



# Safety-specific transformational and passive leadership influences on firefighter safety climate perceptions and safety behavior outcomes



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The impact of leadership on safety climate and safety outcomes has become an important area of research in organizational, leadership and safety sciences. There is evidence that safety-specific transformational leadership positively impacts safety outcomes including safety climate and safety behaviors. However, these relationships have not been thoroughly explored within the fire service. This study is one of the first known studies to examine the relationships between safety-specific transformational and passive leadership, safety climate and safety behavior outcomes in a sample of firefighters.

**Methods:** Data were collected from 398 professional firefighters in the southeastern United States. Structural equation modeling was used to complete the analyses and to examine hypothesized relationships.

**Results:** Safety-specific transformational leadership had a positive influence on safety climate perceptions among firefighters. Conversely, passive leadership, in the context of safety, had a negative impact on safety climate. As expected, safety climate perceptions are positively and significantly associated with safety behaviors, including safety compliance behaviors and safety participation behaviors.

**Conclusions:** These findings provide important evidence of the relationships between leadership styles, safety climate and safety behaviors in the fire service. Ultimately these findings provide guidance for public administrators, fire service administrators and company officers to bolster firefighter safety outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

There are more than one million firefighters in the United States (Haynes and Stein, 2014) risking their lives daily to perform firefighter operations. These firefighters regularly perform fire prevention activities, extinguish fires, perform emergency medical services, respond to hazardous material spills and leaks, perform search and rescue operations and assist with disaster recovery and relief efforts (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). These roles and duties are some of the most hazardous operations performed by any workforce in the United States and throughout the world.

Firefighters directly enter hazardous environments and engage hazardous situations and conditions, which is counter to most occupations that seek to avoid risks. During these line-of-duty operations, safety is paramount. To avoid injury and death, fire-

fighters should execute established safety procedures and tactics, wear appropriate personal protective equipment, avoid the commission of unsafe behaviors and errors and should participate in safety-oriented extra-role behaviors to protect their fellow firefighters. These types of behaviors can be maintained and bolstered in fire departments and companies where a positive safety climate exists (Prati and Pietrantonio, 2012; Smith and DeJoy, 2014) and possibly where officers at all levels in the fire organization are supportive of safety and are transformational leaders.

The application of safety-specific transformational leadership strategies and tactics by fire service leaders and public administrators may assist fire departments with promoting safety and enhancing firefighter safety behavior outcomes. These strategies may help advance positive safety climate perceptions of firefighters and may initiate, sustain and/or improve both safety compliance behaviors and safety participation behaviors, as has been illustrated in other occupations (Barling et al., 2002; Clarke, 2013; Kelloway et al., 2006; Mullen et al., 2011).

Safety-specific transformational leadership incorporates transformational leadership tactics and strategies, but emphasizes

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occupational safety (Barling et al., 2002). Transformational leadership was first introduced by Burns (1978) and was later expanded upon by Bass (1985). Citing the differences between transactional leadership where followers' compliance and performance are based upon an exchange principle, Bass purported that transformational leadership is an approach that seeks performance not through a wage or reward, but through motivation (Bass, 1985; Kuhnert and Lewis, 1987). This style of leadership does not directly exert control over subordinates, but ultimately creates a positive change in followers' climate perceptions (Rainey, 2003). This is initiated through creating a clear and appealing vision, effectively communicating the vision and how it can be obtained, by acting confident and optimistic, by expressing confidence in others, through empowering others to achieve the vision and goals, by leading by example and through motivating followers to pursue higher-order needs (Rainey, 2003; Yukl, 2006).

Historically, leadership strategies in the fire service, because of their hierarchical, military-like structure, have been more transactional, to the point that they are sometimes directive and autocratic. Transactional leadership strategies are normally associated with fostering compliance behaviors, but are not normally associated with outcomes such as commitment, enthusiasm toward objectives or behaviors that transcend self-interests (Rainey, 2003; Yukl, 2006). This approach, in the context of safety, has not been considered as promising as transformational leadership. Transactional leadership has been associated with passive leadership and has been viewed as a corrective approach rather than one that directly produces safety participation or extra-role behaviors (Clarke, 2013). Although transactional leadership strategies are more commonplace in the fire service, some fire administrators and stakeholders have called for change and have suggested that fire service leaders adopt more transformational leadership strategies in all functions, including safety administration (Connealy et al., 2003; Alyn, 2010; Revere, 2010).

In the context of safety leadership, safety-specific transformational leadership has been shown to enhance occupational safety outcomes such as safety climate, safety consciousness and safety behaviors (Barling et al., 2002; Clarke and Ward, 2006; Kelloway et al., 2006; Mullen et al., 2011). Further, there is additional evidence for the relationship between transformational leadership and injury where transformational leadership predicted injury while being mediated by preventive action climate (Zohar, 2002a), which closely resembles safety climate. More recent meta-analytic evidence (Clarke, 2013) further detailed the impact of safety-specific transformational leadership on safety climate

and safety behavior outcomes across multiple industries and occupations, but not including fire or emergency services. Clarke (2013) found that safety-specific transformational leadership does directly impact safety climate and safety participation behaviors. Given the existing literature and evidence, we expect safety-specific transformational leadership behaviors exerted by leaders in the fire service will result in similar associations and will be positively related to perceptions of safety climate. Further, we believe safety climate will have positive influences on safety behavior outcomes.

Passive leadership has been identified as a form of laissez-faire leadership. This sometimes destructive leadership approach (Skogstad et al., 2007) shows passive indifference about tasks and workers, ignores worker needs, ignores problems and has been described as the absence of effective leadership (Yukl, 2006). The impact of passive leadership on safety outcomes has not been studied extensively. The most informative work to date with regard to passive leadership and safety comes from Kelloway et al. (2006) and Zohar (2002a). But, this work did not involve career firefighters.

Passive leaders, in the context of safety, generally only act when a safety-related event occurs, when a safety-related situation has reached a level of severity that action is necessary or when there is no other choice but to act (Kelloway et al., 2006). In the context of safety management and administration, this strategy is not effective as it is reactive rather than proactive or active. This style provides little to no purpose or direction to followers in terms of safety (Mullen and Kelloway, 2009). Individuals in organizations with passive leadership often experience higher than normal safety related events because the organizations' safety climate is diminished since leaders fail to actively promote safe behaviors and practices (Mullen and Kelloway, 2009).

Zohar (2002a) also implies that passive leadership provides little to no concern for the well-being of followers with respect to safety, and if continued, will result in unproductive safety initiatives, diminished safety climate perceptions and diminished safety outcomes. Likewise, when leadership fails to address safety initiatives they can expect other areas of performance to deteriorate and occupational health risks will increase (Kelloway et al., 2006).

The present study will explore whether safety-specific transformational leadership might serve as a means to promote and enhance firefighter safety outcomes. Our conceptualization and posited relationships (see Fig. 1) are consistent with the present literature in the areas of leadership, safety climate, and safety behavior outcomes. To the best of our knowledge, none of the present

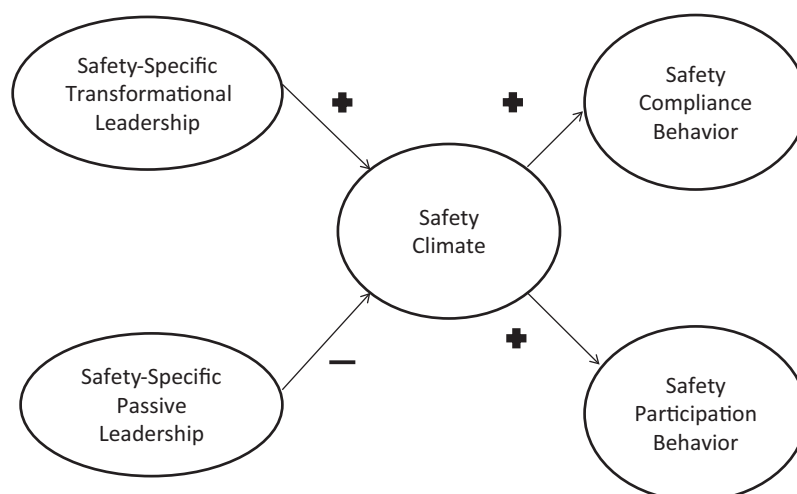


Fig. 1. Proposed model.

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