

Transformational Leadership and Job-Related Learning.

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ABSTRACT

Various empirical studies have examined transformational leadership on the effects of followers and organisations. Transformational leadership has been related to individual attitudes and behaviors such as satisfaction with leaders, organisational citizenship behavior, organisational commitment, motivation, trust in leader, creativity, performance, employee involvement, and empowerment. It has also been linked to such organisational outcomes as innovation, change, productivity, ethical climate, and organisational learning.

Organisational learning occurs at three levels: individual, group, and organisational. The focus of the present study is on the individual level—job-related learning. Job-related learning is a measure of individual job behavior pertaining to acquisition of knowledge and skills and enhancement of job performance within the context of the individual's workplace. It argues that transformational leadership inculcates individuals' drive to learn.

The aim of the study is to examine the relationship between transformational leadership and job-related learning. Transformational leadership is composed of four unique but interrelated facets—idealised influence, individualised consideration, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation. The research results support the hypothesis that transformational leadership is positively related to job-related learning. The implications of the research findings and suggestions for future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Individual learning is important as it is both a precursor and an outcome of learning in organisations (e.g., Argyris & Schon, 1978; Senge, 1992; Tsang, 1997). Interest in the subject of learning has intensified since knowledge and innovation have been acknowledged as sources of

competitive advantage (Starkey, 1998) in that they can lead to the development of organisation-specific capabilities that are tacit and difficult to imitate.

A primary external factor that drives individual learning at the job-level is the leadership. Transformational leadership enhances job-related learning as it challenges the status quo and thereby inspires and motivates individuals to learn due to its principles of intellectual stimulation, idealised influence (charisma), individualised consideration and inspirational motivation (Bass, 1985). This form of leadership is concerned with personnel development (Bierly, Kessler and Christensen, 2000) and engenders emotions that inspire followers to greater performance-levels and achievement (Tirmizi, 2002), both of which rely on job-related learning.

Job-related learning has received relatively little scholarly attention although it is recognised as important for organisational competitiveness. The purpose of this paper therefore is to examine the effects of transformational leadership on job-related learning.

JOB-RELATED LEARNING

A job can be regarded as a set of activities or tasks that an individual performs to meet a set of objectives. Individuals require specific knowledge and skills to perform their jobs effectively. Job-related learning is thus critical for individuals to excel in their jobs. Borrowing from the human resource field, job descriptions are explicit tasks and roles that one must undertake and fulfil to meet specific goals that eventually contribute to group (department) and organisational goals (Torrington and Hall, 1998). In this study, the term ‘job’ is broadly defined as a process with specific tasks for meeting objectives.

“Learning is the process of linking, expanding, and improving data, information, knowledge and wisdom” (Bierly, Kessler and Christensen, 2000). Job-related learning, as the dependent variable, extends itself to facets that facilitate the enhancement of skills, acquirement of new knowledge, and increment in capabilities and competencies that allow incumbents to do their jobs more efficiently and effectively. Boyatzis and Kolb (1995) stressed that the understanding of the relationships is critical as it results in a synergy fit between individuals and their environment thereby enabling “skilled performance”. The knowledge, skills and competencies that individuals currently possess can be rendered unsuitable, insufficient, or even obsolete as the nature of the job changes over time.

Knowledge, as the final state of pattern-recognition (Boyatzis & Kolb, 1995), helps individuals to achieve both a better comprehension of their jobs and an awareness of techniques that improve their performance. For example, learning can lead to a better conceptualisation of one’s job and its relationship with other jobs within the organisation. From a behavioral perspective, job-related learning includes the ability to translate declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge. Furthermore, positive changes in behaviors, such as the attainment of new skills, are indicators of job-related learning.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

From an organisational development perspective, leadership is about inculcating the spirit of freedom and raising energy levels to develop and grow followers (Peters and Austin, 1985). Leadership is the process of influencing subordinates (Bethel, 1990; cited in Johnson, 2002)

towards a common vision by asking what and why (Locke et al., 1991). It is a critical facet in organisational settings as it has been shown to be correlated with increased motivation (Houkes, 2002; cited in Van Dierendonck et al., 2004), reduced absenteeism (Van Dierendonck et al., 2004), increased job satisfaction (Wong, Hui, and Law, 1998), increased personnel well-being (Van Dierendonck et al., 2004), and improved performance (Bass et al., 2003).

The evolution of leadership research can be broadly categorised into three schools of thoughts (Johnson, 2002). The first movement focused on leadership traits, which underwent a paradigm shift as researchers observed that leadership can be trained and developed (Barling, Weber, and Kelloway, 1996). This eventually led to the study of leadership behaviour and styles from both personality and contingent perspectives. The present theory on leadership, transformational leadership, focuses on the relationship between the leader and his/ her followers.

A prevalent focus of leadership research is transactional and transformational leadership. Burns (1978) considered the opposite of transformational leadership to be transactional (managerial), leadership which is characterised by contingent reward and management-by-exception. Contingent reward is exemplified by an exchange between the leader and the follower in that the leader will only reward the follower based on performance.

Transformational leadership “occurs when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self interests for the good of the group” (Bass, 1990, p. 21). Simply, this form of leadership is concerned with personnel development (Bierly, Kessler and Christensen, 2000) and engenders emotions that inspire followers to greater performance-levels and achievement (Tirmizi, 2002).

The Four Factors of Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is described by four characteristics; idealised influence, individualised consideration, inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation (Bass and Avolio, 1996). Idealised influence can be appropriately described as the leader being a role model. Such leaders generally espouse high ethical standards such as utilitarianism and egalitarianism. Another important facet is self-sacrifice of the leader for the good of the follower and/ or values of the organisation. This characteristic of modesty and altruism expressed with a sense of kindness is observed as a source of trustworthiness (Bono and Judge, 2004). Gillespie and Mann (2004) empirically found that idealised influence was the strongest predictor of trust compared to the other three characteristic of transformational leadership.

Individualised consideration demonstrated by the transformational leader focuses not only on the greater good of the organisation, task or team but also provides attention to the specific needs of individuals, where equity rather than equality is emphasised (Avolio and Bass, 1995). The approach adopted by leaders is not to single out individuals for punishment but such leaders recognise that not everyone is equal (i.e., skills, experience, wants and objectives), hence time and attention is made for each individual in order to understand them personally and to help them effectively by tailoring assistance to the individual’s abilities and needs (Bass et al., 2003). Bass

et al. (2003) further explained that as an antecedent to cultivating a learning culture, individualised consideration develops a supportive climate that fosters trust.

Inspirational motivation is the leaders' ability to formulate and express objectives that teams or entire organisations can identify with from commercial and personal perspectives. This objective is operationalised at the individual level and also takes into consideration the capabilities of the individual by considering the manner in which they can contribute to the objectives and simultaneously fulfil their personal ambitions. Transformational leadership stimulates followers by using a variety of approaches such as emotions, logic and career ambitions that are relevant and appealing to individual followers.

Intellectual stimulation is the ability of the leader to inspire followers to “think out of the box” when solving problems thereby resulting in creativity and innovation. Transformational leaders do not encourage their subordinates to follow their instructions blindly but promotes the thinking abilities of subordinates by having them question conventional ways of doing things.

These four factors are powerful characteristics of leadership and collectively provide even greater conduciveness for the development and maintenance of a learning culture as it creates a working environment that is able to stimulate an atmosphere based on positive feelings and values (Tirmizi, 2002). This is parallel to Looman's (2003, p. 218) description of reflective leader that seeks “philosophical wholeness”.

Avolio and Bass (1995) suggested that the four characteristics of transformational leadership may have an effect on followers' development, which in many cases are job-related. For example, intellectual stimulation can improve the decision-making capabilities of followers within the context of their individual jobs (Avolio and Bass, 1995). In addition, the change-centricity of transformational leadership makes this type of leadership more adaptive to situations and responsive to challenges (Bass et al, 2003), hence, transformational leadership may be more conducive and appropriate in instigating followers to change through learning.

Transformational Leadership and Learning Orientation

Leadership is a critical component in driving individual learning. Business environments that are stable require management to only provide direction necessary for the maintenance of operations. Dynamic and turbulent business environment have caused organisations to operate outside of their conventional business models and frameworks. It is impossible for organisations to “manage” these changes. Management skills are insufficient in meeting these challenges as organisations require holistic efforts. Leadership develops and leads personnel out of current moulds to venture and experiment with new ways of doing things.

Lay-offs in organisations are common and transformational leadership is not a cure as such decisions to lay-off personnel are primarily based on economic and financial reasons. However, the characteristics of transformational leadership can mitigate the effects of lay-offs, not only on those leaving the organisations but also on the survivors. This is important as studies have demonstrated that lay-offs tend to alienate survivors (Mishra, Spreitzer and Mishra. 1998). This instinctively demotivates survivors in many aspects from productivity to learning. Leadership

should intervene in the informal organisation as well as the formal organisation (Grieves, 2000) in mitigating the adverse effects of business decisions such as lay-offs.

As much as leadership can influence organisational values (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Schein, 1985 and Kouzes and Posner, 1987), leadership can also influence forms of thinking, motivations and behaviours that enhance the learning of personnel in an organisation (Popper and Lipshitz, 2000). Burns (1978, p. 20) defined transformational leadership as leadership that elevates followers to “higher levels of motivation and morality”, while Syrett and Hogg (1992, p. 329; cited in Looman, 2003) stated that effective leadership “liberates and enables followers”. This infers assisting followers to obtain skills and knowledge through learning in order to become independent with respect to thinking and actions.

Transformational learning is the process of demonstrating how to learn from experience (courage to practice through trial and error), to assume critical reflection, form relationship and hold dialogue with others and continuously aim for personal development (Taylor, 2000). From the discussion above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Transformational leadership will be positively correlated to job-related learning.

METHOD

Participants

400 participants responded to the survey. The average age of participants was 31.3 years (s.d. = 7.2 years) and 55 per cent were female. The average number of years that the participants had worked in their current organisations was 4.2 years (s.d. = 4.5) and they had been in their current jobs on average for 2.7 years (s.d. = 3.4 years), and had worked with their current supervisor for 2.0 years (s.d. = 2.6). 44.1 per cent of the participants were executives, 5.3 per cent were senior managers, 10.8 per cent were middle managers, 9.3 per cent were lower-level managers, and 30.5 per cent were non-managers. With regards to the participants’ education levels, 11.1 per cent of the participants had completed high school, 31.6 per cent had completed a diploma, and the remaining 57.3 per cent had completed either a bachelor degree or a post-graduate degree (i.e., masters or doctorate). The participants were from 31 professions across 21 industries. The top three professions that contributed to this study are administration (17.9%), engineers (9.0%) and lecturers (8.3%). The top four industries that contributed to this study were education (16.5%), crane manufacturing sector (11.3%) and investment holding (9.3%).

Measures

The scales for job-related learning were developed for this research, whilst the scale for transformational leadership was obtained from Bass and Avolio’s (1997) Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire. The Appendix presents the items used for both scales. Three items were used to measure job-related learning. The phrase “in the last six months” was included at the start of each item to ensure that the participants’ response to the variable reflected the recent learning of job-related skills and knowledge. A five-point Likert scale (i.e., 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = not sure, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree) was used with the scales.

Procedure

The data collection method assured the participants anonymity. The questionnaires were distributed as package with an information sheet with brief details of the research. The package was given to the human resources manager in each of the organisations. A pre-paid return envelop was enclosed to enable participants to conveniently complete the questionnaire at a time and place of their choice and to post the completed questionnaires directly to the researchers.

RESULTS

A principal component analysis was used to examine the structure of the overall measurement model. This analysis involved using a Varimax rotation with a three-component extraction as the questionnaire contained items for two constructs: i) transformational leadership; and ii) job-related learning. The cut-off value for item loadings depends upon sample size. Hair, Anderson, Tatham and Black (1998) recommended a cut-off value of .45 for a sample size of 150. In addition, Hair et al. (1998) recommended increasing the cut-off value as the number of items increases. Based on these recommendations, a cut-off value of .50 was used for the overall principal component analysis loadings. The final principal component analysis yielded a two-component Varimax solution comprising eighteen items for transformational leadership and three items for job-related learning.

Table 1 contains the findings from the principal component analysis and shows that all of the items for job-related learning load on the first component and all of the items for transformational leadership load on the second component. Overall scores for both constructs were obtained by averaging the scores of their respective items.

Scale	Items	Principal Components	
		1	2
TFL	consid1		.560
	consid2		.526
	consid4		.509
	iia1		.589
	iia2		.552
	iia3		.696
	iia4		.723
	iib1		.613
	iib2		.735
	iib3		.587
	iib4		.587
	inspire1		.710
	inspire2		.695
	inspire3		.672
	inspire4		.600
	intstim1		.616
	intstim2		.599
	intstim4		.609
JRL	JRL1	.749	
	JRL2	.859	
	JRL3	.808	

^a Loadings > .50 shown.

JRL = job-related learning, TFL = transformational leadership

Table 1. Principal components analysis results for transformational leadership and job-related learning

All of the data were obtained from a single source (i.e., employees) at a single point in time using a single method. The covariance between the constructs may therefore be influenced by single-source and common-method biases. To address this issue, a single-component test was conducted on all of the items that were retained after the principal components analyses. The results from this analysis revealed that the first component accounted for 28.2% of the total variance in the items, which indicates that common source/method variance does not explain the majority of the covariance between the items.

The means, standard deviations, correlations, and internal reliabilities for the measured variables are presented in Table 2. As shown in Table 2, transformational leadership has a significant negative correlation with organisational tenure and job tenure. Job-related learning has significant negative correlations with organisational tenure and job tenure as well as a significant positive correlation with gender; females reported higher levels of job-related learning.

The effects of age, gender, profession, educational level, organisational tenure, job tenure, organisational level, and industry on job-related learning were controlled by using standardised residual scores obtained by regressing job-related learning on the demographic variables. As shown in Table 2, transformational leadership has a significant positive correlation with job-related learning ($r = .345, p < .01$). This findings support the hypothesis.

	Mean (s.d.)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	31.0 (7.2)	-									
2. Gender	-	-.098	-								
3. Education	-	.017	-.197	-							
4. Org. tenure	4.2 (4.5)	.614	.044	-.191	-						
5. Job tenure	2.6 (3.4)	.407	.031	-.156	.664	-					
6. Work with supervisor	1.9 (2.6)	.312	.039	-.181	.473	.612	-				
7. Org. level	-	.392	-.215	.351	.238	.102	.118	-			
8. Profession	-	.096	-.099	.114	.069	.035	.005	.122	-		
9. Industry	-	.098	-.033	-.043	.097	.064	.152	-.179	.033	-	
10. Transformational leadership	3.5 (0.5)	-.061	.072	-.026	-.131	-.117	.047	.036	-.087	-.054	-
11. Job-related learning	3.6 (0.7)	-.055	.125	-.057	-.124	-.119	.009	-.106	-.037	.051	.345

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed); **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

^a $r > .345, p < .01$

Table 2. Means, standard deviation (s.d.), and correlations^a for the measured variables

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis that transformational leadership would be correlated positively to job-related learning was supported. Transformational leadership stimulates feelings such as trust, admiration and loyalty (Tirmizi, 2002) as it stimulates and diffuses knowledge and wisdom (Bierly, Kessler and Christensen, 2000). It draws on values, beliefs, morality, emotions and intellectual stimulations to inculcate internalised development within followers and embeds this into the organisational culture (Schein, 1992). Coad and Berry (1998) maintained that leadership is a critical driver of followers' learning as leadership provides focus and feedback to followers and helps them to determine and articulate their own learning goals. They concluded that if a high learning orientation in an organisation is desired, transformational leadership would be most appropriate type of leadership.

In addition, transformational leadership influences and teaches other managers how to improve their performance in leading others (Brown and Posner, 2001). Brown and Posner (2001) termed the type of learning that results from transformational leadership changing the way followers see themselves and the world as transformational learning. Mezirow (1994, p. 222) defined transformational learning as "the process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of meaning of one's experience as a guide to action".

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research is needed to as the use of a cross-sectional design in this study prohibits inferences being drawn regarding the causal relationships between transformational leadership and job-related learning. Future research might employ a longitudinal design in order to facilitate the drawing of causal inferences. For example, a study might be designed such that transformational leadership is measured first and job-related learning is measured some time (e.g., four months) later.

All of the data collected were obtained from a single source using a common method (i.e., a Likert-scale questionnaire). Mono-source and common-method biases can increase both measurement error and/or the correlations amongst the variables. Although it is difficult to prove such biases were not influential, the principal component analysis and the moderation analysis indicate that mono-source and common-method biases were not highly influential. Future research could avoid such issues by obtaining data for transformational leadership and job-related learning from parties, other than the job incumbent, who are familiar with the leader and the incumbent's job-related knowledge. Nevertheless, such data are difficult to obtain and their validity is questionable.

PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

Keeping pace with job-demand for learning is crucial as failure to acquire the knowledge and skills required to perform a job effectively can result in either stagnation or demotion of personnel (Marsick, 1988). Additionally, failure to acquire the knowledge and skills required to perform a job effectively can result in other unfavorable consequences such as frustration and burnout. There are also consequences for the organisation because employees who do not update their job-related knowledge and skills adversely affect not only their own performance but also

that of the organisation. Furthermore, the ability to learn effectively is a catalyst for creativity and innovation. Innovative behavior is critical for organisations as it can improve or create new products, improve production for quality, and reorganise commercial organisation for enhanced effectiveness (Hansemark, 1998).

Effective leadership not only facilitates job-related learning but it also creates a conducive working environment where leaders and followers trust one another. This aids creativity and innovation that facilitates organisational competitiveness. Leadership is critical in minimising organisational politics. There is no doubt that the force of political agendas in organisations is a cause of negative behaviours. Defensive routines take place when power bases are threatened and when group loyalty takes precedence over individual rights.

Job-related learning is situational as organisational systems and structures (bureaucracies and ad-hoc teams), sources of power (expert and reward power) and dominant cultural characteristics (acceptance of informalities in organisations) illustrates that job-related learning from a social perspectives is highly contextual. There are no rules on how leaders should lead. However, some conformance to the concept of transformational leadership provides an opportunity for organisations to minimise organisational politics.

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APPENDIX

Measures

Transformational leadership (TFL) – intellectual stimulation (instim), idealised influence – behaviour (iib), idealised influence – attributed (ia), inspirational motivation (inspire) and individual consideration (consid).

TFL1: My supervisor re-examines ways of doing things to see if they are up to standard (instim1)

TFL2: My supervisor talks about his/her most important values and beliefs. (iib1)

TFL3: My supervisor instills pride in me for being associated with him/her. (ia1)

TFL4: My supervisor talks enthusiastically about what needs to be accomplished. (inspire1)

TFL5: My supervisor specifies the importance of having a strong sense of purpose. (iib2)

TFL6: My supervisor spends time teaching and coaching. (consid1)

TFL7: My supervisor goes beyond self-interest for the good of the group. (ia2)

TFL8: My supervisor acts in ways that builds my respect. (ia3)

TFL9: My supervisor displays a sense of power and confidence. (ia4)

TFL10: My supervisor considers the moral and ethical consequences of decisions. (iib3)

TFL11: My supervisor talks about a great vision of the future. (inspire2)

TFL12: My supervisor considers me as having different needs, abilities, and aspirations from others. (consid2)

TFL13: My supervisor gets me to look at problems from many different angles. (instim2)

TFL14: My supervisor helps me to develop my strengths. (consid3)

TFL15: My supervisor emphasises the importance of having a collective sense of mission. (iib4)

TFL16: My supervisor expresses confidence that goals will be achieved. (inspire3)

TFL17: My supervisor talks optimistically about the future. (inspire4)

TFL18: My supervisor seeks differing perspectives when solving problems. (instim4)

Job-related learning (JRL)

JRL1: In the last six months, I have learnt a lot of things that have helped me to perform my job better.

JRL2: In the last six months, I have acquired a lot of new job-related knowledge.

JRL3: In the last six months, I have acquired a lot of new job-related skills