RESEARCH BRIEFS

TRANSFORMATION LEADERSHIP: WHEN IS IT REDUNDANT?

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We live in age that can be defined by one word: *more*. As consumers, we want our gadgets and gizmos to do more (and become smaller and cheaper with each passing day). We want more channels, more data, more gas mileage, more fiber, etc. In short, we want—and often demand—more of everything good. This holds true in business, as we want more customer service, more options, more hours, and yes, as investors, more earnings. So when it comes to managers in the workplace, we expect them to be inspiring and able to instill a common sense of purpose to rally and motivate employees. In short, we expect transformational leaders to be the norm. Yet, can there ever be situations where you can have too much of a good thing—where transformational leadership has a neutral or even a negative impact? If so, what follower characteristics might serve to negate the positive force of a transformational leader? And given this knowledge, how can organizations do better at placing the *right* leader in the *right* situation?

These were among the questions explored by Ning Li (University of Iowa), Dan S. Chiaburu, (Texas A&M University), Bradley L. Kirkman, (North Carolina State University), and Xie, Zhitao (Shanghai Jiao Tong University) in their recent study. Li and his colleagues challenged two widely held assumptions in the field of management: first, that it is always best to have transformational leaders in place, and second, that the work context (e.g., the nature of work groups, follower characteristics, etc.) has little or nothing to do with the success or failure of transformational leaders. Addressing these assumptions could advance our understanding of transformational leadership as well as raise important questions about the contingencies that may affect leader–follower relationships.

Li and his colleagues focused on how several contextual factors may influence the effectiveness of transformational leaders. Specifically, they wanted to identify contextual factors that would blunt the impact of transformational leadership. For instance, if a work group perceives its leader to be prototypical of the group's composition (i.e., the leader is seen as "one of us"), then group members may be more likely to engage in positive organizational citizenship (helping). Likewise, a work group with a prototypical leader may be more likely to have employees display a willingness to take charge—thanks to their identification with and allegiance to their team. In short, in this situation, transformational leadership may have less impact if not be unnecessary.

Li and his colleagues also examined how worker perspectives about the organizational hierarchy may influence their organizational citizenship behaviors. If employees embrace traditional values about the organization—meaning they tend to view power hierarchically and defer to their leaders—then they may be prepared to follow a leader simply because it is part of their role expectations as followers. In short, employees with traditional values may be less influenced by or not need transformational leadership to act positively or be "inspired" on the job.

Finally, Li and his colleagues examined the relationship between self-motivated employees and their proclivity to engage in pro-social behaviors. They posited that if workers were more self-directed and oriented towards learning goals, they would be in less need of—and be less influenced by—the behavior of transformational leaders. In other words, self-starting individuals would be less in need of a transformational leader to energize them and direct their efforts in work situations.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHOD

Li and his colleagues surveyed matched sets of subordinates and their supervisors in China. Their study incorporated data from 55 such paired workgroups. Managers and their subordinates were asked a separate set of questions about both themselves and their situation. Managers were asked to rate the workers that they managed on three different dimensions. The first two related to organizational citizenship behaviors. These were altruism (how willing employees were to help one another on work-related problems) and conscientiousness (how willing employees were to work overtime without being paid to accomplish the group's goals). The final aspect

was the employees' willingness to take charge in a situation (how willing employees were to develop their own solutions to work problems).

In turn, the subordinates were asked questions relating to both their manager and themselves. Specifically, they were asked to assess their leaders' transformational capabilities and how similar the leader was to the make-up of the group members (i.e., whether the person was prototypical or not). Finally, subordinates were asked to rate themselves on several dimensions, including whether they had a proactive personality, if they were oriented towards learning more and improving on the job, the extent to which they felt emotionally attached to one another, and if they held a traditional view of hierarchical relationships.

It is important to note that the study was conducted in two state-owned enterprises in China. Li and his colleagues noted that research conducted exclusively in Chinese settings often yields similar results to that found in the West, and vice versa.

KEY FINDINGS

The results were fascinating, underscoring the contextual nature of transformational leadership. In short, follower characteristics, combined with their perceptions of the leader and their own situation, did appear to moderate the connection between transformational leadership and subordinates' willingness to take charge and be good organizational citizens. Clearly, the context is something managers need to consider when assessing the degree to which transformational leadership behaviors can influence subordinates.

Indeed, the study illustrated situations that could make a transformational leader more or less effective. For instance, if subordinates in a work group perceived their leader to be prototypical of them, then transformational leadership had less of an impact on their willingness to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors. That's because seeing the leader as "one of us" was apparently enough to trigger helping behavior and other acts of kindness. Likewise, if subordinates were goal oriented and had a traditional view of the organizational hierarchy, they were less affected by transformational leadership. Self-motivated employees were less likely to need transformational leaders to prod them into action, while "traditionalists" tended to see positive organizational citizenship as something expected given their roles as followers—not something they needed to be "inspired" to do.

Overall, Li and his colleagues concluded that these three sets of factors acted, in essence, as both inhibitors of and substitutes for transformational leadership. As inhibitors, the presence of any of these factors—either independently or especially collectively—could make the presence of a transformational leader "redundant" since followers' positive behavior would instead be sparked by their own motivations or perceptions. On the other hand, when these factors are not present (e.g., employees in a work group do not see their leader as "one of us"), then transformational leadership is likely to have a much greater impact on subordinates. In essence, when such "favorable conditions" are not present, managers—and the organizations they work for—should see a better return on investment from transformational leadership.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This article serves to contextualize our view of transformational leadership. As Fiedler (1967) did decades ago, their study again challenges organizations to ask a simple question: "Is this the right situation for the manager/leader we are putting in place?" What Li and his colleagues have done is to help us flesh out what constitutes the "right" situation for transformational leadership. Their work offers important guidance to executives by describing certain situations in which transformational leadership may not be the most effective or cost-effective choice. Put simply, a highly cohesive team of employees consisting of like-minded individuals may essentially manage themselves without needing a transformational leader to spur them to positive action. They will go about helping one another and pursuing organizational goals because they believe it is the right thing to do.

Consequently, it's vital that managers carefully assess their subordinates and the situational context in which they work. The nature of the workgroup may well determine how effective *any* leader can or could be at motivating and directing their charges. There simply needs to be enough of what Klein and House (1995) famously called the "flammable material"—followers who can be motivated by transformational leadership if that approach is to succeed.

In the end, the work of Li and his colleagues will prompt new research into the contextualization of both transformational leadership and other forms of leadership. For years to come, that research will shape the field of leadership as well as the debate surrounding the interplay of factors influencing employee performance and leader–follower relations. Overall, what Li and his colleagues have started will prove immensely helpful for those who study leadership as well as for those who practice it.

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