



# A multilevel model of transformational leadership, affect, and creative process behavior in work teams☆

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## ABSTRACT

We develop a multilevel model to explain how affect and transformational leadership (TFL) influence team creative process behavior. We theorize, in particular, that a dual-level model of TFL, which incorporates both individual-focused TFL (addressing the individual differences of team members) and group-focused TFL (addressing the team as a whole) underlies affect–creativity relationships. We argue moreover that these effects exist across three conceptual levels: (1) within-person, (2) interpersonal, and (3) group. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical implications and limitations of our model and suggest potential avenues for future research.

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## Introduction

An enduring and as yet unsolved issue in leadership research concerns the question of what leaders can do to foster creative followers (Shin & Zhou, 2003). In this instance, we broadly define team creativity as the process by which team members work together to produce solutions that are both novel and useful (Amabile, 1988, 1996; George & Zhou, 2002, 2007; Oldham & Cummings, 1996). We address in particular the effects of transformational leadership (TFL) on creative processes occurring in teams. Consistent with Bass (1985), we define TFL as a form of leadership intended to motivate and inspire followers to pursue higher-order goals through the transformation of followers' attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors. We also draw on the emerging perspective that recognizes TFL as a dual-level phenomenon involving simultaneous focus on both the group as a whole and the individuals who comprise the group (Wang & Howell, 2010; Wu, Tsui, & Kinicki, 2010). Moreover, recognizing that TFL inherently involves management of follower's emotions, we include affect as a multilevel intermediary source of creativity (George, 2007; George & Zhou, 2002, 2007). In particular, creative processes are distinct from creative outcomes, and vary dynamically from moment-to-moment (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005; To, Fisher, Ashkanasy, & Rowe, 2012). In this article, therefore, we seek to develop an integrated model and to propose specific propositions concerning the role of TFL in engendering the affect–creativity nexus. We aim to do so across three levels of conceptualization: (1) within-person (temporal variability within-person), (2) interpersonal (dyadic relationships), and (3) group (collective perceptions).

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A basic premise of our theory is that to be creative, a team member may not only engage in her or his own tasks, but s/he also needs to engage in social exchanges with coworkers, such as sharing ideas (George, 2007; Hennessey & Amabile, 2010; Zhou & Hoever, 2014). Moreover, while creativity has been shown to involve affect (Amabile et al., 2005; George & Zhou, 2002, 2007; To, Fisher, & Ashkanasy, *in press*; Tsai, Chi, Grandey, & Fung, 2012), the behavioral implications of affective experiences can be complicated insofar as their effects are not necessarily parallel across levels (e.g., Ashkanasy, 2003; Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011). For instance, an engineer who feels frustrated by her recent task progress may persist longer in searching for better alternatives; while the same person may react angrily in response to feeling frustrated with her coworkers.

To untangle the complexity of such affect–creative process relationships, we posit a more integrated approach – one that considers the forces operating at multiple levels within a work team – would seem to be theoretically and practically important (e.g., George, 2007; Hennessey & Amabile, 2010; Zhou & Hoever, 2014). The major focus of this article therefore is to present a multilevel view of research on affect and creativity in teams and to address how leadership behaviors may serve as contextual factors underlying the affect–creative process relationships at different levels (e.g., Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008; Grawitch, Munz, Elliott, & Mathis, 2003; Jones & Kelly, 2009; Tsai et al., 2012). As such, we believe that our conceptual model contributes to the burgeoning literature on affect, creativity, and TFL in three respects.

First, by conceptualizing affect and creative behavior as multilevel constructs, we respond to calls by scholars (e.g., see Ashkanasy, 2003; George & Zhou, 2007; Zhou & Hoever, 2014) to integrate the existing research on affect and creativity at three levels (within-person, interpersonal, and group). This integration is important because it holds potential to provide a better understanding as to how the affect–creative process relationship can coexist at each of the three levels.

Second, we respond to Gooty, Connelly, Griffith, and Gupta's (2010) call to explore how TFL impacts on followers' affective experiences and work outcomes. Building upon Rajah, Song, and Arvey (2011), George and Zhou (2007), and Mumford, Bedell-Avers, and Hunter (2008), we develop a new perspective to understand how the dual-level nature of TFL (i.e., combining group- and individual-focused TFL behaviors) can influence followers' positive or negative affect when engaging in creative process behavior. This is especially imperative because existing research has often overlooked the implications of dual functions of TFL, in other words, some TFL behaviors can be directed toward individual followers, while other such behaviors can be directed toward the group as a whole (Kark & Shamir, 2002).

Third, while past research has focused on investigating the main effect of the dual model of TFL on level-specific outcomes, we take this a step further by theorizing that both individual- and group-focused TFL behaviors are critical boundary conditions influencing relationships between affect and creative processes across levels. We seek to synthesize literatures on leadership, affect, and creativity literatures, to develop an integrated multilevel framework applicable to work-team behavior in modern complex organizations. In particular we seek to show how individual- and group-focused TFL behaviors align with specific levels of affect and creativity, including relationships at different levels of conceptualization (Gooty, Gavin, & Ashkanasy, 2009; Gooty et al., 2010).

In the remainder of this article, we address our aims in three parts. First, we review the existing literature about the multilevel nature of TFL, affect, and creativity. Second, we develop three propositions concerning the moderating role of dual-level TFL on the relationship between affect and creative processes – across three levels of analysis. Finally, we discuss the implications and limitations of our theorizing and suggest potential avenues for future research.

## A multilevel perspective

### *TFL as a multilevel construct*

Central to the theme of this article, we propose TFL to be a critical boundary condition that moderates the relationships between affect and creative processes across levels. We focus on TFL for two main reasons. First, as George (2007) and Gooty et al. (2010) note, TFL has received more substantial research attention than any other leadership approach in both emotions and creativity research. Second, there is now compelling evidence to suggest TFL is a multilevel construct that manifests functional characteristics at both individual and team levels (Avolio & Bass, 1995; Jung, Yammarino, & Lee, 2009; Klein, Dansereau, & Hall, 1994; Liao & Chuang, 2007).

Moreover, and as we noted earlier, Bass (1985) defined TFL as a form of leadership that, via transformation of followers' attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors, is intended to inspire followers to pursue higher-order goals and to exert extraordinary effort in pursuit of organizationally-relevant goals. Avolio (1999) and Bass (1998) subsequently proposed that TFL encompasses four types of behavior: (1) raising followers to a higher level of achievement (*idealized influence*); (2) motivating followers to transcend their personal interests for collective welfare (*inspirational motivation*); (3) developing followers' abilities to facilitate their own personal growth (*individualized consideration*), and (4) developing followers' intellectual ability to approach problems in new ways (*intellectual stimulation*). These behaviors suggest that TFL is both dynamic and effective in shaping followers' attitudes and behaviors to achieve individual and team outcomes. Subsequent research (e.g., see Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Liao & Chuang, 2007; Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011) has confirmed that TFL has significant impact on a wide range of work outcomes at both individual and team levels.

The development of the TFL theory has emerged from two separate streams. Earlier theories focused on the influence of leadership behaviors on individual followers (e.g., Bass, 1985; Bennis & Nanus, 1985), assuming that the same leader may display different behaviors toward each follower. More recently, TFL has come to be conceptualized as a group-level construct that emphasizes followers' shared perceptions about a leader's leadership behaviors (see Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003; Schaubroeck, Lam, & Cha, 2007). While these two lines of research have been dominated in the TFL literature separately, little attention has yet been directed to integrating both conceptualizations for new research inquiry. Recently, researchers such as Wang and Howell (2010) and Wu et al. (2010) have begun to argue that the four dimensions of TFL should be reconceptualized as a *dual-level* model: group-focused and individual-

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