



# How transformational leadership works during team interactions: A behavioral process analysis

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 15 April 2014

Received in revised form 25 June 2015

Accepted 15 July 2015

Available online 31 July 2015

Handling Editor: Shelly Dionne

### Keywords:

Transformational leadership

Leader–follower communication

Team interaction processes

Meetings

Lag sequential analysis

## ABSTRACT

Transformational leadership is generally considered helpful for team functioning. However, the social dynamics underlying the benefits of transformational leadership remain elusive to date. To understand how and why transformational leadership can foster team functioning, this study focuses on leader–follower communication dynamics during team interactions. From the perspective of leadership as social problem solving, we argue that transformational leadership is linked to functional team problem-solving processes because transformational leaders use solution-focused communication (mediator model). In a sample of 30 videotaped problem-solving team meetings from two organizations, we coded transformational leadership style and the verbal behavioral interactions of leaders and team members over the course of their entire meetings (30,128 behavioral units in total). Multilevel results showed that transformational leadership was positively linked to functional problem-solving communication by team members. This positive relationship was mediated by leaders' solution-focused communication. Moreover, at the micro-level of conversational dynamics within the meeting process, lag sequential analysis revealed that leaders' ideas and solutions triggered subsequent solution statements by team members and inhibited counterproductive communication by team members, such as running off topic, criticizing, or complaining. We discuss theoretical and methodological implications for conceptualizing dynamic leader–follower processes as well as managerial implications for leading effective meetings in organizations.

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Transformational leadership has been linked to team functioning and team performance (e.g., Burke et al., 2006; Schaubroeck, Lam, & Cha, 2007; Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011). To understand why transformational leadership may foster team functioning, previous research has focused on intermediate team states such as team commitment, empowerment, or shared team goals that benefit from transformational leadership and in turn can explain positive effects of transformational leadership on team functioning (Chi & Huang, 2014; Dionne, Yammarino, Atwater, & Spangler, 2004). However, what is currently missing from the literature is an understanding of the fine-grained social dynamics that can leverage the benefits of transformational leadership in teams (Chi & Huang, 2014; Wang et al., 2011).

To begin to pinpoint the micro-level dynamics underlying transformational leadership influence, this study focuses on the role of transformational leadership during team interactions, consistent with relational perspectives of leadership (e.g., Fairhurst, 2008; Ospina & Foldy, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006). By studying the effects of transformational leadership on team communication processes,

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we follow recent calls for leadership research at the level of actual events, rather than aggregating individual perceptions of leadership to the person level (Eberly, Johnson, Hernandez, & Avolio, 2013; Hoffman & Lord, 2013). Our focus on actual behavioral instances of both leaders and follower can yield more accurate insights into leader–follower dynamics in organizational teams. Moreover, by studying *temporal* communication dynamics between leaders and followers, we begin to consider the role of time in leadership (Bluedorn & Jaussi, 2008; Shamir, 2011).

Our study approach highlights communication as a key element of leader–follower processes (e.g., Cornelissen, Durand, Fiss, Lammers, & Vaara, 2015; Day, 2000; Shamir, 2007). We build on recent propositions to take an organizational discourse approach to leadership by focusing on the actual communicative behaviors exhibited by both leaders and team members during team interactions (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Specifically, we investigate the effects of transformational leadership on team members' communicative behaviors during team interaction processes. Moreover, research on the link between transformational leadership and counterproductive work behavior remains sparse (Wang et al., 2011). As such, in addition to understanding how transformational leaders can foster functional behaviors by team members, we are also particularly interested in whether transformational leaders can help diminish counterproductive communicative behaviors by team members during team interactions.

However, transformational leadership as an individual style may not suffice for eliciting favorable team member behaviors and inhibiting counterproductive member behaviors during team interactions. Rather, the benefits of transformational leadership seem to require a behavioral manifestation in terms of leaders' communicative behavior during team interactions (cf. De Vries, Bakker-Pieper, & Oostenveld, 2010). To date we know very little about *how* transformational leadership actually becomes effective in team settings. In other words, what we are currently missing is the behavioral mechanism, or mediating communicative vessel, by which transformational leadership can aid team functioning. To address this gap, we focus on leaders' solution-focused communication, a communicative expression of sensemaking (e.g., Zaccaro & Klimoski, 2001), as an intermediate process between transformational leadership and team member behaviors.

In sum, this study connects the dots between theorizing on transformational leadership style, leader–follower discourse (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012), leadership as social problem solving (Zaccaro & Klimoski, 2001; Zaccaro, Rittman, & Marks, 2001), and the behavioral dynamics during team interactions (e.g., Kauffeld & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2012). In a sample of 30 regular team meetings, we develop a multilevel model to examine how transformational leadership style affects team members' communicative behavior and highlight the underlying process of leaders' solution communication. Moreover, we provide a micro-process perspective of the behavioral linkages between leaders and followers within the temporal interaction processes, using lag sequential analysis. Our research approach answers calls for more dynamic, process-based conceptualizations of leadership (Dinh et al., 2014) and highlights the role of solution-focused leader behaviors as a necessary link between transformational leadership and follower behavior. We discuss theoretical implications for team leadership research and managerial implications for leading effective meetings.

Transformational leadership during team interactions

Transformational leadership is a leadership style that raises followers' awareness of the importance of task outcomes, activates higher-order needs, and motivates followers to transcend self-interests for the sake of the organization (Bass, 1985; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990; Yukl, 1989, 2013). Transformational leadership is defined as the “the process of influencing major changes in the attitudes and assumptions of organization members and building commitment for the organization's mission, objectives, and strategies” (Yukl, 1989, p. 269). Our specific conceptualization of transformational leadership in the present study follows the tradition of Podsakoff and colleagues (1990), who reviewed the literature on transformational leadership and addressed criticism about earlier measurement approaches by developing the transformational leadership inventory (TLI; Podsakoff et al., 1990). This instrument encompasses six key dimensions of transformational leadership, based on the previous literature: (1) identifying

Table 1  
Meeting behaviors coding scheme with sample statements.

Solution-focused statements	Counterproductive statements
<b>Defining the objective</b> Vision, description of requirements “We need to find a way to improve that.”	<b>Running off-topic/losing the train of thoughts in details and examples</b> Examples irrelevant to the goal, monologues “I had been sick for three weeks, my finger was totally crushed, however, that was ten years ago, I guess.”
<b>Solution</b> identifying a (partial) solution “I suppose we need a new manual.”	<b>Criticizing/running someone down</b> Disparaging comments about others “You come over to visit us but you never clean-up.”
<b>Describing a solution</b> illustrating a solution “The manual should contain the most important procedures.”	<b>Complaining</b> Emphasizing the negative status quo “No one ever listens to us anyways!”
<b>Arguing for a solution</b> e.g., naming advantages of solutions “That way we won't forget anything important.”	
<b>Problem with a solution</b> objection to a solution “This is not possible because procedures change three times a year.”	

Note: Excerpt from the act4teams coding scheme for team meeting interaction. Only relevant behavioral codes for the present investigation are shown. For details, see Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock (2012).

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