



## Predictors of the emergence of transformational leadership in virtual decision teams

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the etiology of transformational leadership in virtual team contexts. First, we compared 127 members of virtual decision-making teams with 135 members of traditional face-to-face teams in terms of the relationship between aspects of personality and the emergence of transformational leadership. The type of communication media (face-to-face versus “pure” virtual) was found to interact with extraversion and emotional stability in the prediction of emerging transformational leadership. In line with prior findings, we showed how these personality characteristics were relevant to transformational leadership emergence in our face-to-face teams. However, they were largely unrelated to such leadership in the virtual team context. We also focused specifically on the virtual context by analyzing the content of team interactions. After accounting for the effect of degree of activity level, the linguistic quality in one’s written communication was found to predict the emergence of transformational leadership in virtual teams.

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Transformational leaders articulate strongly-held beliefs and values, stimulate thinking that fosters innovative solutions to problems, and generate high degrees of follower confidence, trust, and admiration (Bass, 1997; Bass & Avolio, 1994). Given the relevance of such leadership to the success or failure of groups in organizations (Judge & Piccolo, 2004), researchers have turned their attention to its etiology and whether variables can be identified that predict its formation (e.g., Judge & Bono, 2000). The current study expands this line of investigation by focusing primarily on virtual teams (VTs) and the extent to which various traits or qualities exhibited by team members predict their emergence as perceived, transformational leaders.

Our study is important for two key reasons. First, much more is known about the individual and group level outcomes of transformational leadership (e.g., Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Judge & Piccolo, 2004), as compared to the traits or qualities that could give rise to perceptions of its formation in emerging leaders. Yet, an understanding of the etiology of transformational leadership could have important implications for the selection and development of effective leaders in organizations. Second, our current understanding is somewhat limited to face-to-face settings (Judge & Bono, 2000). Little is known about why or how transformational leadership may emerge in a virtual context, despite the fact that it may be of equal relevance in such a setting (Avolio, Kahai, & Dodge, 2000; Kahai, Sosik, & Avolio, 1997). As noted by Avolio and Kahai (2003), the few studies that have tried to systematically examine leadership in virtual teams (VTs) have done so by assigning or designating a leader. However, VTs oftentimes have no designated leader, instead relying on a shared leadership model (Conger & Pearce, 2003; Pearce, 2004), also known as distributed or rotating leadership (Pulley, Sessa, & Malloy, 2002). This type of leadership is used in self-managed teams, and it allows for leadership to shift depending on the task, expertise, and influence of certain members (Duarte & Snyder, 1999; Lipnack & Stamps, 2000). As such, even in the shared leadership environment exemplified by VTs, individual leadership qualities do matter, and individual leaders may emerge (cf., Conger & Pearce, 2003; Pearce, Yoo, & Alavi, 2004; Shamir, 1997).

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Thus, our focus is on the individual emergence of transformational leadership. In sum, our purpose is twofold: (1) to examine the degree to which the five-factor model of personality is predictive of perceived transformational leadership behavior in both virtual and face-to-face settings, and (2) to examine predictors that may be specific to VTs. Our specific focus is on the nascent or formative stages of decision-making teams, and our research context involved student teams engaged in an ethical decision-making task. Next, we overview the theoretical basis for our research, followed by the development of hypotheses.

## 1. Predictors of perceptions of transformational leadership in a virtual context

A model of personal qualities that may serve as predictors of emergent transformational leadership in a virtual context is shown in Fig. 1. Two key aspects of the model should be noted. First, the model suggests the potential relevance of trait-based predictors, as well as more behaviorally-oriented variables. Second, although to some degree we consider comparisons with face-to-face groups, our primary focus is on understanding the emergence of transformational leadership perceptions in a virtual context.

Schneider and Goktepe (1983) defined emergent leaders as group members who exert significant influence over other members of the group although no formal authority has been vested in them. Leaders emerge through a complex process of role taking and peer perceptual processes (cf. Seers, 1989; Taggar, Hackett, & Saha, 1999). Arnoff and Wilson (1985) explained sources of leadership status as either ascribed or achieved. Ascribed sources of status stem from a process whereby readily observable individual differences, such as gender or personality, result in attributions of competency and leadership ability that affect status within a group. Thus, status is ascribed based on implicit theories (ILTs), schemas, or societal stereotypes, with or without accompanying behavioral support. In contrast, achieved sources of status stem from a process whereby valued behaviors and tangible contributions to others or the group result in a person earning status within the group. Thus, as described in Neubert and Taggar (2004), leadership emergence can follow two possible pathways in teams: (a) team members are ascribed emergent leader status by means of identifiable individual differences; or (b) team members achieve emergent leader status by fulfilling valued roles within the team and/or providing valued contributions. As described in further detail below, we see both pathways as relevant to the perception of emergent transformational leadership through the information processing of followers.

### 1.1. Information processing and implicit leadership theories

A number of authors have discussed how cognitive information processing is relevant to how individuals make sense of their surroundings, including perceptions of leadership. For example, ILTs and cognitive categorization would suggest that individuals create leadership prototypes in their mental schema and then access those schemas to evaluate information regarding a particular leader. That is, potential leaders are evaluated by others on the basis of beliefs and assumptions that those others have about the characteristics of effective leaders, and specific behavior or actions of the leader are compared against these leadership prototypes (Lord & Brown, 2001; Lord & Maher, 1991; Offerman, Kennedy, & Wirtz, 1994). Thus, ILTs represent “cognitive frameworks and categorization systems that influence the perception and interpretation of information about leaders” (Shamir, 1992, p. 389). If followers believe that the actions and behaviors exemplify such things as providing vision that is different from the status quo, exuding confidence, and being innovative or showing special capabilities, then they are likely to interpret the leader as being transformational (Conger & Kanungo, 1987). In short, this matching process provides a means of simplifying the vast array of information or stimuli that a follower may encounter with regard to his/her leader (Markus & Zajonc, 1985).

We propose that media type (i.e., virtual versus face-to-face) can affect the behaviors that leaders are able to demonstrate, and in turn, the interpretation of their leadership on the part of followers in a team setting. By definition, a virtual team context involves spatial or geographic dispersion, coupled with technology-mediated communication (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). As such, less personal information or cues are likely to be communicated in a virtual team context, as compared to a face-to-face setting (e.g., Daft, 2008; Zaccaro & Bader, 2003). Nevertheless, the findings of Carlson and Zmud (1999) would suggest that a virtual context can convey reasonably rich communication if appropriate technology is used.

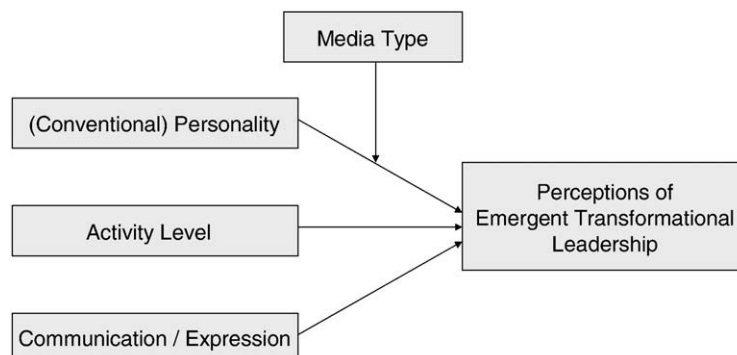


Fig. 1. Personal qualities in relation to perceptions of emergent transformational leadership in decision teams.

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