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Follower developmental characteristics as predicting transformational leadership: a longitudinal field study

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Abstract

The leadership literature has focused on the effects of leaders whereas much less attention has been given to the followers' role in shaping their leader's style. Therefore, this longitudinal field study tested follower developmental characteristics as predictors of transformational leadership. The sample included 54 military units and their leaders, in which there were 90 direct followers and 724 indirect followers. Results at the group level of analysis indicated that followers' initial developmental level, as expressed by the initial level of their self-actualization needs, internalization of the organization's moral values, collectivistic orientation, critical-independent approach, active engagement in the task, and self-efficacy, positively predicted transformational leadership among indirect followers, whereas these relationships were negative among direct followers. The different role of followers' initial developmental level as a predictor of transformational leadership among close versus distant followers is discussed.

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1. Introduction

“Without his armies, after all, Napoleon was just a man with grandiose ambitions.”
(Kelley, 1992)

There is a widespread bias to perceive leaders as causal agents who shape events, rather than as being shaped by them. Yukl (1998) stated, “most research and theory on leadership

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has favored a definition of leadership that emphasizes the primary importance of unilateral influence by a single, ‘heroic’ leader” (p. 504). The majority of the leadership literature, while ostensibly focused on the effects of leaders, has neglected the important role of followers in defining and shaping the latitudes of leaders’ actions (Hollander, 1993). Consequently, much less is known about the follower side of the leadership equation (Ehrhart & Klein, 2001). Several researchers emphasized, however, that leadership is a relationship that is jointly produced by leaders and followers. For example, Shamir and Howell (2000) asserted that leadership and followership might both play an active role in forming their mutual relationships, in spite of their imbalanced power, and ultimately in shaping organizational outcomes. This field study offers a conceptual framework of followers’ developmental characteristics that are assumed to predict transformational leadership and tests it empirically within a longitudinal framework.

2. Followership within traditional and new leadership theories

Early transactional theories explained how to achieve or maintain results as contracted between the leader and his or her followers. Leadership behavior was typically described in terms of a leader–follower exchange relationship, in which leaders provide direction, support, and reinforcement and followers achieve agreed-upon levels of performance (Avolio & Bass, 1988; House & Shamir, 1993). These traditional leadership theories typically posited follower characteristics as *dependent variables* that are affected by the leader. The various models concentrated on the impact of the leader’s traits, behavior, power bases, and influence tactics on followers’ characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors (Yukl, 1998). The most comprehensive effort to give follower characteristics a more central and active role was made by the situational leadership theories (e.g., Fiedler, 1964; House, 1971; Vroom & Yetton, 1973), which have sometimes defined follower characteristics as *moderators*.

Much less effort (e.g., Merton, 1957; Osborn & Hunt, 1975) has been made to include follower characteristics as *independent variables* that influence leader behavior. The relatively few studies that examined follower variables as predictors of leadership have focused on follower behavior (e.g., feedback and performance, review in Bass, 1990) rather than on follower characteristics, predispositions, or attitudes. Another line of leadership research, especially the leader–member exchange (LMX) studies, has examined the *reciprocal relationships* between leaders and followers and focused on relational variables such as, liking, similarity, and expectations. We are unaware of any study that examined follower initial characteristics as predictors of leadership behavior within the new versus the more traditional leadership theories.

A stream of new theories has occupied center stage in leadership research over the past two decades. These theories are alternatively referred to as “transformational,” “charismatic,” “inspirational,” and “visionary.” Despite different emphases in each theory, most scholars agree that these theories are all of a common genre and point to a strong convergence of the findings from studies on these theories (e.g., House & Shamir, 1993). Transformational leaders exhibit charismatic behaviors, arouse inspirational motivation, provide intellectual

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