



Linking transformational leadership and work outcomes in temporary organizations: A social identity approach

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Abstract

Following the call to investigate whether the theory of leadership could be applicable in temporary organizations, this research examined the associations among transformational leadership (TFL), subordinate work engagement (WEG) and project turnover intention (PTI) in project settings. In addition, a subordinate's identification with the project is proposed as a social identity mechanism through which transformational project managers exert influence on subordinate work outcomes. The model is tested based on the data collected from a sample of 162 employees working in infrastructure projects located in China. Transformational leadership is found to positively relate to subordinates' work engagement and negatively relate to subordinates' project turnover intentions. Furthermore, project identification completely mediates the TFL-WEG relationship, whereas it partially mediates the TFL-PTI relationship. These findings contribute to literature by extending the extant transformational leadership approaches in the context of temporary organization, and by broadening the leadership research in conjunction with social identity theory.

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1. Introduction

Research regarding transformational leadership has gained considerable academic attention in the past two decades (Dvir et al., 2002; Lowe et al., 1996; Qu et al., 2015; Strom et al., 2013). Defined as “charismatic, visionary, and inspirational actions that influence followers to broaden their goals and perform beyond the expectations specified in their formal work roles and job descriptions” (Qu et al., 2015, Page 286), transformational leadership is found to contribute to “team-supporting behaviors” (Zhang et al., 2011) within organizations and act as a crucial enabler of improved employee work outcomes, including attitude, behavior, and performance (Avolio et al., 2004; Bono

and Judge, 2003; Yammarino et al., 1993; Zhu and Akhtar, 2014a).

Although extant research has helped us to develop a good understanding of the underlying mechanisms of the transformational leadership process, most of this research is conducted within permanent organizational structures and therefore rests on the assumption that leader-follower constellations are stable and continuous (Antonakis et al., 2003; Shamir, 2011). There is an emerging argument that, where leader-follower constellations are not stable and continuous, transformational leadership may not necessarily be applicable (Bakker, 2010; Lundin and Steinhórsson, 2003). Temporary organization, defined as “a set of organizational actors working together on a complex task over a limited period (Bakker, 2010, Page 468),” is considered to be an increasingly common form of organization, due to the current ‘fast-change’ business environment (Lundin and Steinhórsson, 2003). As Chen et al. (2004) and Tyssen et al. (2013) state, the characteristics of temporary organizations pose

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specific challenges to leadership. Projects are a popular form of temporary organization in which members of the project (usually staff members) are seconded by their affiliated organizations (generally firms) as they carry out specific, project-oriented tasks. The leader-follower relationship between a project manager and his/her subordinate may only last for a very limited period of time. Besides, project managers often feel that an ‘authority gap’ exists while they administrate and lead the project teams, as their subordinates have multi-roles outside the project in question (Tyssen et al., 2014a). Further, many scholars argue that transformational leadership within the context of a project is expected to explain additional variance, aside from that which is within the context of permanent organizations, as projects’ unique characteristics are not considered by general leadership research (Gundersen et al., 2012; Kissi et al., 2013; Müller and Turner, 2010). Accordingly, leadership research regarding temporary organizations may require approaches that differ from those used in the research of permanent organizations (Tyssen et al., 2013). Specifically, transformational leadership, which has been proven to be an effective approach in stimulating and inspiring high level engagements, needs to be revised, taking into account its influence on temporary organizations (Gundersen et al., 2012).

One factor that has received particular attention within transformational leadership research is organizational identification (Epitropaki and Martin, 2005; van Knippenberg and Hogg, 2003; van Knippenberg et al., 2004). A great deal of empirical studies support the notion that organizational identification is related to leadership and/or work outcomes (van Dick et al., 2004; van Knippenberg and Sleebos, 2006). However, as far as we know, previous studies have predominantly considered people’s identification with the organization as a whole and these studies therefore tell only a partial story (Cicero and Pierro, 2007; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Generally, people will classify themselves as various social entities based on different types of organization membership; they are able to have multiple foci of identification (Huettermann et al., 2014) and thus the salience of an individual’s multiple identities is relative to the given situation (Ashforth and Johnson, 2001). As “we cannot assume that the factors found to influence organizational identification would similarly influence identification with other foci” (Olkkonen and Lipponen, 2006), it is necessary to shed more light on the factors that influence one’s identification with their immediate organization (Kreiner et al., 2006; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Researchers argue that transformational leadership stimulates subordinates’ performance by fostering their organizational identification (Bass, 1985; Kark et al., 2003); however, to our best knowledge, empirical studies scrutinizing the mediating role of subordinates’ identification with their immediate organization (such as a project) in the transformational leadership process is still tenuous (Liu et al., 2010).

To address these gaps in the literature, the current study develops a model (Fig. 1.) in order to elucidate the role of the individual’s identification with a temporary organization, taking into account the transformational leadership process

within the context of temporary organizations. Specifically, this article focuses on projects as a research context, as projects are a typical form of temporary organization that are widely adopted primarily by modern companies on a regular basis (Engwall, 2003). We will use the terms *projects* and *temporary organizations* interchangeably throughout the rest of this article. This research also examines the extent to which the individual’s identification with a project (hereafter referred to as *project identification*) mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and work outcomes, specifically work engagement and turnover intention. Work engagement has been defined as “a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli et al., 2006) and turnover intention refers to one’s perceived likelihood of staying with or leaving the current organization (Bigliardi et al., 2005). As for the project team members who are skilled professionals seconded by the parent organizations for a limited time, the project is their directly current organization. Given the definition in a broad wide, turnover intention in the project settings (hereafter referred to as *project turnover intention*) can be understood as the people’s intention to quit the roles/profiles/types of professions in the project organization. Work engagement and project turnover intention offer positive and negative reorientations of an individual’s behavior and attitude, and have been found in organizational behavior research to be associated with leadership (Breevaart et al., 2014; Miao et al., 2012).

This study aims to make several contributions to the field. First, there is a repeated call to undertake leadership research within a specific organizational context (Avolio et al., 2009; Dinh et al., 2014; Porter and McLaughlin, 2006), this study echoes this call and extends the investigation of transformational leadership and its effects to a previously understudied context for leadership, that is, the temporary organization. Our focus is on a project that typifies a temporary organization. Organizations react to environmental dynamism and uncertainty by using temporary structures such as projects. In this way, they show how they play a vital role in promoting social and economic development. Thus, we extend the previous findings on the applicability of transformational leadership in different organizational contexts by examining this leadership behavior in the context of temporary organizations (i.e., projects). Second, we theoretically analyze in detail the characteristics of these settings and their effects on the relationship between transformational leadership and subordinates work outcomes. Third, some researchers believe that leaders can impact followers’ psychological attachment to their work unit (Kark et al., 2003), while others think that individual identification with the organization can improve their work outcomes. However, the two notions have not been integrated thus far. By providing empirical evidence to elucidate the underlying mechanism of project identification in the relationship between transformational leadership and subordinate work outcomes, this study brings new insight to the psychological process in project leadership research.

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