



## Questioning universal applicability of transformational leadership: Examining employees with autism spectrum disorder

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### ABSTRACT

Challenging an implicit assumption of universal applicability, we propose that a subset of transformational leader behaviors may hamper organizational outcomes for a unique yet growing segment of the workforce: employees on the autism spectrum. Specifically, we tested the hypothesis that emotion-laden communication and social exchanges characterizing the inspirational motivation dimension of the theory are associated with increased feelings of anxiety which, in turn, negatively relate to work outcomes. In contrast, we proposed that other dimensions of transformational leadership, such as individualized consideration, would be associated with reduced levels of anxiety and, ultimately, improved workplace outcomes. Results generally supported the hypothesized indirect relationships for ratings of organizational commitment, but not self-reported job performance which was most strongly predicted by individualized consideration, directly. Implications for managing employees with autism spectrum disorder are discussed as well as the overall applicability of transformational leadership to this growing segment of the workforce.

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### 1. Introduction

As a theory, transformational leadership has been shown to be related to a range of outcomes across hundreds of studies, and its impact as a conceptual framework is well summarized in multiple meta-analyses (de Groot, Kiker, & Cross, 2000; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996) and qualitative reviews (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Hunt, 1999; Tichy & Devanna, 1986). A number of scholars have suggested that the theory was responsible for taking the field of leadership from the brink of extinction and transforming it into the thriving area of research it is today (Bass & Bass, 2008; Bryman, 1992; Hunt, 1999). In short, there is little debating the importance, impact, or historical significance of vision-based models to our current understanding of, and approach to, leadership.

Despite far-reaching empirical support for its impact on several criteria, the theory is not without its detractors. Criticisms include an overemphasis on vision and affective components to the exclusion of other leadership behaviors and cognitions such as planning and strategy development (Hunter, Bedell-Avers, & Mumford, 2007; Yukl, 1999). Rather than a denigration of omission, other scholars have offered more direct criticisms of the theory, suggesting that a focus on affective and emotional arousal via transformational leadership can have detrimental effects on subordinates, leading to outcomes such as burnout, higher levels of stress, dissatisfaction, and reduced performance (Harrison, 1987; Keller, 1992; Seltzer & Bass, 1990). Although empirical support regarding increases in stress and anxiety specifically has been lacking (see Seltzer, Numerof, & Bass, 1989), we

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suggest that this “non-finding” may be attributable to differences across subordinates not yet investigated. That is, we suggest that an understudied subset of the workforce may be more susceptible to the potential for negative influence from transformational leadership. Moreover, given the range of behaviors comprising transformational leadership it seems reasonable to suggest that some actions on the part of the leader may be ineffective or even harmful, while others are likely to have associations with more positive effects. Central to this article, we propose that some employees, specifically, employees with autism spectrum disorder, will be differentially impacted by the varying dimensions of transformational leadership. In the following sections, a brief overview of the characteristics of employees with autism is presented. Next, given these characteristics, we discuss how transformational leadership behaviors might be received by these employees. Finally, we put forth and test a mediation model whereby transformational leadership behaviors indirectly impact workplace outcomes (organizational commitment and job performance) by operating through anxiety. We begin our discussion by introducing an emerging segment of the workforce: employees with autism.

### 1.1. *Employees with autism spectrum disorder*

Over the course of the past decade, there has been a significant increase in diagnosed cases of autism spectrum disorder, or ASD. A recent report from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention indicates that approximately 1 in every 50 (2.0%) children meets the diagnostic criteria for the disorder, with that likelihood being much greater (1 in 31) for males (Blumberg et al., 2013). To put these values in perspective, it is useful to consider the prevalence rates of more widely known disabilities, such as vision impairment (1 in 714), hearing impairment (1 in 714), Down syndrome (1 in 800), childhood cancer (1 in 6700), juvenile diabetes (1 in 400) and cerebral palsy (1 in 280; CDC, 2009). Extrapolation from current prevalence rates places the total number of individuals with autism in the United States around 1.5 million, with the *Autism Society of America* (2006) suggesting that this is a lower bound estimate.

Although these values provide some indication of the number of individuals with autism, it is important to note that these values are not static – the number of individuals diagnosed with the disorder is on the rise. The CDC noted that from the years 2002 to 2006, there was a 57% increase in cases of ASD. Additionally, there was a 23% increase in cases from 2006 to 2008. Finally, Blumberg and colleagues (2013) noted a 42% increase in diagnoses between 2007 and 2012. Data are clear in suggesting that diagnoses are likely to stay on an upward trajectory for some time, even with the acknowledgement of currently debated stricter diagnostic criteria that may curb the sharp upward trend. Most central to the present study, a sizable influx of teens and adolescents are entering adulthood and beginning to seek employment (Gerhardt & Lainer, 2011). Improved diagnostic tools as well as early behavioral interventions have led to greater optimism for education and employment resulting in increased numbers of young adults having aspirations of a fulfilling work life (Dawson et al., 2010). For reasons that range from legal (Colella, Paetzold, & Belliveau, 2004; VanBergeijk, Klin, & Volkmar, 2008) to ethical, as this growing population becomes of age to enter the workforce, organizations must increase their preparedness to deal with the unique opportunities and challenges this influx presents. In particular, the social nature of ASD and its high comorbidity with anxiety disorder (Gillott & Standen, 2007; Volker & Lopata, 2008) present noteworthy challenges to those that manage and operate organizations. In short, identifying mechanisms that will facilitate the successful integration and engagement of employees with ASD at work appears to be of paramount and increasing importance.

### 1.2. *Autism and the workplace*

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are a group of pervasive developmental disorders which range from severe to milder forms. According to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, ASD is broadly characterized by impairments in social interaction, deficits in verbal and nonverbal communication, as well as the presence of restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior and interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). ASD is thought to be a permanent developmental disorder creating lifelong challenges for the individual (Gerhardt & Lainer, 2011; Hendricks, 2010).

Despite these social impairments, growing research on adults with ASD suggests that this population may possess qualities and attributes that can enable them to excel in the workplace. For example, individuals with ASD often display a keen attention to detail, a willingness to engage in repetitive activities, trustworthiness, reliability, and timeliness (Hillier et al., 2007). Furthermore, having a focused interest can allow them to gain significant expertise on a particular topic, providing a valuable knowledge resource to an organization. Finally, several studies have found that most, if not all, supervisors rated the job performance of their employee with ASD as average or above average (e.g., Hagner & Cooney, 2005; Hillier et al., 2007; Unger, 2003). Taken together, it appears that with sufficient accommodations and supports, individuals with ASD possess the capabilities to be an asset to an organization.

Although individuals with autism have the competencies to do well in the workplace, they face significant obstacles in organizations. Overall, individuals with ASD are more likely to be unemployed compared to any other group with disabilities (Dew & Allan, 2007). Specifically, it is estimated that 50%–75% of adults with ASD are unemployed (Howlin, Goode, Hutton, & Rutter, 2004; Hurlburt & Chalmers, 2004; Mawhood, Howlin, & Rutter, 2000; National Organization on Disability, 2004) and the majority who are employed are not working full-time (Chappel & Somers, 2010). To compound the problem, unemployment difficulties are still common even after taking into account those who are higher functioning and who have postsecondary educational experiences (Gerhardt & Lainer, 2011; Howlin, 2000). Specifically, the *National Autistic Society* (2011) estimated that

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