



# Revisiting the mediating role of trust in transformational leadership effects: Do different types of trust make a difference?

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the mediating effects of cognitive and affective trust on the relationship between follower perceptions of transformational leadership behavior and their work outcomes. Using data obtained from 318 supervisor–subordinate dyads from a manufacturing organization located in mainland China, structural equation modeling results revealed that affective trust fully mediated the relationships between transformational leadership and the work outcomes of followers, including their affective organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs), and job performance. In contrast, cognitive trust negatively mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and follower job performance, and had insignificant effects on their affective organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behaviors. These findings highlight the importance of affective trust as a mechanism which translates transformational leadership into positive work outcomes for the organization.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last three decades a great deal of research has examined the direct effects of transformational leadership on follower work outcomes including job performance, creativity and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) (Burke, Sims, Lassara, & Salas, 2007; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996). However, it is only in recent years that leadership researchers have begun to unravel the psychological mechanisms which underlie such relationships (e.g., Avolio, Zhu, Koh, & Pujja, 2004; Walumbwa & Hartnell, 2011). One mechanism central to the process of effective transformational leadership is the development of follower trust in the leader (Jung & Avolio, 2000; Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003; Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990). Trust has been typically used to measure the quality of social exchange between follower and leader (Pillai, Schriesheim, & Williams, 1999; Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2011). Previous empirical studies have found that trust fully mediates the impact of transformational leadership on organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) (Pillai et al., 1999; Podsakoff et al., 1990), and job performance (Jung & Avolio, 2000). However, these studies have typically conceptualized trust as a uni-dimensional measure, and neglected the fact that it may consist of more than one dimension.

Recent developments in the literature indicate that there are two types of trust, one of which is exchange-based or relational in nature and the other character-based or cognitive in nature (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; McAllister, 1995; Wang, Tomlinson, & Noe, 2010; Yang & Mossholder, 2010; Yang, Mossholder, & Peng, 2009). Affective trust refers to the trust which is based on emotional ties between two parties in a relationship that results from the mutual exhibition of care and concern (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002;

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McAllister, 1995). It is generally agreed that affective trust is a good proxy for the process of social exchange, given it measures the extent to which both parties in a relationship engage in the reciprocated exchange of care and concern (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Schaubroeck et al., 2011; Yang et al., 2009). Cognitive trust, on the other hand, refers to that which is based on an instrumental evaluation by the follower of the salient personal characteristics of the leader such as their integrity, competence, reliability and dependability (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Schaubroeck et al., 2011). In other words, cognitive trust influences employee attitudes by making them feel more confident in their supervisor's ability and qualification to guide their task performance (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). This should lead employees to judge their work experiences in a favorable light, and encourage them to engage in behavior that benefits the organization.

However, there is also preliminary evidence to suggest that unlike affective trust, cognitive trust may also lead to over-dependence or reliance of the follower on the leader and result in the tendency of followers to engage in free-riding or social loafing behavior (Kark et al., 2003; Ng & Chua, 2006). This suggests that whereas affective trust might positively influence work outcomes such as job performance in a positive way, cognitive trust may have negative outcomes, given that job performance requires employees to act on their own initiative and not rely on their supervisor's ability. As previous studies examining the mediating effects of trust on the relationship between transformational leadership and follower outcomes at the individual level have typically used measures of trust which combine affective and cognitive dimensions (Jung & Avolio, 2000; Pillai et al., 1999; Podsakoff et al., 1990; Rubin, Bommer, & Bachrach, 2010), we believe that, due to the fact that these two types of trust are of a different nature (McAllister, 1995), they could have very different effects on the dynamic relationships between leadership and follower outcomes. The combination of two rather different types of trust into one general construct by previous researchers means we are unable to fully understand the dynamic and complex roles played by different types of trust on follower responses to leadership behavior.

Although recent work by Schaubroeck et al. (2011) has found that cognitive and affective trust at the group level mediate the impact of transformational leadership on team performance, no attempt has been made to examine the underlying individual level psychological processes which link transformational leadership to follower work outcomes. In the present study we examine the differential effects of cognitive and affective trust at the individual level on the relationship between transformational leadership and follower work outcomes. In addition to examining how both dimensions of trust link transformational leadership to job performance, we also seek to understand how they mediate the impact of transformational leadership on the organizational commitment and OCBs of followers which measure their work attitudes and extra-role behavior. We believe it is appropriate to examine the mediating effects of affective and cognitive trust at the individual level as they were originally conceptualized as individual level constructs and because growing research has shown leadership to have differential effects at the individual and group levels (Dansereau, Yammarino, & Kohles, 1999; Waldman & Yammarino, 1999). In addition, we feel that examining the impact of trust on follower work outcomes at the individual level is appropriate given the sample we used in the present study was taken from an industrial context in which team size is relatively large and performance is typically measured at the individual rather than the group level.

This study makes a further contribution by examining the possible negative effects of transformational leadership on subordinate work outcomes through the development of high levels of cognitive trust. Although previous studies investigating the processes by which transformational leadership weaves its effects on subordinate work outcomes through trust-based mechanisms these studies have typically adopted constructs which measure affective trust or combine items which measure affective and cognitive trust (Jung & Avolio, 2000; Pillai et al., 1999; Podsakoff et al., 1990; Rubin et al., 2010). More specifically, in light of previous work, we argue that although both affective and cognitive trust may mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and the follower work outcomes of affective organizational commitment and OCBs in a positive way, the development of high levels of cognitive trust by transformational leaders may lead followers to over-depend on their leader and increase their propensity to engage in free-riding or social loafing behavior, or to reduce personal work initiative and motivation, and negatively impact on their performance. We argue this phenomenon of over-dependence is more likely to operate at the individual level and so therefore is not evident in previous work looking at team level measures of trust and performance (e.g., Schaubroeck et al., 2011). The findings of this study should enable us to better understand and advise managers as to how they might better leverage the effects of transformational leadership to promote desired work outcomes through the development of trust.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Transformational leadership

Out of a large number of theories of leadership, transformational leadership has been the most widely researched over the last three decades. This theory was developed and popularized by Bass (1985), based on the seminal work of Burns (1978). He conceptualizes transformational leadership as having four separate dimensions, namely idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation and individualized consideration (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994). Transformational leaders provide idealized influence when they act as role models, exhibiting the kind of behavior that is widely admired in society. This generally includes exemplary ethical behavior, the implicit adoption of personal goals that are not self-centered, and a willingness and ability to pursue these goals even though doing so may incur personal cost and self-sacrifice. Such behavior generates respect for, and trust in, the leader and makes followers more proud of their organization and keener to work harder to promote its goals (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Intellectual stimulation refers to the degree to which leaders stimulate and encourage creativity in their followers by nurturing and developing independent and innovative thought (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Transformational leaders encourage followers to ask questions, think deeply about their jobs, and figure out better ways of executing their prescribed tasks. For such leaders, learning is

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