaders noted earlier, informants also described effective leaders (Ames, 2009a). Whereas assertiveness was a leading theme in failed leader descriptions, it was far less prevalent in both absolute and relative terms in descriptions of effective leaders. Likewise, in the studies of leadership weaknesses described earlier, informants also noted leadership strengths of targets (Ames & Flynn, 2007). Whereas assertiveness was a dominant theme in the weakness comments, it was not nearly as prevalent in comments about strengths. From the point of view of leadership strengths and effective leaders, assertiveness could easily be dismissed as not mattering much.

It is arguably the case that assertiveness is more obvious as a factor in failure than success *because* it has a non-linear effect on leadership. When assertiveness is well-calibrated, it may effectively disappear in onlookers’ evaluations, attracting limited attention and evoking minimal comment. As Ames and Flynn (2007, p. 308) put it, “In causal terms, a moderate level of assertiveness may be a background condition: a necessary but insufficient cause of perceived leadership. Like salt in a sauce, too much overwhelms the dish, too little is similarly distracting, but just the right amount allows the other flavors to dominate our experience. Just as food is rarely praised for being perfectly salted, leaders may be somewhat infrequently praised for being perfectly assertive.” In short, had the research summarized in the preceding section focused on effective leaders, leadership strengths, and linear predictors of effectiveness, assertiveness would have been an utterly unimpressive factor: infrequently mentioned and largely unpredictable. This may explain why the overarching account of assertiveness’ role in leadership has been slow to emerge. A broader implication is that there may be other factors important to leadership that have been similarly miscast or overlooked.

Over the past few decades, a growing number of scholars and observers have focused on leadership failure and derailment (e.g., Kellerman, 2004; Tierney & Tepper, 2007; Van Velsor & Leslie, 1995) and many of the findings resonate with the work on assertiveness reviewed here. Indeed, in a review of leadership research, Hogan, Curphy, and Hogan (1994, p. 494) cite a study by Millikin-Davies (1992) gauging incidents of “managerial incompetence.” The two most common complaints from direct reports were like bookends of the assertiveness spectrum: “managers’ unwillingness to exercise authority,” including a reluctance to confront problems and conflict, and “managers tyrannizing their subordinates,” including aggressive and abusive management. Ongoing work on leadership failure holds the promise of further clarifying the role of assertiveness and the mechanics of leadership more generally.

### 5.3. Questions of leadership

Past research and theorizing has, implicitly or explicitly, addressed a range of questions about leadership, including “What traits do effective leaders possess?,” “What behaviors do effective leaders do?,” “How do effective leaders change their behavior across situations?,” and “What kinds of relationships do effective leaders have with their subordinates?” Each of these is a worthwhile question and the answers they have evoked help to complete the larger portrait of leadership and organizational behavior. As my work on assertiveness has evolved, I have come to see it as pointing toward another version of the question of leadership: *How, and how hard, do effective leaders push?* Or perhaps even more broadly: *How do effective leaders fight?*

It is not meaningful, in my view, to say whether this or any question is a better, or the best, framing question for leadership. Any lens on leadership and organizational behavior both highlights and obscures. The criterion is whether it is useful. I believe the question of assertiveness and fighting is, at this time, a very useful one in two regards. First, it prompts a new look at, and potential synthesis of, related existing research. Research on conflict and negotiation has long been a vibrant and active tradition (for reviews, see, e.g., Bazerman, Curhan, Moore, & Valley, 2000; Neale & Northcraft, 1991). In recent years, the conditions governing and processes underlying both beneficial and harmful consequences of organizational conflict have been outlined (see Jehn & Bendersky, 2003 for an integrated account). Scholars studying leadership and management teams have revealed the importance of conflict to team functioning (e.g., Behfar, Peterson, Mannix, & Trochim 2008; Simons & Peterson, 2000). Organizational “conflict cultures” have also been the subject of insightful analysis (Gelfand, Leslie, & Keller, 2008). When the question of leadership is cast as

“How do effective leaders fight?,” the relevance and importance of these and related research traditions is obvious. Scholars will not fully understand the story of leadership without understanding the personal, team, and organizational dynamics of conflict. Happily, past research provides many answers.

The second way in which the question of assertiveness and fighting is useful is that it identifies and prompts helpful new research. Seeing leadership through the lens of assertiveness has prompted my own research further up and down the causal chain. I turn to these efforts, including the sources of assertiveness and the perception of assertive behavior, in the sections that follow.

### 6. Sources of assertiveness: why so many get it so wrong

If the costs of low and high assertiveness are as profound as suggested here, why do so many individuals and leaders appear to get assertiveness wrong, at least in the eyes of onlookers? Several possibilities exist and this section explores three of them. As shown in Fig. 3, individuals may be motivated, stuck, or unaware. One case is that extremely low or high assertiveness is *motivated*: a person knows full well the outcomes his behavior engenders and is content that his behavior achieves his aims, despite the misgivings of onlookers. Someone who has an overriding need for affiliation, for instance, may recognize that he is suffering instrumental losses and seen as weak, but care only about the relational consequences of his behavior. This may be the case for individuals high in unmitigated communion who tend to fare worse in negotiation outcomes (Amanatullah, Morris, & Curhan, 2008). Someone who is generally ambivalent about, or even disdains, others may care only about instrumental outcomes and thus be content to display relationship-harming high levels of assertiveness. This may be the case for malignant or destructive narcissism (e.g., Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006) and perhaps Machiavellianism and sub-clinical psychopathy (e.g., Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

In these cases, extreme low or high assertiveness could be said to be motivated: conscious, deliberate, and acceptable to the actor. In various forms, this account seems to be the dominant one in the negotiation and conflict literatures where individual differences in competitiveness and cooperativeness are often traced to styles with labels such as *pro-self* and *pro-social* (e.g., Carnevale & De Dreu, 2006; De Dreu et al., 2000; Komorita & Parks, 1996; Van Lange, 1999). Many of these accounts are rooted in some form of dual-concern theory (e.g., Carnevale & Pruitt, 1992), which maps out two dimensions of motivations or concerns, one related to the self and one related to other parties. Pro-self individuals have a higher concern for self and lower concern for others; pro-social individuals demonstrate the reverse pattern. In both cases, the resulting competitive or cooperative behavior is described as intentional, deliberate, and motivated. Over the past generation, considerable evidence has accumulated showing that these concerns vary

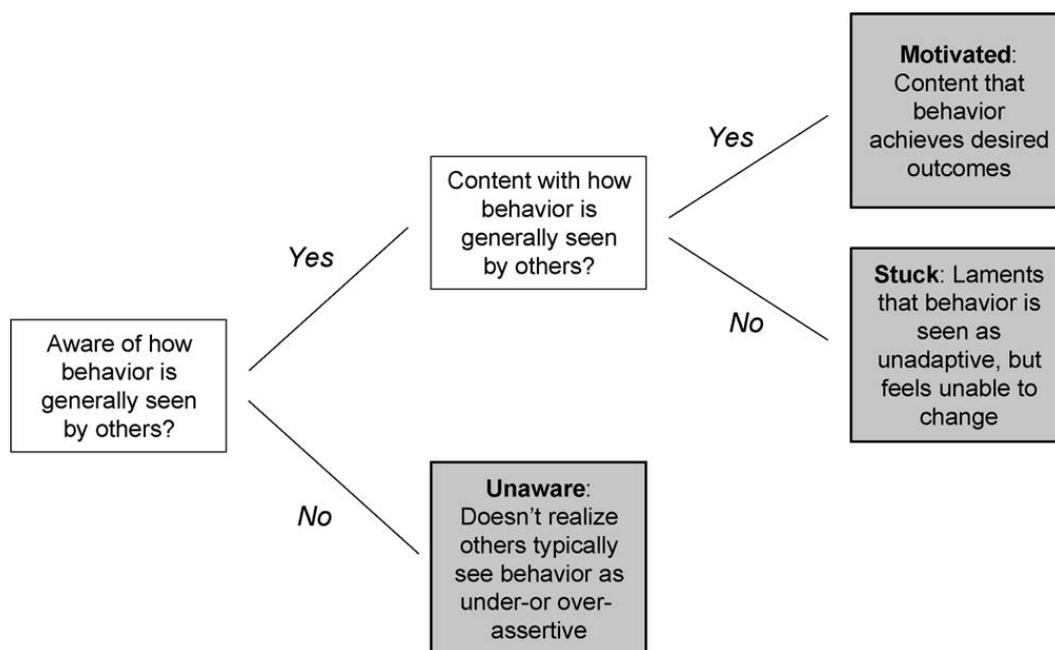


Fig. 3. Selected types of under- and over-assertive individuals.

meaningfully from person to person and that they explain at least some share of behavioral assertiveness in interpersonal conflict and negotiation (e.g., Carnevale & De Dreu, 2006).

Another model of an under- or over-assertive individual is someone who regrets that she is seen as under- or over-assertive, but does not know how to proceed otherwise, or does not believe she can proceed otherwise. In other words, the actor is *stuck*, perhaps quite unhappily, with his or her assertiveness. Such could be the case with an aggressive individual who cannot find the right words to express sympathy or with a sheepish introvert who believes not only that she lacks the skills to speak up effectively, but that she has little hope of ever developing them (e.g., Beer, 2002). These individuals may feel that they do not possess the behavioral vocabulary for adopting other levels of assertiveness, a notion that fits with Bandura's (1977) work on self-efficacy and behavioral performance in anxiety-provoking situations. Motives aside, the argument goes, those who do not have a sense of self-efficacy for a certain kind of behavior will have difficulty performing it and persisting in it. Recent research has illuminated such effects in the context of negotiation: individuals who feel unable to negotiate, or to develop as negotiators, tend to show less effective behaviors and fare worse in these exchanges (Kray & Haselhuhn, 2007; Sullivan, O'Connor, & Burris, 2006).

Surely some under- and over-assertive individuals are motivated and others are stuck. Yet both of these cases involve self-awareness, a recognition of how one's behavior is viewed by others. A third case is an individual seen as over- or under-assertive who is partly or wholly *unaware* of how his or her behavior is perceived. Work on self-awareness in general suggests such cases may not be rare. Many people have only a modest grasp of how they are seen by others (e.g., Kenny & DePaulo, 1993), often assuming that observers see them the way they, the targets, see themselves. In organizational research on work-related dimensions, manager self-reports likewise typically show at best a moderate correspondence to subordinate ratings of the managers (e.g., London & Wohlers, 1991).

There are reasons to think self-awareness is at least sometimes limited for interpersonal assertiveness. Although they found that targets and observers agreed on the frequency with which the target performed certain extraverted behaviors, such as telling a joke, Gosling, John, Craik, and Robins (1998) showed that target–observer agreement on the frequency of disagreeable and assertive behaviors, such as interrupting someone, was low. Moreover, a majority of targets showed self-enhancement effects, tending to over-identify their own socially desirable behaviors and under-identify undesirable (e.g., aggressive) ones. Elsewhere, Kolar, Funder, and Colvin (1996) found that targets' views of their own assertiveness were not strongly correlated with measures of their actual assertiveness in several videotaped episodes, including conversations and a debate. Interestingly, the researchers found that other peoples' (e.g., roommates') general impressions of the target's assertiveness were more predictive of assertive behavior in the specific episodes. In other words, *other people* may be better able to predict a target's assertive behavior than the target himself or herself.

A follow-up to the study of failed leaders noted earlier assessed the extent to which these leaders were seen as self-aware regarding their assertiveness and its consequences (Ames, 2009a). Subordinates of low assertiveness failed leaders and high assertiveness failed leaders indicated how much they believed those leaders understood the social and instrumental impacts of their behavior. Some 60–75% of failed leaders were seen as mostly or completely unaware of the social impact of their behavior (e.g., on their relationships with coworkers and subordinates). Some 45–65% of failed leaders were seen as mostly or completely unaware of the instrumental impact of their behavior (e.g., on task outcomes). Thus, a considerable share of those at the extremes of assertiveness may not be motivated or stuck; they may be, to a great extent, unaware. However, unawareness is not an especially rich or complete explanation of behavior. In the next section, I review evidence for a new account of individual differences in assertiveness that is consistent with a lack of self-awareness.

## 7. Assertiveness expectancies

For a generation, social cognitive models of personality have portrayed individual differences in behavior as a function not only of actor motives but also of their beliefs and cognitions about the situations in which they find themselves (cf Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Put another way, we act on the world as we see it. Thus, predicting assertiveness may require more than simply knowing an actor's social or instrumental motives. Aside from motives, assertiveness may also be the product of *expectancies*, an actor's idiosyncratic forecasts of what would happen in a given situation if they adopted different levels or forms of assertiveness. To predict an actor's assertiveness, we would want to know how hard she thinks she can, or must, push to get what she wants.

Recent work suggests that assertiveness expectancies play a meaningful role in explaining individual levels of assertiveness (Ames, 2008b). In a series of studies, individuals expressed their assertiveness expectancies by predicting social and instrumental outcomes for a range of behaviors spanning from low assertiveness to high assertiveness. For instance, participants reviewed a scenario involving a manager's low-ball offer in a salary negotiation. Participants went on to consider a number of responses, ranging from accepting the low-ball offer to responding with an aggressive counter-offer, and then rated the outcomes they expected would result, such as final negotiated salary and liking and trust for the new employee on behalf of the manager. In another scenario, participants imagined they were in a team meeting with a fellow manager who recommended a strategic initiative they knew would not be successful. Participants rated outcomes for responses ranging from saying nothing to vociferously and forcefully objecting. In effect, across these scenarios, participants made a forecast of what they thought would happen if they yielded ground or fought hard. To what extent would they get their way? And to what extent would they get along? These scenario expectancies served as an independent variable, meant to capture participants' more general views of what happens when they push hard or give in. Some participants expected that pushing hard would have few costs and many benefits; others expected that being assertive would undermine relationships, instrumental outcomes, or both. A central prediction in this research was that this independent variable of assertiveness expectancies would predict dependent measures of actual behavioral assertiveness on behalf of the participants.

Several studies supported this prediction (Ames, 2008b). Those who expected relatively minimal costs for high levels of interpersonal assertiveness (e.g., they thought a manager would find an aggressive counter-offer in the salary negotiation acceptable) were seen by partners in an unrelated dyadic, fixed-sum negotiation as considerably more assertive. Expectancies also predicted the value claimed in negotiation settlements: those who were more optimistic about the payoffs of highly assertive behavior achieved more favorable deal terms. In another study, participants were rated by work colleagues for their typical level of assertiveness in the actual workplace (e.g., standing their ground in a conflict). As predicted, those who were more optimistic about the payoffs of highly assertive behavior in the scenarios were seen by work colleagues as considerably more assertive in the workplace.

It could be that expectancies are merely a reflection of motives. For instance, those who care intensely about preserving good relationships may expect higher levels of assertiveness to bring worse results. If this were the case, the expectancy account would add little beyond motivational accounts. However, across the series of studies (Ames, 2008b), the effects of expectancies on assertiveness were distinct from the effects of motivations, including social value orientations (such as pro-social and pro-self) and unmitigated communion, a preoccupation with satisfying others' needs. Indeed, in most cases, measures of expectancies were not significantly correlated with measures of motives. Thus, an aggressive manager who pushes hard against the people around him may not care any less about his relationships than a more accommodating manager; he may simply (and perhaps incorrectly) believe that his behavior does not weaken his relationships. It is worth stressing that this expectancy approach to individual differences in assertiveness does not suggest that motives do not matter. On the contrary, multiple studies (Ames, 2008b) showed that *both* expectancies and motives were simultaneously predictive of behavior.

In sum, individual differences in assertiveness flow not only from motives but also from expectancies about what consequences will result from different levels of assertiveness. When these expectancies are exaggerated, behavior may be as well. An individual who is decidedly optimistic about assertiveness – believing that high levels of assertiveness will bring many benefits and little harm – would likely act assertively. An individual who is markedly pessimistic – believing that high levels of assertiveness bring much harm and limited benefits – would be more likely to yield. This provides an answer to the question of “why do people get assertiveness wrong” that is consistent with the observation that many people have no idea that they are seen as under- or over-assertive. The answer is: they believe they are getting assertiveness right, acting in an adaptive, effective, even inevitable way that will bring about the best possible outcomes. Sometimes these expectancies are right; other times, they may be wildly off the mark.

### 7.1. *Where do expectancies come from?*

If expectancies shape assertiveness, what shapes expectancies? There are reasons to suspect that, at some level, expectancies are like other interpersonal schemas, such as attachment styles (e.g., Bowlby, 1969). These mental working models for relationships are built up over time throughout the course of personal development, reflecting the accumulated evidence of what happens when one yields or pushes hard. Yet expectancies are also likely susceptible to elaboration and updating, especially as people take on new roles (e.g., a first or new job), enter new contexts (e.g.,

joining an organization), behave in novel domains (e.g., a novice negotiator), and form new relationships. In these cases, an individual's expectancies may be updated or validated based on the apparent evidence and his or her interpretation of that evidence. Both of these (evidence availability and interpretation) are potential sources of distortion that could lead expectancies to diverge from actual outcomes, and thus produce behavior regularly seen by onlookers as under- or over-assertive.

One evidentiary constraint is that individuals typically have access to the consequences of only those behaviors they perform, not of the ones they forego. When a timid team member withholds his idea in a brainstorming session because he fears his teammates would disparage him, he does not know how his teammates would have reacted had he shared it. When a blunt manager delivers only negative feedback to a subordinate because she fears the message might be lost with "sugarcoating," she does not know how her employee would have responded to feedback that featured sincere praise as well. Given such incomplete data, actors may often have no immediate pressure to overturn their expectancies. With no evidence to the contrary, the teammate and manager in the foregoing examples could readily convince themselves that their worst fears would have been realized if they had acted differently, even if those predictions were unfounded.

In some cases, evidence about negative consequences may exist but be veiled from the actor. This may be common in cases of aggression. For instance, a belligerent manager demanding subordinate effort on a task might see immediate and obvious instrumental benefits (i.e., increased subordinate effort on the focal task), and therefore feel validated in his or her expectancies. Less apparent to manager, though, is the subordinate's disguised contempt and reduced effort on other extra-role tasks.

Outcomes following an individual's behavior may often be ambiguous and susceptible to misinterpretation thanks to confirmation biases (e.g., Nickerson, 1998). For instance, a manager could push hard for a colleague's cooperation on a project, or yield to the colleague's mild resistance to providing help. In either case, the colleague might show a polite and controlled response and the project might conclude in an adequate manner. The manager could readily interpret these responses in line with his or her expectancies. The assertive manager could imagine that the compliant colleague remains committed to their relationship and that assertion was necessary to complete the project. The unassertive manager could imagine that his own capitulation was necessary to preserve his relationship with the colleague and that the project was successful despite his accommodation. Thanks to ambiguous feedback and a propensity for confirming one's own suppositions, both under- and over-assertive individuals may thus be Pollyannaish about their assertiveness style, imagining it to be the best of all possible approaches.

Given that valid, unambiguous, and complete evidence about outcomes may often be hard to come by, individuals may tend to base their expectancies on cases where they seem to have more thorough data. Most people have a handful of close acquaintances or confidants with whom they regularly interact and who provide advice, reactions, and input (e.g., McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006). Direct interaction with, and indirect input from, these acquaintances could validate or challenge one's own expectancies. If acquaintances were sampled randomly from the population of potential interactants, individual expectancies might thus converge toward population norms. However, if affiliation itself is partly a function of individual assertiveness, expectancies could be reinforced by subgroups that have skewed norms. In other words, if aggressive individuals tend to affiliate with one another, they could reinforce one another's sense of aggressive behavior as appropriate, adaptive, and necessary. Likewise, if accommodating individuals affiliated with one another, they could reinforce yielding as adaptive and high assertiveness as aberrant and destructive. This could lead to expectancies that are locally true with acquaintances but miscalibrated for the larger population.

Ongoing research suggests this may be the case (Ames, in preparation). In several studies, professionals identified their closest acquaintances; measures of both respondent and acquaintance personality were obtained, including evaluations made by informants before participants formed the relationships under study. Results suggest that assertiveness, and the related construct of extraversion, are significant predictors of close acquaintanceship. Compared to low assertive individuals, high assertive individuals were more likely to identify close acquaintances who were also highly assertive.

There are several ways, then, in which expectancies – idiosyncratic forecasts about the consequences of interpersonal assertiveness – could drift away from actual outcomes. Even in the face of considerable evidence, individuals can readily convince themselves that their expectations have been validated. When the evidence is incomplete or ambiguous, the process of self-confirmation becomes that much easier. Over time, individuals may be drawn into close acquaintanceship with others who share a similar level of assertiveness, thereby strengthening the sense that one's own expectancies and behavioral style are widespread, normal, and adaptive.

## 7.2. Prospects for change

The prevalence of miscalibrated assertiveness begs questions about the potential for change and development. Taking the three cases identified earlier (see Fig. 3), those who are *motivated* in their under- or over-assertiveness are arguably a challenging class. A shy or bullying manager may engender costs for an organization and coworkers, but if those individuals are conscious, self-aware, and deliberate about their behavior and its consequences, it may be hard to convince them that such an intentional style is somehow “wrong.” In this case, one route to changing behavior may be identifying an actor’s overarching, distal goals (e.g., being recognized as competent) and helping them to gauge whether their proximal goals (e.g., winning every argument through belligerence) lead to behavior that ultimately undermines those distal goals.

Other cases may be more amenable to development. Individuals who are *stuck* in their low or high assertiveness may wish that they could behave otherwise but feel that there is no potential for change, or they simply do not know how to change. While assertiveness may have some genetic components (e.g., Rushton, Fulker, Neale, Nias, & Eysenck, 1986), there is also evidence that individuals have the potential to alter related behaviors. For instance, negotiations courses are among the most popular in graduate schools of business and executive education programs. Both students and instructors alike observe that substantial improvement in skills can emerge in relatively short periods of time through a combination of experience, feedback, reflection, and discussion (e.g., Lewicki, 1997; Loewenstein & Thompson, 2000). For some students, this entails improving their ability to act more aggressively; others who have a naturally competitive style may learn how and when to accommodate and collaborate. Elsewhere, clinical approaches, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (e.g., Lazarus, 1971), have shown impressive track records of promoting change in assertiveness, including hostility reduction (e.g., Deffenbacher, Thwaites, Wallace, & Oetting, 1994) and addressing social anxiety and fear of public speaking (e.g., Hofmann, Moscovitch, Kim, & Taylor, 2004). In short, change is possible and several models for personal development exist.

Individuals who are *unaware* that their behavior is seen as under- or over-assertive may have miscalibrated expectancies. If so, adjusting their expectancies might naturally lead to revised behaviors. Those with overly optimistic expectancies might be surprised to learn how their assertive behaviors threaten their relationships with others around them and equally surprised that toning down their assertiveness need not lead to catastrophic instrumental losses. Those with overly pessimistic expectancies might be surprised to learn that they have room to push harder, defending their own interests without damaging their relationships. As noted earlier, one reason miscalibrated expectancies might endure is the absence of good evidence about what would happen if a different level of assertiveness was pursued. Simply adopting a different interpersonal approach and observing the consequences could be useful for calibrating expectancies. The normally reserved teammate could find that her colleagues welcome her interjection; the habitually competitive negotiator might find that his negotiation partner rewards his concession by sharing some helpful information. Arguably, negotiations training, as noted above, works in part by exposing participants to surprising evidence that they do not normally receive—what Loewenstein and Thompson (2000) termed “expectation failures.” In the course of a typical role play debriefing, participants learn details about the other party’s interests and payoffs and often gain information about how their partner perceived their behavior. Some students are startled to learn that it would have been reasonable to push much harder; others are amazed to discover that the other party felt the student’s combative behavior had crossed a line.

Another source for raising self-awareness is multirater feedback in which managers and leaders learn how others perceive their interpersonal and conflict behavior through open-ended comments and ratings. Self-other congruence in such ratings has been linked to performance (e.g., Church, 1997). Recent work suggests that multirater feedback does not regularly or automatically lead to substantial performance improvements, though under the right conditions – including when change is seen as important, necessary, and possible – personal development can emerge (Smither, London, & Reilly, 2005).

## 8. The perception and impact of assertiveness

Having pressed up the causal chain by examining the sources of an actor’s assertive behavior, I now move down the causal chain by examining perceivers’ judgments of actors’ assertiveness. How do onlookers judge a person’s behavior as too assertive or not assertive enough? And what conditions govern the impact of a low or high level of behavioral assertiveness? In the paragraphs that follow, I examine a number of relevant factors, ranging from norms to stereotypes.

*Norms* for competitiveness and interpersonal assertiveness no doubt vary by country, region, industry, firm, function, and other factors. Indeed, work on organizational culture has identified related constructs, such as aggressiveness, as one of the meaningful dimensions on which organizational cultures vary (e.g., O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). Differences in assertiveness norms likely have effects on employee attraction, selection, socialization, and retention (e.g., Schneider, Smith, Taylor, & Fleenor, 1998) and the maximally effective level of interpersonal assertiveness would arguably be higher in more aggressive organizational cultures. Optimal levels could also be shaped by members of one's immediate work group or team. Simonton (1985) described a parallel effect in a different domain – intelligence – suggesting that team leader intelligence may be partly constrained by member intelligence such that beyond a certain level, gaps can create friction and limit effectiveness. One could imagine gaps in leader-member assertiveness would create friction and limit effectiveness as well (see also Giberson, Resick, & Dickson, 2005 on homogeneity of personality in organizations).

Along with norms, *situations* certainly vary: some tasks, times, or settings call for dominance and forcefulness while others suggest conciliation. This notion resonates with theories of contingent leadership that prescribe different styles for different situations, including situational factors such as the structure of the task, subordinate maturity and competence, and the power possessed by the leader (e.g., Fiedler & Chemers, 1974; Hersey & Blanchard, 1972; House, 1971). It stands to reason that optimal assertiveness shifts depending on the situation and leaders would be well-served to read those shifts and respond accordingly. As noted earlier, my own research is consistent with this, showing that the situational fit of a leader's assertiveness predicts ratings of his or her effectiveness above and beyond linear and curvilinear impacts of "average" assertiveness (Ames, 2009b).

*Negative stereotypes* may lead to a narrower range of acceptable behaviors and heightened derogation for excessive behavior in one or both directions. Such may be the case with women in organizations, who may face backlash effects for showing high (i.e., counter-stereotypical) levels of assertiveness but also risk being seen as overly communal, weak, and yielding (e.g., Bowles, Babcock, & Lai, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Heilman & Chen, 2005; Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Stereotypes may affect not only the standards applied to behavior (i.e., what kinds of acts are deemed acceptable), but also the interpretation of the behavior itself (i.e., what kind of act a behavior is). For instance, Duncan (1976) found that racial stereotypes affected how a scene involving an ambiguous shove between two individuals was interpreted. When the actor giving the shove was black, the shove was more likely to be seen as violent and intentional; when the actor was white, the shove was more likely to be interpreted as playful or accidental. In short, the basic inferential step of identifying a behavior – aggressive, accommodating, strong, weak, and so forth – may often be influenced by stereotypes. Individuals who are subjected to a stereotype of aggression or weakness may thus face a double challenge with assertiveness: not only may the range of permissible behavior be narrower, but their behaviors may stand a greater likelihood of being interpreted as falling outside of this range in the first place.

Each of the factors noted above (norms, situations, and stereotypes) likely have some role in governing how behavior is interpreted and the impact of low or high behavioral assertiveness. In the next section, I consider a factor that may also have a major impact on interpretations and impact: rationales.

## 9. Rationales and account-giving

The work reviewed earlier suggests that managers often face a bind: push too hard and others will see you as overbearing; go too easy and you fail to get your way and get things done. The negotiator's dilemma (e.g., Lax and Sebenius, 1986) suggests a similar tradeoff: when a negotiator displays a competitive style, she risks jeopardizing joint problem-solving and value creation; when she displays an accommodating style, she risks being exploited. Is there any way around these challenges other than finding the elusive middle way or deftly – perhaps dizzily – alternating between styles? Can leaders sometimes have their cake (getting their way; claiming value) and eat it (getting along; joint problem-solving), too?

Past work suggests that one potentially promising route for breaking these tradeoffs revolves around the use of accounts and rationales—explanations, justifications, excuses, and apologies offered in conjunction with a request or decision. Work on these topics can be traced in part to Goffman (1959), whose dramaturgical frame on interpersonal relations highlighted subtle everyday negotiations over identity and face. Several generations of social psychologists have explored the impact of account-giving (see, e.g., Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). One classic study (Langer, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978) involved a research confederate asking to cut in line to use a library photocopier. In some cases, he or she offered no justification ("Excuse me . . . May I use the Xerox machine?"). In other cases, he or she offered a

meaningful justification (“Excuse me . . . May I use the Xerox machine because I’m in a rush?”). In still other cases, she offered a circular explanation that the researchers termed “placebic information” (“Excuse me . . . May I use the Xerox machine because I have to make copies?”). When the request was relatively small (copying five pages), compliance with the request was over 90% for both the meaningful justification and the placebic information compared to 60% when no justification was offered. The authors concluded that in at least some cases, people respond to even the appearance of a rationale.

Organizational scholars have shown how accounts can impact relationships and outcomes in the workplace. In a review of the literature, [Sitkin and Bies \(1993\)](#) outlined evidence that accounts can lessen apparent responsibility (i.e., seeing an actor as having no other choice but to act in a certain way), legitimate motives (i.e., recasting an act as consistent with larger or even noble goals), and alter perceptions of consequences (i.e., making “bad news” seem less negative). [Shaw, Wild, and Colquitt’s \(2003\)](#) review and meta-analysis of explanations in organizational settings (e.g., for layoffs or the denial of a resource request) found that “explanations were quite powerful,” leading to higher levels of perceived fairness and cooperation and lower levels of retaliation and withdrawal.

There are thus reasons to think that rationales and accounts may help leaders break the tradeoff between social and instrumental outcomes. In some of my recent work, I have brought this idea into the realm of negotiations. There, a considerable amount of past work shows that assertive opening offers can shape settlement terms in a way that is favorable to the opener (e.g., [Galinsky & Mussweiler, 2001](#); [Neale & Northcraft, 1991](#)). But very little attention has been paid to the question of *how* to make an opening offer and the potential impact of an accompanying rationale. Some research on rationales in social dilemmas suggests that explanations for competitive behavior can foster cooperation (e.g., [Bottom, Gibson, Daniels, & Murnighan, 2002](#)), yet other work suggests that rationales may be dismissed as cheap talk or may even backfire (e.g., [Pillutla & Murnighan, 1995](#); [Skarlicki, Folger, & Gee, 2004](#)). A pair of prior studies examining a “my-hands-are-tied” rationale in negotiations drew divergent conclusions ([Friedland, 1983](#); [Rubin, Brockner, Eckenrode, Enright, & Johnson-George, 1980](#)).

Building on the work on accounts noted earlier, I expected that rationales could have positive relational as well as instrumental effects. I believe there are several processes at work that produce beneficial effects for accounts that accompany assertive offers in a negotiation. The first revolves around interpersonal reactance. Rationales can be seen as a gesture of respect: rather than simply demanding compliance, the offer-maker explains himself or herself, thereby giving the respondent cover to go along while saving face (e.g., [Brett et al., 2007](#)). Rationales may also redirect perceptions of the “harm” of an assertive offer, shifting causal attributions from the offer-maker (e.g., “He must be a real jerk to make such a low-ball offer”) to the offer-maker’s situation (e.g., “He has to low-ball because he’s got great alternatives”) (e.g., [Snyder & Higgins, 1988](#)). In contrast, the lack of a rationale may lead to negative attributions about the offer-maker ([Morris, Larrick, & Su, 1999](#)). When no face-saving explanation is offered, recipients may react negatively with intransigence and a reduced willingness to reach a joint solution (e.g., [Brett et al., 2007](#)). Indeed, disgruntled offer-recipients may seek revenge or otherwise sabotage the exchange even at their own expense (e.g., [Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004](#)).

Rationales may have instrumental benefits for another reason as well. Anchoring effects have been ascribed in part to the activation of anchor-consistent knowledge. When a person is presented with an anchor (whether in a decision task or a negotiation), she or he may automatically and unconsciously begin to entertain reasons why that starting point is a reasonable or legitimate value. In most cases, the specific anchor itself is rejected, but adjustments from that anchor may be insufficient because they are biased by the anchor-consistent knowledge that is already cognitively activated and accessible (e.g., [Mussweiler, Strack, & Pfeiffer, 2000](#)). To the extent that this is true, providing an explicit rationale along with the initial anchor could amplify these effects, heightening the accessibility of a certain logic that favors the anchor.

In sum, I expected that rationales for assertive opening offers would have both social and instrumental benefits. I found support for this in a pair of studies featuring dyadic negotiations ([Ames, 2009c](#)). In a first study, I took advantage of naturally occurring variance in the quality of negotiators’ rationales. In a two-person single issue distributive role play featuring MBA students in buyer and seller roles negotiating the bulk purchase of computer equipment, I had both parties grade the quality of their counterparts’ rationales. The analyses focused on those who made the opening offer in the negotiation, including both buyers and sellers. As expected, counterparts’ judgments of openers’ rationales were positively related to the openers’ settlement values (i.e., higher prices for sellers, lower prices for buyers). In addition, counterparts’ judgments of openers’ rationales were positively related to relational outcomes, including the counterparts’ satisfaction with the interaction and trust for the opener. Overall, as past work

would suggest, openers fared better than those whose counterparts opened, but compelling rationales seemed to amplify this effect. Those who opened with a compelling rationale fared better both instrumentally and relationally than those whose rationales were judged as less compelling.

A second study sought to clarify the causal impact of rationales. I randomly assigned sellers in a multiple-issue role play negotiation to one of three sets of instructions. One instruction set encouraged the sellers to make an assertive opening offer. A second instruction set gave the sellers the same encouragement to make an assertive opening offer and also encouraged them to combine it with a compelling rationale. A third set was a control condition, with no additional instructions beyond the basic details for the seller role. As expected, those in the rationale condition achieved better relational outcomes (e.g., more trust from partners) than those in the assertive opening condition (Ames, 2009c). In addition, as expected, those in the rationale condition achieved better settlement terms (especially in terms of the one issue out of four that was distributive) than those in the control condition. In short, those instructed to combine an assertive opening with a rationale seemed to break the tradeoff and partially solve the negotiator's dilemma, enjoying "instrumental gains" without "relational pain."

These two studies suggest that rationales may help negotiators and leaders break the tradeoffs between instrumental and relational outcomes. But are all rationales created equal? Shaw et al. (2003) argued that, in at least some cases, the quality of rationales is far more predictive than the simple presence of a rationale. What makes a rationale compelling? Past research suggests a number of dimensions, including information value (e.g., thoroughness, relevance) and sensitivity (e.g., interpersonal concern and caring). In a third study, I tested another distinction that I suspected would affect the impact of rationales: self-focus versus other-focus. My expectations were shaped by past work on family and marriage counseling which argues that You-statements (e.g., "You never take out the garbage!") can evoke resentment and reactance, with the listener feeling under attack and threatened by someone else's characterization of his or her intentions, behavior, or position (e.g., Gordon, 1975). In contrast, I-statements (e.g., "I get frustrated when the garbage piles up") may seem less accusatory and are, in some sense, unassailable. Counselors and clinicians often advise individuals to turn to I-statements and avoid You-statements in interpersonal conflicts.

I believe this distinction is relevant in a more general sense in negotiation. Negotiation educators often advise students to understand both their own options and alternatives in a negotiation as well as their counterpart's options and alternatives. While it may be important to know both sides, I suspect that an opening rationale stressing one's own circumstances (i.e., self-focused) may be more effective than an opening rationale focused on the counterpart (i.e., other-focused). Like You-statements, a counterpart-focused opening rationale (e.g., "You should take my offer because it's the best you can do") may be seen as threatening and engender resistance, especially if the recipient feels the offer-maker has mischaracterized his or her position. Like I-statements, a self-focused opening rationale (e.g., "I can only offer you this much because I have another great alternative") may evoke less resistance.

Participants in a third study (Ames, 2009c) played the role of one side in a negotiation (e.g., buying a used car or selling an antique table) and read about a hypothetical partner's opening in the exchange. Some people read about a partner making an assertive offer with a self-focused rationale ("This piece is bigger than I was expecting . . . Plus I've got another table I'm looking at that I could get for considerably less. I could offer you \$200"). Others read about a partner making an assertive offer with a counterpart-focused rationale ("I think selling this piece right now could be good for you . . . And I don't think you're going to find many other people interested in it. I could offer you \$200"). A third group read about a partner simply making an assertive offer ("I could offer you \$200").

As expected, those reading about the assertive opening with a self-focused (offer-maker-focused) rationale expressed more positive relational ratings toward their partner (e.g., trustworthy, reasonable) than those reading about an assertive opening with a counterpart-focused (offer-recipient-focused) rationale. Although participants did not conduct an interactive negotiation with a settlement, some measures indicate that self-focused rationales may have yielded instrumental benefits as well. Participants reading about counterparts who offered a self-focused rationale said that they would give more modest counter-offers in response and they also expressed a higher likelihood of achieving a settlement than those whose offer-makers delivered a counterpart-focused rationale. Put another way, those whose partners gave a self-focused rationale seemed to "lower their sights" whereas those whose partners gave a counterpart-focused rationale seemed to "dig in their heels."

Overall, these three studies are consistent with prior organizational (e.g., Shaw et al., 2003; Sitkin & Bies, 1993) and social psychological (e.g., Schlenker & Weigold, 1992) work on the power of account-giving and rationales. It appears as if, in at least some cases, the right kind of rationale can allow managers to break through the tradeoffs between relational and instrumental outcomes highlighted in past work (e.g., Ames & Flynn, 2007). In the larger

context of assertiveness and leadership, the implications seem to go well beyond opening offers in a negotiation. Leaders may often find themselves faced with the need to make ambitious proposals and requests. Deftly integrating a rationale with their request may allow them to be effective relationally and instrumentally. In terms of perceived self-efficacy and expectancies, managers may feel more comfortable offering bold proposals if they know that doing so in conjunction with an effective social account need not undermine their relationships and earned trust.

## 10. Future directions and conclusions

### 10.1. *Mediating and moderating factors*

Many questions remain about how, why, and when interpersonal assertiveness impacts leadership. Moderators of the assertiveness-leadership link deserve further attention, including factors discussed throughout this article. National cultural norms vary in the level of assertiveness that they prescribe (e.g., Javidan, Dorfman, Sully de Luque, & House, 2006). Similarly, research suggests that norms and behaviors related to assertiveness may differ between urban and rural environments (e.g., Milgram, 1970) and between different regions within a given country, such as the north and south of the United States (e.g., Cohen & Nisbett, 1994). Stereotypes might tighten the range of acceptable assertiveness, leading to derogation of individuals who fail to walk a precariously fine line (e.g., Eagly & Carli, 2007; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Understanding how culture and stereotypes can bound the effects described here is an important step in revealing the dynamics of assertiveness.

Mediators deserve further attention as well. The argument presented here about the impacts of under- and over-assertive leadership is arguably more material than symbolic. That is, under-assertive leaders have been cast as failing to deliver results while over-assertive leaders have been portrayed as insufferable and annoying. These descriptions seem to ring true, yet assertiveness may have a symbolic or signaling function as well. Recent work has sought to understand leadership in light of self- and social-identity mechanisms (see, e.g., van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003) and in terms of the quality of leader-subordinate relationships (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). It could be that, aside from material outcomes, such as a failed project or an irritating interaction, the behavior of very low and very high assertive leaders serves a signaling function in the eyes of subordinates about their standing and relationship with their leader. Both passivity and aggression on behalf of a leader may send the message that “I don’t care about you” and “You don’t matter much around here.” There may be value in further integrating the account presented here with these identity and relationship perspectives, with the potential for revealing new mediating mechanisms and moderating boundaries.

### 10.2. *Beyond direct conflict*

Most of the work reviewed in this article casts leaders as direct parties in conflicts, having to decide how hard to push in the face of potential resistance or imposition. But, of course, leaders do more than fight—they shape the conditions under which *others* engage in conflict. Thus, organizational cultures and work unit norms are not simply static, exogenous background factors; they are facets through which leaders can extend or limit their effectiveness by establishing and reinforcing norms and practices related to conflict (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; O’Reilly et al., 1991). Leaders can also exert control over their top management teams – who is on them, what relationships the members have with one another, and so forth – and thereby affect the quality and quantity of conflict (Simons & Peterson, 2000). These indirect channels may have as much impact on effectiveness as the direct channel of leaders engaged in face-to-face conflict.

### 10.3. *Concluding thoughts*

At least some assertiveness seems essential to interpersonal and organizational effectiveness and yet, like so much else in life, too much assertiveness can be a bad thing. The work reviewed here shows how, up to a point, interpersonal assertiveness brings benefits; beyond some middle range, harm tends to accrue. Many failed managers and leaders seem to congregate at one end of the assertiveness spectrum or the other. In the language of the proverb noted in this article’s introduction, their under-assertiveness is too sweet, failing to deliver on task objectives, or their over-assertiveness is too bitter, jeopardizing their relationships with others. Getting assertiveness “right” appears to be a

prevalent challenge for leaders. Research on the dynamics of assertiveness has the promise of addressing some of the most basic questions of interpersonal relations and, at the same time, of offering practical advice on a challenge faced by almost everyone in organizational life.

It is both a happy and a frustrating fact that there is no single question about leadership. Frustrating in that the diversity of perspectives sometimes defies an easy summary or simple answers. Happy in that this state of affairs is preferable to the alternative of a hegemonic and narrow-minded frame to which all our thinking must hew. “What traits do effective leaders possess?” is a good question; so is “What do effective leaders do?” The present work suggests there is potentially great value in pursuing another leadership question: *How do effective leaders fight?* The emerging answer to this question already has multiple parts, some of which draw on work many years old . . . and some of which lead to yet more questions. The answers presented here are certainly incomplete and quite likely wrong in small and large ways. Nonetheless I think the evidence is convincing that following this question wherever it leads will be a worthwhile journey.

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