



Transformational leadership and R&D workers' multiple commitments: Do justice and span of control matter? ☆

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how transformational leaders influence research and development (R&D) workers' commitment to their organizations and leaders. The study investigates the mediating role of organizational justice (i.e., procedural and interactional) based on social exchange theory and the moderating role of span of control in this relationship. In a sample of 445 Turkish R&D personnel, the study finds that transformational leadership significantly influences followers' organizational commitment partially through procedural justice and their supervisory commitment partially through interactional justice. Second, the findings reveal that transformational leaders boost perceptions of procedural justice and organizational commitment when the span of control is relatively narrow. Interestingly, when the span of control is large, transformational leadership has significant positive effects on supervisory commitment, but no significant effects on organizational commitment among R&D workers.

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1. Introduction

Commitment is a “force that binds an individual to a course of action of relevance to one or more targets” (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001, p. 308). Committed employees are more likely to engage in desirable behaviors such as high performance, and motivation and to create value for their organizations (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). Recent research claims that examining various foci of commitment such as organizational and supervisory commitments is crucial since employees do engage in separate exchange relationships with the organization to which they belong and the supervisor who is in charge of monitoring their performance (Becker, 1992; Becker, Billings, Eveleth, & Gilbert, 1996; Vandenberghe, Bentein, & Stinglhamber, 2004). To this end, the present study examines antecedents of organizational and supervisory commitments among R&D workers. In doing so, specific attention to leadership is paid, as leadership is one of the most influential antecedents of commitment (Benson & Brown, 2007; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996). Of the various leadership behaviors, transformational leadership (TL) is observed to have a positive relationship with commitment (e.g., Avolio, Zhu, Koh, & Bhatia, 2004; Bono

& Judge, 2003; Lowe et al., 1996). Despite the suggested relevance of TL to managing knowledge work, creativity and innovation in the literature (Garcia-Morales et al., 2012; Keller, 1992), how TL affects commitment within the R&D context is not studied.

R&D workers, who are a sub-set of the broader category of knowledge workers, have different characteristics and value systems than traditional workers carrying out routine tasks (Drucker, 1999). These workers tend to be found in sectors which are characterized by innovation and knowledge creation, and include complex, uncertain and dynamic tasks (Morhman, Cohen, & Morhman, 1995). Being a critical source of competitive advantage to organizations, these employees, who are short in supply, have many alternatives in the market (Flood, Turner, Ramamorthy, & Pearson, 2001). Thus, keeping them as human resources committed to their organizations and leaders is critical. Despite their increasing importance to organizations and economies, little is known about the antecedents of organizational and supervisory commitments among R&D workers (Benson & Brown, 2007).

The primary aim of the current study is to examine the direct and indirect effects of TL on commitment to multiple foci among R&D workers. As mentioned in the next sections, in spite of studies interested in the direct effects of TL on followers' commitment, research investigating the processes in those relationships is scant (Avolio et al., 2004; Bono & Judge, 2003). The present research aims to open this black box (Jung & Avolio, 2000) to examine the processes by which transformational leaders exert influence on followers' commitment. While trying to understand these mediating processes, the present study relies on social exchange theory, which forms a basis for

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theoretical perspectives in organizational behavior such as organizational justice. Indeed, previous research points out the importance of organizational justice as an antecedent of commitment, especially for knowledge workers (Flood et al., 2001; Thompson & Heron, 2005). Accordingly, the quality of employee commitment is dependent on perceived interpersonal treatment and fairness of the organizational policies. When employees perceive that they are treated fairly in the organization, they reciprocate by higher levels of commitment in return. Hence, organizational justice (i.e., procedural and interactional) is proposed as a mechanism through which TL influences multiple commitments among R&D workers.

The secondary aim of the study is to examine the moderating role of organizational context (i.e. *span of control*) in the above-mentioned mediating processes between TL and commitment to multiple foci. Since leader–follower relationship does not occur in a vacuum, the context in which leadership is enacted should be studied as an important contextual variable of leadership effectiveness, especially in enhancing the levels of commitment among the followers (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982; Porter & McLaughlin, 2006). Even if managers possess the desired leadership style, organizational context, namely span of control in the present study, may interfere with their ability to influence desirable outcomes for their subordinates (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002) such as increasing their commitment. In other words, span of control may shape the social-exchange relationships between the employee and the leader/organization and the resulting commitments to these targets. For example, the social exchange between the leader and his/her followers may become less engaging when s/he has a large span of control as compared to a narrow span of control. Thus, studying how span of control moderates leader effectiveness seems to be essential for a better understanding of the leadership phenomenon, particularly as this variable directly impacts on how organizations are designed.

Overall, this research makes the following contributions. Based on social exchange theory, the present paper attempts to integrate leadership, justice and commitment literatures. This approach illustrates that TL enhances follower commitment through organizational justice. A key contribution is that different aspects of justice, namely procedural and interactional justice, are proposed and tested for their influences on commitment to the organization and the leader, respectively. Furthermore, as the social exchange between leaders and followers may become less engaging in larger groups, the current study examines the moderating role of increased span of control. This approach sheds new light on how organizational design can influence followers' experience of leadership processes. In the next section, the theoretical background and hypotheses of the study are presented.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Transformational leadership

According to the multi-factor leadership model (Bass & Avolio, 1995), TL has four components: charismatic role modeling, individualized consideration, inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation. By *charisma*, the leader instills admiration, respect and loyalty, and emphasizes the importance of having a collective sense of mission. By *individualized consideration*, the leader builds a one-to-one relationship with his or her followers and understands and considers their differing needs, skills and aspirations. Thus, these leaders meet the emotional needs of each employee (Bass, 1990). By *inspirational motivation*, the leader articulates an exciting vision of the future, shows the followers ways to achieve the goals and expresses his or her belief that they can achieve them. By *intellectual stimulation*, the leader broadens and elevates the interests of his or her employees and stimulates followers to think about old problems in new ways. The leader who exhibits these behaviors helps his or

her followers not only exceed their initial performance expectations, but can also change their attitudes based on the strong emotional attachment he or she builds with them (Bass, 1995).

Many previous studies illustrate a strong direct link between TL and organizational commitment (Avolio et al., 2004; Bono & Judge, 2003; Walumbwa & Lawler, 2003; Walumbwa, Orwa, Wang, & Lawler, 2005). They state that followers working with such leaders sacrifice their individual self-interests for the collective interests of their group when their leaders point to a collective sense of mission. When leaders pay attention to followers' development and intellectually stimulate and inspire them by a compelling vision, followers are more likely to be committed to the long-term goals of their organizations. Similarly, leaders who are genuinely interested in the welfare of their followers and maintain personalized relationships with them are likely to enhance supervisory commitment in their followers. Thus, the present study proposes that TL has direct effects on multiple commitments of R&D workers, as well as indirect effects through the mediating role of organizational justice. Since the direct effects of TL on commitment are well-established in the literature, the focus of the present study is on the indirect effects, as mentioned below.

2.2. Social exchange theory

Social exchange is defined as “subjective, relationship-oriented interactions between employers and employees characterized by an exchange of socio-emotional benefits, ... a long-term focus [and] ... open-ended commitments” (Lavelle, Rupp, & Brockner, 2007, p.845). In the literature, this framework is proposed mainly for understanding the leader–follower relationship (Bass, 1990) and the determinants of commitment (Mowday et al., 1982). A positive or negative exchange relationship with a person or entity (i.e., the leader and the organization) may affect employees' attitudes and feelings such as commitment to these targets (Brown, 1996). Previous research examines organizational justice as one important antecedent of commitment within this exchange framework and suggests that fair exchange is a sub-domain of social exchange theory (Settoon, Bennett, & Liden, 1996; Thompson & Heron, 2005). Such studies show that employees are not only interested in rewards, but also in how those rewards and outcomes are distributed (Greenberg, 1995). For example, procedural justice represents perceived fairness of the system such as procedures used for outcome and resource allocation (Leventhal, 1980; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Moorman, 1991). In addition, interactional justice includes the interpersonal treatment by and fairness of the supervisor (Bies & Moag, 1986; Cropanzano, Prehar, & Chen, 2002; Masterson, Lewis-McCleary, Goldman, & Tylor, 2000; Moorman, 1991). Social exchange theory suggests that employees respond differently when they perceive unfairness in formal procedures or interpersonal treatment (Cropanzano et al., 2002; Masterson et al., 2000). Accordingly, because formal procedures represent the way the organization allocates resources; procedural justice tends to correlate highly with organization-related attitudes and behaviors. As interactional justice relates to the behaviors of the person carrying out the interpersonal treatment, this type of justice tends to be correlated with leader-related attitudes and behaviors. In other words, the source of procedural justice is the organization, while the source of interactional justice is the leader. Thus, procedural justice is expected to associate with organizational commitment and interactional justice with supervisory commitment in the present study, as discussed further in the next sections.

2.3. The mediating role of procedural justice

Procedural justice includes evaluation of organizational processes such as accurate information gathering for decision making, representation of those concerned with the decision making process, consistency of patterns and criteria for decision making, the possibility

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