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## The role of transformational leadership in enhancing organizational innovation: Hypotheses and some preliminary findings

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### Abstract

A wide range of factors has been found to affect organizational innovation. Of these, top managers' leadership style has been identified as being one of the most, if not the most, important. Yet, few studies have empirically examined the link between this factor and innovation at the organizational level. This study builds on the extant literature to propose four hypotheses about how top managers' leadership styles directly and indirectly (via empowerment and organizational climate) affect their companies' innovation. A multisource approach is used to collect survey data from 32 Taiwanese companies in the electronics/telecommunications industry. The findings support a direct and positive link between a style of leadership that has been labeled as "transformational" and organizational innovation. They also indicate that transformational leadership has significant and positive relations with both empowerment and an innovation-supporting organizational climate. The former is found to have a significant but negative relation with organizational innovation, while the latter has a significant and positive relationship. The implications of the findings and possible directions for future research are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In today's globalized economic environment, customers' vastly increased access to information and suppliers has empowered them to demand ever-increasingly arrays of product features, higher quality, better service, and favorable price/cost ratios (Brett & Okumura, 1998; Yukl, 2001). These realities of the marketplace have put tremendous pressures on companies to increase their efficiency and effectiveness and, even more fundamentally, the creativity that they bring to product/process improvements and development (Andriopoulos & Lowe, 2000; Cummings & Oldham, 1997; Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999). This development also has motivated efforts by practitioners and scholars to identify factors that can stimulate creative behaviors in groups and organizations. For example, Amabile (1998) has identified three factors as being important: individuals' intellectual capacity (creative thinking skills), expertise based on past experience, and a creativity-conducive work environment. Oldham and Cummings (1996) also have identified creativity-relevant personal attributes as well as characteristics of the organizational context like job complexity, supportive supervision, and controlling supervision.

Among the factors that influence employees' creative behaviors and performance, leadership has been identified by many researchers as being one of the most, if not the most, important (Amabile, 1998; Jung, 2001; Mumford & Gustafson, 1988). These scholars suggest that leaders can affect followers' creativity in both direct and indirect ways. An example of a direct effect is leaders catering to followers' intrinsic motivation and higher level needs, which are known to be important sources of creativity (Tierney et al., 1999). Indirectly, leaders can support creativity by establishing a work environment that encourages employees to try out different approaches without worrying about being punished just because outcomes are negative (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996).

While extant research has contributed useful insights into the determinants of employee creative behaviors and performance, its ability to guide practice is limited by the predominance of studies with a focus on the individual employee level. Although understanding individual employees' creativity and creative work processes is worthwhile, a more important concern for organizations is how to mobilize creativity among employees for the development and production of novel, socially valued products and/or services (Mumford & Gustafson, 1988). Unless the creative behaviors of individual employees can be coordinated and their creative outputs and ideas are harnessed to yield such organizational-level outcomes, the company still would be left without effective responses to the challenges of a competitive marketplace. As for the role of leadership, empirical studies also have tended to examine its effects at the individual level rather than that of the organization. A further limitation on the generalizability and external validity of extant findings is the predominant use of experimental settings and/or subjective measures of creativity (e.g., subjective supervisor ratings).

In view of the current state of the literature, this study explores how leadership affects creativity at the level of the organization. The type of leadership considered in this study is a set of behaviors that has come to be labeled "transformational leadership." Transformational leadership emphasizes longer-term and vision-based motivational processes (Bass & Avolio, 1997) and has been the subject of extensive research in the past decade. Yet, despite the

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