

A cross-cultural test of the ‘five-factor model of personality and transformational leadership’

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Abstract

Considering the impact of culture on the generalization of leadership theory, we offer a replication of Judge and Bono’s [Judge, T.A., Bono, J.E. (2000), Five-factor model of personality and transformational leadership. *J Appl Psychol* 85 (5) 751–765.] study “Five-Factor Model of Personality and Transformational Leadership” to examine the applicability of the findings in the Chinese culture. Our study shows that certain personality traits positively associated with transformational leadership behavior in the North American context are not evident in the Chinese environment. Hofstede’s four cultural dimensions, cultural tightness and self-monitoring theory are used to explain the differences between our outcomes and those of Judge and Bono.

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1. Theoretical background

Transformational leaders, who are capable of coping with change while building employee morale and commitment, exhibit their effectiveness over those with other leadership styles (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). Transformational leadership behaviors can be categorized into four dimensions: idealized influence/charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1985).

Judge and Bono (2000) are the first to link transformational leadership with the Five-Factor model of personality, which includes neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Costa and McCrae, 1992). The findings of Judge and Bono’s study showed the predictive power of certain personality traits of transformational leadership, suggesting the possible use of Big-Five personality traits to select transformational leaders. Ployhart et al. (2001) extended Judge

and Bono (2000) research in Singapore, an Asian country. They found that the personality constructs were not equally predictive of typical (will do) and maximum (can do) transformational leadership performance. Leung and Bozionelos (2004) examined the relationship between the Big-Five personality traits and the prototypical image of the effective leader in the Confucian culture as well as investigated the extent to which the prototypical notion of the effective leader was associated with the features of transformational leadership. Research conducted by Project GLOBE (Den Hartog et al., 1999) examined whether transformational leadership attributes were universal contributors to outstanding leadership. The result of the study showed that transformational leadership was among the prototypes of outstanding leadership in all sixty-one countries including U.S. and China.

We would like to point out the major differences between the existing studies and our proposed study. Ployhart et al. (2001) obtained the scores on leadership behavior from the maximum performance setting and the typical performance setting, which are significantly different from the daily working setting. Additionally, it is important to note that the participants in Leung and Bozionelos (2004) and GLOBE project (Den Hartog et al., 1999) were asked to describe the prototypical image of the

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effective leader in the Confucian culture instead of being asked to provide an evaluation for their real-life leaders based on the actual performance. There may be a significant difference between the picture of the ideal and that of the real. In a recent meta-analysis study, Judge and Bono (2004) provided a more extensive examination on the relationship between the Five-Factor Model of personality and transformational leadership. They found that the overall linkage of personality with ratings of transformational leadership behavior is weak.

China has been undergoing an economic reform starting in 1978, gradually moving from a central-planning economy to a market-oriented economy; from a domestic-oriented market to a global-oriented market. The subsequent changes at the firm level are huge: the lifetime employment system was abandoned; both leaders and subordinates strive to survive in a performance-based competitive environment. The news on mergers, restructuring, and layoffs suddenly dominate the headlines in newspapers. In such uncertain times, extraordinary individuals, transformational leaders, are urged to lead subordinates going through such tremendous challenge. Therefore, it becomes imperative to study transformational leadership in China and to understand how to take good use of the understanding on the relationship between personality traits and transformational leadership behavior to select, train, and develop transformational leaders.

2. Personality and transformational leadership

2.1. Extraversion

Out of the five personality traits, extraversion emerged as a significant correlate of transformational leadership in Judge and Bono's (2000) study. According to Judge and Bono (2000), extraversion was linked to transformational leadership behavior through its characteristics of articulation and social dominance.

Articulation was important in the practice of transformational leadership and this relationship was reflected through its close relationship with inspirational motivation, one dimension of transformational leadership. In order to inspire the enthusiasm and self-confidence among the subordinates and to elevate subordinates' level of motivation to share the same vision as that of the leaders, transformational leaders must be able to communicate the value of the desired goal in an appealing way. The ability to communicate becomes particularly important for the Chinese leaders. Chinese leaders, especially the leaders from State-Owned-Enterprises (SOE), bear the responsibility as spokesperson to effectively convey the directives from state ministries to superiors and subordinates in the organizations. SOE leaders' duty on political agenda communication is due to their heavy reliance on the government for both tangible resources (bank loans and important raw materials) and intangible resources (business opportunities) even though China has been undergoing a transition from a central-planning economy to a market-oriented economy. Social dominance, the other demonstration of the extraversion personality, was closely associated with initiative taking and social interaction stimulation (House and Howell, 1992), which were identified as the requisite traits

of transformational leaders. Largely due to the high power distance characteristic of Chinese culture, Chinese leaders are usually engaged in the dominant positions: they are responsible to take initiatives in social setting, introduce topics for discussion in meetings and gatherings, and stimulate social interaction. Under this line of reasoning, we expect extraversion to be a positive indicator of transformational leadership in China. Nonetheless, from the perspective of culture tightness, such positive relationship might not be observed in China.

The concept of culture tightness indicates how much deviant behavior is tolerated in a given society. In a tight culture society as China, people strictly follow the social norms. In addition, the high power-distance Chinese culture requires everyone to behave strictly according to his or her rank in the organization. People are not encouraged to present new ideas, even if the ideas may lead to progress in the organization. Therefore, even though the extraversion personality is associated with exceptional expressiveness and a strong inclination to take a leadership role in groups, and consequently might be positively related to transformational leadership behavior, it may be ill regarded by peers, subordinates or superiors who live in a tight culture society. In other words, the tight culture will prohibit leaders from exhibiting extraversion-related behavior, such as exceptional articulation and group leadership. So, we predict no relationship between extraversion and transformational leadership behavior.

H1. Extraversion will not predict transformational leadership behavior in the Chinese culture.

2.2. Openness to experience

According to Judge and Bono's (2000) finding, openness to experience was positively correlated with transformational leadership. Judge and Bono (2000) predicted this positive relationship based on the argument that individuals with high openness to experience personality had a strong desire for change and change was the characteristic of transformational leaders reflected through the intellectual stimulation, a component of transformational leadership behavior. Intellectual stimulation instigates a cognitive reappraisal of current circumstances and leads to a questioning of old and perhaps comfortable assumptions (Bass, 1985). In the long run, intellectual stimulation may produce desirable effects. Yet, in the short run, leaders who continually urge followers to search for new and better methods of doing things may create ambiguity, conflict, or other forms of stress in the minds of followers (Avolio, 1999). Podsakoff et al. (1990) reported a negative relationship between transformational leader's intellectual stimulation and follower's trust in and satisfaction with the leader. This negative relationship is expected to be more prevalent in a high uncertainty-avoidance country like China. The Chinese society feels threatened by uncertain and ambiguous situations; the Chinese subordinates heavily depend on the structures in their organizations and institutions to make events clearly interpretable and predictable (Wang et al., 1998). A leader with the openness to experience personality would be perceived less predictable and undependable by their superiors and subordinates. Despite the

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