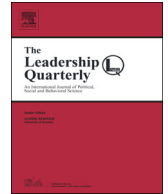




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Do happy leaders lead better? Affective and attitudinal antecedents of transformational leadership

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ABSTRACT

In a study of 357 managers using multiple methods and raters, we investigated how leaders' affective experience was linked to their transformational leadership. As predicted, we found that leaders who experienced more pleasantness at work were rated by their subordinates as more transformational, and this relationship was partially mediated by leaders' affective organizational commitment. Surprisingly, job satisfaction did not mediate this relationship. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

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Transformational leadership has emerged as one of the most prominent leadership theories during the past decade, drawing a great deal of scholarly attention and investigation (Grant, 2012; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Rafferty & Griffin, 2004; Rowold & Heinitz, 2007; Rubin, Munz, & Bommer, 2005; Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). According to Bass (1985, 1990), leaders are “transformational” when they: (1) hold high standards of moral, ethical, and personal conduct (referred to as “idealized influence”); (2) provide a strong vision for the future (referred to as “inspirational motivation”), (3) challenge organizational norms and encourage creative thinking (referred to as “intellectual stimulation”), and (4) identify and meet their followers' developmental needs (referred to as “individualized consideration”). The reason why Bass referred to these four sets of behavioral characteristics as transformational in nature is because he believed that these could transform employees into high performers. Indeed, studies have found that subordinates who perceive their leaders as more transformational tend to have higher performance-levels (e.g. Barling, Weber, & Kelloway, 1996; Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999), higher creativity-levels (e.g. Shin, Kim, Lee, & Bian, 2012; Shin & Zhou, 2003), and higher frequencies of organizational citizenship behavior (e.g. Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990; Wang, Law, Hackett, Wang, & Chen, 2005). Collectively, these findings suggest that it behooves organizations to have transformational leaders. This, in turn, suggests that it behooves management scholars to understand factors influencing leaders to behave (more versus less) transformationally.

Surprisingly, as noted by Rubin, Munz, and Bommer (2005: 846), the latter understanding is unclear. That is, we do not yet have an answer to the question: “Why do some leaders engage in transformational leadership behavior and others do not?” The scholars who have investigated antecedents to transformational leadership have done so with a “trait approach.” For example, greater degree of

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transformational leadership has been predicted to occur on the part of leaders who are more extraverted, more agreeable, more open to change (Crant & Bateman, 2000; Judge & Bono, 2000), and more positive in their self-assessments (Hannah, Avolio, Chan, & Walumbwa, 2012). Furthermore, studies of identical and fraternal twins have shown that transformational leadership is heritable and influenced by genetic factors such that leaders engage in more transformational leadership behaviors when their twin sibling is a transformational leader (Johnson, Vernon, Harris, & Jang, 2004; Li, Arvey, Zhang, & Song, 2012). Yet, Li et al. (2012) found that, relative to one's additive genetic factors, one's unique environment and experiences in it explain larger variance in self-perceived transformational leadership; and similarly but conversely, Bono and Judge (2004) found in their meta-analytic review of the leadership literature that a large proportion (88 to 95%) of between-person variability in transformational leadership remains unexplained by leader traits (e.g., personality). This led Bono and Judge to speculate that transformational leadership may be “more malleable, more transient, and less trait-like than one might otherwise believe” (Bono & Judge, 2004: 906). To build on this speculation, the antecedents to transformational leadership examined in this paper regard *contextual variabilities* that are likely to explain the between-person variability of transformational leadership (cf. Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007; Luthans & Youssef, 2007; Norman, Avolio, & Luthans, 2010). Specifically, we examine how the extent of transformational leadership behavior is influenced by leaders' psychological states (i.e., moods) and job attitudes at work that change across situations. Such antecedents have gone unexamined in studies searching, instead, for differences in leaders' individually-invariable sources of variability (personality-traits).

To be clear, we are proposing that the leaders' mood experiences and job attitudes may *directly* influence their extent of transformational behaviors; as such, we are proposing a direct effect of leaders' mood-state and job attitudes on their degree of transformational leadership. We are *not* proposing that leaders' moods or attitudes at work affect transformational leadership only if leaders express their mood and create “mood contagion” as suggested by other scholars. “Mood contagion” is a mechanism that induces a congruent mood state through the observation of another person's public display of mood (Neumann & Strack, 2000; Sy, Côté, & Saavedra, 2005). We recognize that empirical support for a mood contagion-explanation for subordinates' perception of transformational leadership exists (e.g., Bono & Ilies, 2006); but such explanations require leaders to *express* the moods they are feeling. In contrast, we posit that leaders' likelihood of being transformational is greater when leaders *experience* (rather than *express*) more pleasant feelings. By pleasant feelings, we mean one's positive affective experiences, such as feeling various positive moods and emotions (described in detail in our literature review). Hereforward we use the term “feelings” instead of moods or emotions to emphasize the role of one's overall affective experiences in transformational leadership. Thus in our conceptualization of pleasantness we focus on pleasant core affect (e.g., happy, excited, and enthusiastic; Barrett, 2006a, 2006b; Russell, 2003; Russell & Barrett, 1999) and explore its association with transformational leadership. The possibility of a *direct* effect of leaders' pleasantness (pleasant core affect) on their degree of transformational leadership has yet to be studied; examining this thus adds a unique perspective to research on affective processes in transformational leadership (e.g., Berson, Shamir, Avolio, & Popper, 2001; Bono, Foldes, Vinson, & Muros, 2007; Bono & Ilies, 2006; George, 2000).

The idea that leaders' *job attitudes* may influence their transformational leadership adds a new direction in transformational leadership research too. Our reasons for focusing on job attitudes as another “state-like” antecedent of transformational leadership are twofold. First, recent studies have shown the importance of job contexts in transformational leadership (e.g. Purvanova & Bono, 2009; Zhang, Wang, & Pearce, 2014). Leaders' job attitudes can be an important mechanism linking job contexts to transformational leadership because job contexts may constantly shape and reshape leaders' attitudes about their jobs and/or organizations that, in turn, promote or inhibit their transformational leadership. Second, job attitudes are evaluative judgments containing both affective and cognitive components (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Fisher, 2000; Weiss, Nicholas, & Daus, 1999). As a result, the variability of job attitudes likely exceeds that of leaders' traits (Luthans & Youssef, 2007; Luthans et al., 2007), yet is probably less than the variability associated with leaders' moods and emotions, such as their feelings of pleasantness.

As illustrated in Fig. 1, we hypothesize that leaders who are likely to be more transformational are those who affectively experience on a *continual (day-to-day)* basis greater levels of “pleasantness” (Barrett, 2006a,b; Russell, 2003; Russell & Barrett, 1999) and hold more positive job attitudes, such as higher levels of job satisfaction and affective organizational commitment. Our reason for selecting the latter two job attitudes over others is guided by insights drawn from Riketta (2008) who notes that job satisfaction and affective organizational commitment are generalized rather than specific job attitudes and that more general (rather than specific) job attitudes are more predictive of broad-based behaviors, which transformational behaviors are. As Fig. 1 shows, we hypothesize that the leader with more positive job attitudes will likely be those who experience greater pleasantness in their day-to-day work experiences; as such, we highlight *job attitudes* as a partial mediator of the relationship that leaders' pleasantness likely has with their transformational leadership.

Our study promises to benefit managers as well as management scholars in two ways. First, if our findings show, as we predict, that leaders' psychological states and experiences at work influence their transformational leadership, this will provide empirical support for Bono and Judge's (2004) speculation that antecedents to transformational leadership may be *contextually variable* in nature. Relatedly, such findings will show that transformational leadership may *not* be due *only* to more stable and trait-like antecedents where focus has been to date, such as personality factors (e.g. Bono & Judge, 2004, Hannah et al., 2012), genetic factors (e.g. Arvey, Zhang, Avolio, & Krueger, 2007, Li et al., 2012), and life span factors (Avolio & Gibbons, 1988). Because the nature of the antecedents we examine are more malleable and transient relative to leader traits, our theorizing and findings also promise to help both managers and management scholars rethink what it takes to encourage leaders to behave transformationally and how to increase leaders' motivation to do this. Fostering this choice may, in turn, increase, the positive consequences often linked to this leadership style (cf. Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013).

A second way our study's findings may benefit managers as well as management scholars pertains to our possibly finding leaders' job attitudes to be the partial mediator we predict these to be (illustrated in Fig. 1). If we indeed observe this, our findings will respond

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