



Communication and trust are key: Unlocking the relationship between leadership and team performance and creativity☆



Kathleen Boies^{a,*}, John Fiset^{a,1}, Harjinder Gill^{b,2}

^a Department of Management, John Molson School of Business, Concordia University, 1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd. W., Montreal, QC H3G 1M8, Canada

^b Department of Psychology, University of Guelph, MacKinnon Extension, Room 3007, Guelph, ON N1G 2W1, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Considerable theoretical and empirical work has identified a relationship between transformational leadership and team performance and creativity. The mechanisms underlying this link, however, are not well understood. To identify the intervening processes inherent in this relationship, we experimentally manipulated the leadership style assigned to 44 teams taking part in a resource-maximization task. Teams were exposed either to a leader using inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, or a control condition. Our findings reveal important differences between leadership styles in communication and team outcomes (objective task performance and creativity). These results suggest that different dimensions of transformational leadership should be emphasized depending on the outcome sought. In addition, our results provide evidence for a sequential mediation model where leadership influences team outcomes through overall team communication and trust in teammates. This study suggests mechanisms by which transformational leaders may impact team outcomes, which has implications for team building and leadership training.

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Faced with the increasing demands of complex competitive environments, organizations are looking to collaboration and teamwork as means of resolving challenges, both large and small, across hierarchical levels and cultures (Salas & Gelfand, 2013). One key component in ensuring effective team functioning is trust among team members (McAllister, 1995). Meta-analyses and reviews have all highlighted leadership as one of the most notable determinants of trust (Burke, Sims, Lazzara, & Salas, 2007; Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002) and an enabler of team trust (Lee, Gillespie, Mann, & Wearing, 2010). This study answers a call by Burke et al. (2007) to place more focus on trust from the perspective of the team.

In addition to answering Burke et al.'s (2007) call, this study makes three notable contributions. First, surprisingly, given the plethora of studies on transformational leadership, little is known about which dimensions of transformational leadership may be most potent in influencing different indicators of team performance. Leadership scholars have called for a more careful scrutiny of specific leadership dimensions. For example, Antonakis, Avolio, and Sivasubramaniam (2003) highlight the fact that a better understanding of specific transformational leadership dimensions will facilitate leader training, leader coaching, and the provision of feedback to leaders. Second, though the relationship between transformational leadership and team outcomes has been well documented (e.g., Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011), our study goes one step further and includes both objective task performance and

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 514 848 2424.

E-mail addresses: Kathleen.boies@concordia.ca (K. Boies), j_fise@jmsb.concordia.ca (J. Fiset), gillh@uoguelph.ca (H. Gill).

¹ Tel.: +1 514 848 2424.

² Tel.: +1 519 824 4120.

creativity. This is particularly important in light of the first contribution—we argue that one reason we should focus on specific dimensions of transformational leadership is that they will be associated with different outcomes. This could have important implications for leader selection or assignment, depending on the outcome sought. Third, although the relationship between transformational leadership and team outcomes is likely not direct, the intervening mechanisms are not well understood. Understanding the mechanisms that underlie this relationship may facilitate its occurrence in the future by, for example, helping to put in place enabling conditions (e.g., Dionne, Yammarino, Atwater, & Spangler, 2004; Yukl, 1999). Through these three contributions, this study answers a call for more process-focused studies and experimental designs in the area of leadership (Hunter, Bedell-Avers, & Mumford, 2007).

Transformational leadership dimensions

The leadership behaviors under study are specific dimensions of transformational leadership as outlined by Bass (1985, 1998). Transformational leadership is accomplished through four distinct but interrelated behaviors: idealized influence (the leader acts in a way that followers want to emulate), inspirational motivation (the leader articulates an inspiring vision), individualized consideration (the leader attends to followers' individual needs and aspirations), and intellectual stimulation (the leader challenges followers' preconceived notions).

For the purpose of the current study, we selected inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation because these dimensions are particularly relevant to predicting team outcomes (task performance and creativity) in the current experimental setting, in which teams will watch a video of the leader displaying various leadership behaviors. First, inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation, unlike idealized influence, for example, can easily be translated into behavioral aspects and therefore trained (see also Qu, Janssen, & Shi, 2015, for a similar argument). Second, inspirational motivation is entirely focused on formulating an overarching vision that should unite a group of otherwise disparate followers around a shared objective. Third, inspirational motivation has also been shown to prime identification with the group (Wu, Tsui, & Kinicki, 2010). In contrast to idealized influence, inspirational motivation is turned outwardly, and directed toward the collective. Idealized influence is often linked to charisma and focuses on self-sacrifice, setting a personal example, and leading by example. By putting the spotlight on the individual leader, this may work against team performance in some cases. Fourth, though intellectual stimulation has sometimes been considered to be focused more on individual followers rather than the collective (e.g., Kark & Shamir, 2002; Wang & Howell, 2010; Wu et al., 2010), intellectual stimulation in teams may foster healthy dissension which might lead to better team outcomes (Dionne et al., 2004). Finally, the focus on intellectual stimulation is particularly interesting as this behavioral dimension has been noted as the “most underdeveloped component of transformational leadership” (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004, p. 333). In comparison, individualized consideration focuses on personal development and coaching of each team member, individually. It may therefore rely more on dyadic relationships (Kark & Shamir, 2002) and its link to team performance may be more tenuous than in the case of intellectual stimulation. In summary, inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation are particularly appropriate to the context of the current study.

Previous literature also supports our choice to (a) compare inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation and (b) study transformational leadership dimensions in isolation. First, Waldman, Siegel, and Javidan (2006) examined the relationship between CEO transformational leadership and corporate social responsibility. They found that charisma (also referred to as idealized influence) and intellectual stimulation had different effects on engagement in corporate social responsibility. Second, as mentioned above, large scale investigations of the MLQ have found that transformational leadership dimensions, though highly related, presented a better fit when loaded onto separate factors (e.g., Antonakis et al., 2003; Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999), clearly suggesting that the transformational leadership behaviors are empirically distinguishable. In other words, a leader exhibiting inspirational motivation would not necessarily exhibit idealized influence, intellectual stimulation or individualized consideration to the same degree. Thus, in principle, transformational leaders may use any of the four dimensions to a greater or lesser extent, depending on their ability, preferences, or the requirements of the situation. Finally, Dionne et al. (2004) outlined different intervening mechanisms in the relationship between specific transformational leadership dimensions and team performance, thus suggesting the value in looking at these dimensions separately. An understanding of the relationship between specific transformational leadership dimensions and team outcomes has important implications for leadership coaching and training (e.g., Bass & Riggio, 2006). The above arguments support our contention that transformational leadership dimensions can function independently, and thus should be studied separately.

The effects of leadership styles on team performance and creativity

Two team outcomes were the focus of the current study. First, we were interested in the impact of leadership styles on teams' task performance, defined as the extent to which a team meets or exceeds expectations about task requirements (based on Harrison, Newman, and Roth' (2006) definition of individual task performance). A second aspect of team performance that was of interest was creative performance, defined as the generation of novel and useful ideas and/or products by a group of people working jointly (cf., Hoever, van Knippenberg, van Ginkel, & Barkema, 2012; Zhou, 2006).

Much has been written over the past several years on the relationship between transformational leadership and performance. Meta-analytic work found that transformational leadership is related to individual task performance (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Wang et al., 2011), as well as creative performance (Wang et al., 2011), though the latter has been the subject of fewer empirical investigations (e.g., Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002). Surprisingly, given its focus on the collective, the relationship between transformational leadership and team performance has not been studied as frequently as the relationship between transformational leadership and individual performance (e.g., Dionne et al., 2004; Eisenbeiss, van Knippenberg, & Boerner, 2008). Furthermore,

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