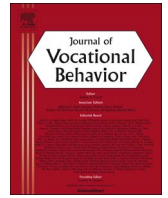




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## Staying after the storm: How transformational leadership relates to follower turnover intentions in extreme contexts



Marion B. Eberly<sup>a,\*</sup>, Dustin J. Bluhm<sup>b</sup>, Cristiano Guarana<sup>c</sup>, Bruce J. Avolio<sup>d</sup>, Sean T. Hannah<sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Milgard School of Business, University of Washington Tacoma, 1900 Commerce St., Tacoma, WA 98402, United States

<sup>b</sup> College of Business, University of Colorado Colorado Springs, 1420 Austin Bluffs Pkwy, Colorado Springs, CO 80918, United States

<sup>c</sup> Kelley School of Business, Indiana University, 1309 E. 10th St., Bloomington, IN 47405-1701, United States

<sup>d</sup> Foster School of Business, University of Washington, PACCAR Hall, Seattle, WA 98195, United States

<sup>e</sup> School of Business, Wake Forest University, 1834 Wake Forest Road, Winston-Salem, NC 27106, United States

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### ABSTRACT

While largely untested, theorizing concerning transformational leadership has suggested that its effects will vary depending on the extremity of the context in which this leadership style is exercised. Further, knowing how to retain employees after they are exposed to the stresses and trauma of extreme events remains a challenge for organizations to address. In this study, we examined the transformational leadership of U.S. Army unit leaders operating within the *extreme* context of combat to test a multi-level model. Our results show that transformational leadership had an indirect effect on reducing follower turnover intentions via increases in followers' on-the-job embeddedness. This effect was moderated by the unit's level of exposure to extreme events, such that transformational leadership reduced followers' turnover intentions via embeddedness only when the unit experienced a high degree of extreme context exposure. These results have implications for advancing theory related to both leadership and turnover, as well as for advancing the practice of leadership and retention of employees, particularly in extreme contexts.

### 1. Introduction

Transformational leadership emphasizes achieving higher-order goals through communicating purpose and developing followers to transcend their own interests in support of the organization's (Bass, 1985, 1996; Bass & Avolio, 1990, 1994). The positive effects of this type of leadership on numerous individual and organizational outcomes are well-validated across many industries, occupations and cultures (DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Despite this extensive evidence for its effectiveness, we know surprisingly little about the role of transformational leadership in the turnover process. Limited research indicates that followers of transformational leaders are less likely to form intentions to quit or actually leave their jobs (Tse, Huang, & Lam, 2013), but the mediating mechanisms and moderating conditions of this effect have yet to be explained (Waldman, Carter, & Hom, 2015).

Considering that the effects of leadership may be amplified or attenuated by contextual factors (Porter & McLaughlin, 2006), it is prudent to provide a more contextualized view of transformational leadership theory (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013), which we can then apply to understanding the effects on turnover. The initial conceptualizations of

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [marionb@uw.edu](mailto:marionb@uw.edu) (M.B. Eberly).

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transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978) argue that it is more relevant and necessary in contexts associated with crises, threats, turmoil and uncertainty (De Hoogh et al., 2004; Pawar & Eastman, 1997). Given the increasing number of organizations that operate in such ‘extreme situations’ (Bamberger & Pratt, 2010; Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio, & Cavarretta, 2009), researchers have recently reiterated the call of examining transformational leadership in these underexplored, yet theoretically and practically relevant contexts (i.e., Dust, Resick, & Mawritz, 2014; Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013).

In this paper, we examine the effects of transformational leadership on the turnover intentions of followers operating within an extreme context. An extreme context is “an environment where one or more extreme events are occurring or are likely to occur that may exceed the organization’s capacity to prevent and result in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological, or material consequences to—or in close physical or psycho-social proximity to—organization members” (Hannah et al., 2009, p. 898). Examples of organizations that regularly operate within extreme contexts include fire departments, law enforcement units, deep sea fishing vessels, disaster recovery organizations, and military combat units. Moreover, many ‘typical’ organizations can encounter what we would consider an extreme context; either by design (e.g., a relocation to a new country or a merger; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006) or by chance (e.g., a school hit by a tornado, an office park faced with a terrorist attack).

The study of effective leadership in extreme contexts is especially important considering the negative effects of working within such contexts, including post-traumatic stress, debilitating health, fear, depression, insecurity, and burnout (Barling, Kelloway, & Frone, 2005). Of major concern to organizations, such reactions can prompt workers to voluntarily leave the organization to seek a more stable context. While all organizations face the risk of turnover and its negative consequences (Holtom, Mitchell, Lee, & Eberly, 2008), exposure to extreme contexts adds another significant reason for quitting, as extreme events can serve as a shock that precipitates thoughts of leaving (Lee & Mitchell, 1994).

We advance transformational leadership theory with two main contributions to the literature. The first is in examining how unit-level transformational leadership motivates followers to remain with an organization despite experiencing difficult and even life-threatening challenges, and identifying a key mediator of this relationship. We argue transformational leadership reduces followers’ turnover intentions by embedding followers more fully in their jobs (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski, & Erez, 2001). Second, we answer the call to examine leadership within an extreme context (Hannah et al., 2009), theorizing and testing whether the effect of transformational leadership on followers’ job embeddedness is stronger in units that experience greater exposure to extreme events. We suggest that the degree of exposure to extreme events will alter the effects of transformational leadership on turnover intentions. We tested the multi-level moderated-mediation model shown in Fig. 1 using data collected at two points in time from a sample of U.S. Army soldiers deployed to an active war zone.

## 2. Hypotheses development

### 2.1. Transformational leadership and turnover intentions

Transformational leadership is comprised of four construct dimensions: inspirational motivation, idealized influence, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation. Inspirational motivation includes the communication of a meaningful vision and the use of positive appeals to motivate followers to work toward the vision, in which the leader also demonstrates optimism and enthusiasm to overcome challenges. Idealized influence represents leadership that role-models high levels of competence and ethical standards, and displays confidence in what followers can accomplish. Individualized consideration is displayed by identifying and addressing each follower’s strengths and needs, while coaching and developing their unique potential. Finally, intellectual

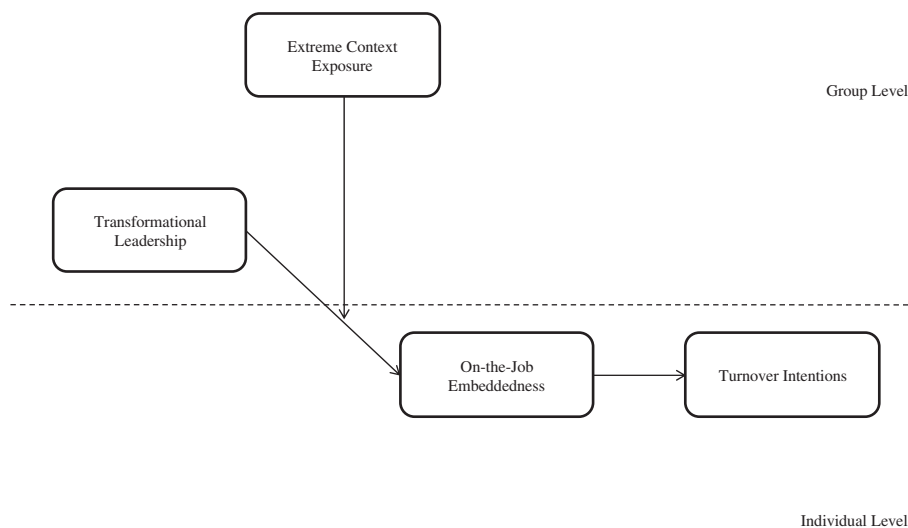


Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

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