

RESEARCH BRIEFS

DO TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERS IGNITE THE SAME DISCRETIONARY BEHAVIORS IN ALL FOLLOWERS?

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

It has become almost a truism that, in order to be effective, leaders should inspire their followers and behave in ways that make their followers want to emulate their actions. But is it really that simple? Does transformational leadership always lead to positive outcomes? Or are there times when a leader's transformational efforts will be less effective in eliciting certain behaviors from followers?

These are some of the questions that Ning Li (University of Iowa), Dan Chiaburu (Texas A&M University), Bradley Kirkman (North Carolina State University), and Zhitao Xie (Shanghai Jiao Tong University) set out to answer in their recent study that challenged the popular view that transformational leadership is always good, and explored whether there are factors that may influence whether leaders' transformational efforts are met with success or failure. Viewing followers as "flammable material" that can be "sparked" through their leader's influence, Li and colleagues focused on how transformational leadership affects the discretionary behaviors that their followers can engage in. This included citizenship behaviors, or behaviors that go beyond their job's requirements as well as taking charge behaviors, or followers' voluntary attempts to constructively change how work is done. In looking at how transformational leadership can affect these discretionary behaviors, Li and his colleagues argued that the effectiveness of leader behaviors depends on how followers view the leader, how much followers identify with their workgroup, and certain follower characteristics.

Li and his colleagues argued that transformational leadership would be less salient if followers view their leader as prototypical, or as being reflective of the group as a whole. This is because followers of a prototypical leader already trust that the leader has their well-being in mind, and thus doesn't have to be inspiring to get more out of his or her followers. A non-prototypical leader, on the other hand, is more likely to have to inspire followers because the followers are going to be naturally

less committed to a leader they view as outside of the group.

Li and his colleagues also examined whether followers' feelings about their work team—specifically whether they felt they were part of a close-knit cohesive team—might affect a leader's transformational efforts. They argued that this "team identification" would serve as a substitute for transformational leadership. That is, when followers identify with their team, they do not need an inspiring leader because the team's goals likely serve as the guiding vision, making the leader's vision unnecessary. Furthermore, followers are already likely to help out one another (i.e., engage in citizenship behaviors) and take charge because they have a strong sense of unity with the team. They posited that in such cases, transformational leadership is likely to be less effective because followers are already receiving these transformational functions from the team itself.

Finally, Li and colleagues suggested that follower characteristics could also make a leader's transformational efforts less effective in inspiring them to take charge and engage in more citizenship behaviors. For example, they suggested that followers who have a predisposition to defer to authority figures would be less influenced by their leaders' transformational behaviors when deciding to engage in discretionary citizenship behaviors. The logic here is that they would engage in citizenship behaviors regardless of their leaders' idealized influence or inspirational prowess. Similarly, followers with a proactive personality—those naturally inclined to go out and make things happen—are less likely to be affected by a transformational leader with regard to taking charge, as they don't need an external force (i.e., a transformational leader) to inspire them to get things done. Finally, Li and colleagues suggested that when followers are learning goal oriented, or predisposed to seek out challenge and strive toward achievement goals, they would be more likely to take charge, regardless of their leader's transformational efforts. Overall, followers' learning goal orientation should lessen the impact of transformational leadership on taking charge.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHOD

To test when transformational leadership is and is not effective, Li and colleagues obtained surveys from 196 pairs of employees and their leaders in 55 workgroups from two large state-owned companies in China. Followers were asked to answer questions about (a) their direct supervisor's idealized influence and inspirational motivation (i.e., transformational leadership), (b) their supervisor as a reflection of the group as a whole, (c) their emotional attachment with their team (i.e., team identification), (d) their tendency to bow to authority, (e) their inclination to create or control a situation (i.e., proactive personality), and (e) their predisposition toward challenge and self-development (i.e., learning goal orientation). Supervisors were asked to answer questions about their follower's citizenship (how much they helped others and put in extra effort) and tendency to take charge in their work.

KEY FINDINGS

Li and colleagues found support for several of their hypotheses. Specifically, they found that when leaders were viewed as prototypical, or reflective of the group, followers who had less transformational leaders took charge and engaged in more citizenship behaviors than followers whose leader was both highly prototypical and transformational. On the other hand, when leaders were not seen as prototypical, transformational efforts were as we typically expect to find—they were related to followers taking charge more and engaging in more citizenship behaviors.

Li and his colleagues also found support for team identification lessening the impact of transformational behaviors on taking charge. They found that when followers identified more with their team, transformational leadership had less influence on citizenship behaviors and taking charge. When followers did not feel as attached to their team, however, transformational leadership did influence these discretionary behaviors.

Likewise, Li and his colleagues found support for their assertion that having traditional views of authority would lessen the influence of transformational leadership on citizenship behaviors. That is, as expected, if followers were highly traditional, transformational leadership did not impact their citizenship, as they were just as likely to engage in such discretionary behaviors regardless of their leaders' influence.

Finally, Li and his colleagues found that followers who were more proactive and goal oriented

were less influenced by their leaders' idealized influence and inspirational motivation to take charge than were followers who were less proactive or motivated by different achievement goals.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study reveals some of the skeletons in the closet when it comes to transformational leadership. Contrary to the popular view that transformational leadership is always beneficial, Li and his colleagues showed that there are times when transformational leadership is not necessary for influencing discretionary behaviors of followers. Their results suggest that the effects of transformational leadership on citizenship and taking charge behaviors depend on how followers perceive a leader, how close followers feel to the rest of their workgroup, and certain follower characteristics. In short, if you want to know how effective transformational leadership will be for increasing follower citizenship behavior and initiative, then you first have to look at the context and the followers that are being led.

The results of this research suggest there are a few key things that organizations and leaders can do to improve the citizenship and taking charge behavior of followers. One is to examine whether it is easier for leaders to be prototypical or transformational in a given organization, and then focus on developing whichever leadership style is easier to implement. Another suggestion for leaders is to assess whether their followers feel part of a close-knit team. If team identification is high, leaders may want to focus their efforts on maintaining team cohesiveness instead of trying to inspire their followers. Similarly, leaders should get to know their followers and their personalities. In doing so, they can tailor their leadership style to be more effective than if they applied a "one-size fits-all" transformational leadership style.

While shedding some light on the limits of transformational leadership, this study is not without its limitations. The first is that the data were only collected at one time point. Since the data are a snapshot, the cause and effect of relationships cannot be determined. In addition, the data were only collected in China. As such, the extent to which these results would also apply in a Western culture remains unknown.

In sum, given the generally accepted view that transformational leadership is always positive, Li and his colleague's research provides a more sophisticated perspective on the topic. Transformational

leadership does have limits, and those limits center around the followers being led. Going back to the notion that followers can be viewed as “flammable material” waiting to be “sparked,” this research suggests that there is more than one way to start a fire.

SOURCE

- Li, N., Chiaburu, D. S., Kirkman, B. L., & Xie, Z. (2013). Spotlight on the followers: An examination of moderators of relationships between transformational leadership and subordinates' citizenship and taking charge. *Personnel Psychology, 66*, 225–260.