



Transformational leadership sub-dimensions and their link to leaders' personality and performance

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ABSTRACT

The multi-dimensionality of the transformational leadership construct has been under debate in the last decades. To shed more light on this issue, we conducted a meta-analysis ($k = 58$ studies), examining the transformational leadership sub-dimensions and their links to leader personality and performance in order to gather empirical evidence of the multi-dimensionality of transformational leadership. First, the results showed that the Big 5 personality traits are directly linked to transformational leadership sub-dimensions and to the overall measure, and are indirectly linked to leader performance. Interestingly, however, different combinations of the personality traits are differentially related to the transformational leadership behaviors. For instance, whereas inspirational motivation is related to all personality traits, only openness to experience and agreeableness affect individualized consideration. These findings emphasize the importance of examining the transformational leadership sub-dimensions separately to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and the antecedents of these leadership behaviors.

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Introduction

There is strong empirical evidence that transformational leadership, more than any other leadership style, is highly effective (see meta-analyses of Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011). Transformational leadership's potential to address issues that are relevant in the modern, changing, and uncertain work environment is the main reason for its positive influence (Lim & Ployhart, 2004). Interestingly, however, regardless of transformational leadership's strong impact on research and practice (Bass, Jung, Avolio, & Berson, 2003; De Groot, Kiker, & Cross, 2000; Gong, Huang, & Farh, 2009; Grant, 2012; Jansen, Vera, & Crossan, 2009; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Yammarino & Bass, 1990), transformational leadership theory still suffers from inconsistent results regarding the four-factor structure of its construct (e.g., Bass & Avolio, 1993).

Originally, Bass (1985) and Burns (1978) introduced transformational leadership as part of the full-range leadership theory. This theory includes three leadership styles encompassing transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership. Transactional leadership is composed of three dimensions: contingent reward, active management-by-exception, and passive management-by-exception. Although laissez-faire leadership has some features in common with passive management-by-exception, it has been

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argued that laissez-faire leadership should be treated as separate from transactional leadership, as it represents the absence of leadership (Bass, 1998; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). The original idea behind transformational leadership was that leaders can appeal to followers' moral values in order to achieve (reforming) goals (Burns, 1978) and influence followers to transcend their self-interest for the larger good of their team and organization in order to realize optimal performance levels (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). Building on this concept, Bass (1985) proposed that the transformational leadership construct comprises four sub-dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (see also Avolio & Bass, 2004; Yukl, 2013). Although both transactional and transformational leadership thus comprise different sub-dimensions, only transactional leadership research shows a systematic examination of the separate components (e.g., Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008; Yammarino, Spangler, & Bass, 1993). A possible explanation for this difference in focus may be that, in terms of transactional leadership, the different sub-dimensions have differential effects on outcomes, such that contingent reward is labeled relatively positive and management-by-exception (both active and passive) is labeled relatively negative. However, as all transformational leadership sub-dimensions seem to be associated with positive outcomes, and are often found to be highly interrelated, researchers frequently collapse the four sub-dimensions into one overarching transformational leadership construct (e.g., DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011; Epitropaki & Martin, 2013; Ewen et al., 2013; Føllesdal & Hagtvvet, 2013). Recently, however, the usefulness of the concept's four-factor structure has been called into question (e.g., van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). As such, we set out to examine the multi-dimensionality of transformational leadership by examining personality traits as antecedents and performance as an outcome of transformational leadership's four sub-dimensions.

On the one hand, it has proven difficult to replicate the proposed four-factor structure (Bycio, Hackett, & Allen, 1995; Carless, 1998; Hinkin & Tracey, 1999; Tejada, Scandura, & Pillai, 2001; Tepper & Percy, 1994). Consequently, many empirical tests of transformational leadership operationalize it as a unitary construct (DeRue et al., 2011; Epitropaki & Martin, 2013; Ewen et al., 2013; Føllesdal & Hagtvvet, 2013). For example, we carefully reviewed recent papers in the *Leadership Quarterly* and found that seven out of ten papers on transformational leadership published in 2013 and 2014 used its unitary operationalization.⁵ Two broad sets of arguments have been put forward in support of transformational leadership as a unitary construct (Bycio et al., 1995; Carless, 1998; Tejada et al., 2001; Tepper & Percy, 1994). First, researchers have stated that the transformational leadership sub-dimensions are often highly inter-correlated and should therefore not be distinguished conceptually (Yukl, 2013). Second, it has been argued that, although the dimensions may have theoretical merit, they do not have adequate discriminant validity for a separate examination (Bycio et al., 1995; Carless, 1998; Tejada et al., 2001; Tepper & Percy, 1994).

On the other hand, another group of researchers has emphasized the importance of examining the transformational leadership sub-dimensions individually (e.g., Sutton & Staw, 1995; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013), which sparked recent empirical examinations following this advice (e.g., Antonakis & House, 2014; Parr et al., 2013). van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) explicitly discourage examining the transformational sub-dimensions as an overall construct. They argue that no theory indicates whether researchers should apply an additive – that is, the sub-dimensions are summed to create an overall transformational leadership measure – or an interactive approach – that is, any transformational leadership dimension becomes more effective the more a leader conveys other transformational leadership sub-dimensions – when combining the sub-dimensions into an overall construct. Furthermore, these scholars propose that it is likely that different transformational leadership sub-dimensions influence different outcomes via different mediators and in different ways, and thus require different theoretical argumentation to account for transformational leadership's multi-dimensional nature. A study by Parr et al. (2013) supports this idea by showing that the transformational leadership sub-dimensions influence organizational commitment via anxiety in different ways. That is, they find that idealized influence and individualized consideration have an indirect and positive effect on organizational commitment through anxiety, that inspirational motivation has an indirect and negative effect on organizational commitment through anxiety, and that intellectual stimulation has no indirect effect on organizational commitment.

We conducted a meta-analysis with the intention of advancing the field in terms of the transformational leadership construct's uni-dimensional, or multi-dimensionality, puzzle. Like van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013), we argue that the different transformational leadership sub-dimensions should be distinguished, because they are likely to have different origins; that is, different personality antecedents. For instance, it is reasonable to assume that personality traits that stimulate followers to think out of the box – such as openness to experience – are more strongly related to a sub-dimension like intellectual stimulation, whereas traits that promote leaders' caring behavior – such as agreeableness – are likely to predict individualized consideration more strongly. Assuming that transformational leadership is a multi-dimensional construct, we investigate the assumption that its sub-dimensions have different antecedents by linking these to the Big 5 personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Goldberg, 1990). In doing so, we provide the first meta-analytic test examining all of the transformational leadership sub-dimensions and their links to the Big 5 personality traits. Thereby, we update the meta-analysis by Bono and Judge (2004) and address one limitation of their study – the combination of idealized influence and inspirational motivation into one charismatic leadership measure. Furthermore, we extend their work by examining the transformational leadership sub-dimensions and their links to leader performance and whether these sub-dimensions influence outcomes differently, which would support the multi-dimensionality of the transformational leadership construct.

We not only argue that the transformational leadership sub-dimensions are differently linked to the Big 5 personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1992), but also that the personality traits affect effective leader performance indirectly via their differential effects on different leadership behaviors (e.g., Bono & Judge, 2004; Cavazotte, Moreno, & Hickmann, 2012; DeRue et al., 2011; Hetland & Sandal,

⁵ LQ papers in 2013/2014 that used the unitary-approach: Epitropaki and Martin (2013), Ewen et al. (2013), Føllesdal and Hagtvvet (2013), Tse, Huang, and Lam (2013), Zhang, Wang, and Pearce (2014), and Zhu, Newman, Miao, and Hooke (2013).

LQ papers in 2013/2014 that used the separation-approach: Antonakis and House (2014), Parr, Hunter, and Ligon (2013), and Peus, Braun, and Frey (2013).

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