

Transformational leadership climate: Performance linkages, mechanisms, and boundary conditions at the organizational level

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ABSTRACT

Transformational leadership (TFL) climate describes the degree to which leaders throughout an organization engage in TFL behaviors. In this study, we investigate performance linkages, mechanisms, and boundary conditions of TFL climate at the organizational level of analysis. In a sample of 158 independent organizations, 18,094 employees provided data on TFL climate, positive affective climate, trust climate, and employees' task performance behavior and organizational citizenship behavior. In addition, human resource managers rated overall employee productivity. Study results yielded a pattern of moderated mediation for overall employee productivity and employees' aggregate task performance behavior, in that an organization's TFL climate was indirectly (through positive affective climate) related with these outcome variables under conditions of high trust climate, but not under conditions of low trust climate. Further, we found an organization's TFL climate to indirectly relate with employees' aggregate organizational citizenship behavior through positive affective climate, largely independent of the level of trust climate.

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Leaders are particularly effective if they engage in transformational leadership (TFL) behaviors, such as articulating a captivating vision for the future, acting as charismatic role models, fostering the acceptance of common goals, setting high performance expectations, and providing individualized support and intellectual stimulation for followers (Bass, 1985; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990). Many studies show that these TFL behaviors inspire high levels of performance in followers (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe & Kroeck, 1996; Podsakoff et al., 1990; Wang, Law, Hackett, Wang, & Chen, 2005). Nevertheless, although these studies have added greatly to knowledge about effective leadership, they have almost exclusively focused on individual leaders and their interaction with followers. In organizations, however, leaders rarely act in isolation; instead, leaders work together with other leaders, and there are many leaders throughout the hierarchy. In addition, employees are not only exposed to their individual leader, but also see and interact with other leaders throughout the organization. Does it matter for an organization as a whole, then, whether leaders *throughout the organization* similarly engage in TFL behaviors?

The degree to which different leaders in an organization direct similar behaviors toward their subordinates is captured in the concept of *leadership climate* (e.g., Bliese & Halverson, 1998; Chen & Bliese, 2002; Chen, Kirkman, Kanfer, Allen, & Rosen, 2007; Gavin & Hofmann, 2002). Walter and Bruch (2010) extended this concept to TFL, suggesting that a TFL climate emerges when employees throughout the organization perceive their direct leaders as engaging in the behaviors associated with TFL. Research on this type of leadership climate is only in its beginnings, though. It remains an open question whether TFL climate holds benefits for

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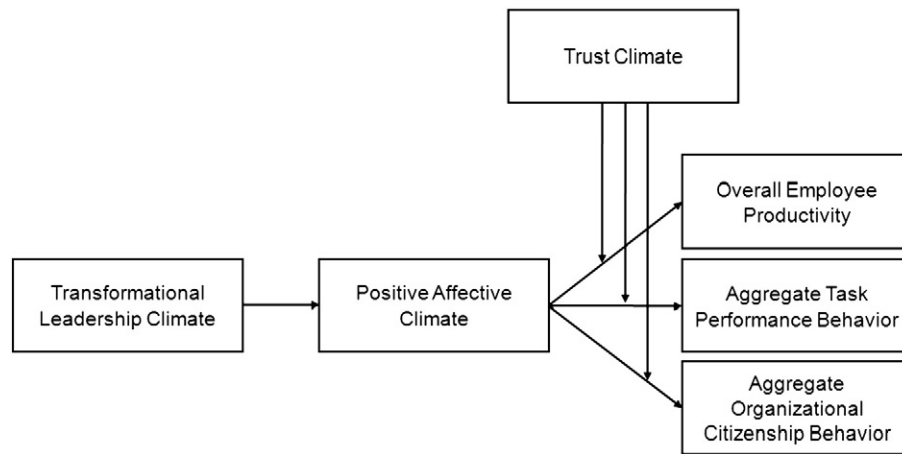


Fig. 1. The moderated mediation model.

the organization as a whole. Also, the mechanisms that may link TFL climate to such benefits and the boundary conditions for these mechanisms have not been examined to date. Thus, further research is necessary to obtain a better understanding of the performance linkages, the mechanisms, and the boundary conditions of TFL climate.

In this study, we address these research gaps by developing and empirically testing a model of the functioning of TFL climate at the organizational level. Our model links TFL climate with workforce performance – the extent to which the workforce, as a whole, is productive and engages in performance-relevant behaviors (Scullen, Bergey, & Aiman-Smith, 2005; Shaw, Gupta, & Delery, 2005). Specifically, we consider three aspects of workforce performance: overall employee productivity, aggregate employee task performance behavior, and aggregate employee organizational citizenship behavior. We therefore view performance as a *behavior*, rather than an *outcome*, which suggests that “performance is in the doing, not in the result of what has been done” (Beal, Cohen, Burke, & McLendon, 2003, p. 990).

Furthermore, we propose that TFL climate is linked to workforce performance through the organization's positive affective climate. Building on affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), we suggest leaders' TFL behaviors are positively associated with followers' positive feelings. Research at lower levels of analysis has demonstrated this relationship (Bono, Folds, Vinson, & Muros, 2007), with followers' positive feelings mediating TFL–performance linkages both at the individual (McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002) and team levels (Pirola-Merlo, Härtel, Mann, & Hirst, 2002). To the extent that leaders in an organization homogeneously engage in pronounced TFL behaviors (i.e., the organization's TFL climate is high), employees throughout the organization should experience such leadership as a positive work event (Ashkanasy & Jordan, 2008; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). In response, an organization-wide positive affective climate (i.e., the shared experience of positive affect within an organization; cf. Dasborough, Ashkanasy, Tee, & Tse, 2009; Gamero, González-Romá, & Peiró, 2008) may emerge and, following broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998, 2003), may facilitate employees' performance.

Finally, Shamir and Howell (1999) have noted that the effectiveness of TFL may depend on an organizational culture characterized by mutual trust, candid communication, and integrity. In line with research suggesting that trust represents an important moderating factor for performance relations in organizations (e.g., Dirks & Ferrin, 2001), we examine Shamir and Howell's notion in the present article. Hence, we cast an organization's trust climate (i.e., the positive expectations employees have about the intent and behaviors of other organizational members; Huff & Kelley, 2003) as a boundary condition under which the potential relationship between TFL climate and workforce performance (as mediated through organization's positive affective climate) unfolds.

It is important to emphasize that our study investigates performance linkages, mechanisms, and boundary conditions of TFL climate at the *organizational level of analysis*. In contrast, most previous studies of TFL were located at the individual or team level. McColl-Kennedy and Anderson (2002), for example, showed that individual leaders' transformational behaviors indirectly shape followers' performance, through follower's emotions. Our line of reasoning, however, suggests that *beyond* individual-level differences in such variables, there is comparatively more variability in TFL, positive affect, trust, and workforce performance between organizations than within organizations. Our study addresses these *between-organization* differences, advancing a new, broader perspective on the potential consequences of TFL.

Altogether, we propose an organizational-level moderated mediation model, in that an organization's TFL climate is suggested to indirectly associate with workforce performance (viz., overall employee productivity, aggregate task performance behavior, and aggregate organizational citizenship behavior), through positive affective climate, with the strength of these indirect linkages hinging on the organization's trust climate (see Fig. 1).⁴ By examining this model in a sample of 158 independent organizations, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of the functioning of TFL climate and identify reasons why some organizations may benefit from TFL climate to a greater extent than others.

⁴ We note that besides the linkages presented in Fig. 1, alternative models are conceivable. We ask the reader to refer to the Results section for post-hoc empirical examinations of such models.

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