

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

The Leadership Quarterly

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/leaqua

Contextual leadership, transformational leadership and the performance of international innovation seeking alliances[☆]

Richard N. Osborn^{a,*}, Russ Marion^b^a Department of Management, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI 48025, United States^b Department of Educational Leadership, Clemson University, Clemson, SC, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

International alliances
Contextual leadership
Transformational leadership
Complexity theory
Innovation

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examined aspects of contextual leadership [Osborn, R. N., Hunt, J. G., & Jauch, L. R. (2002). Toward a contextual theory of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 13, 797–837] and transformational leadership [Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. New York: Free Press] by alliance heads and by executives in the sponsoring firms for a sample of innovation seeking U.S./Japanese alliances in research-intensive sectors. We identified three aspects of performance (a) alliance innovation, (b) the strategic contributions to the U.S. sponsor and (c) the strategic contributions to the Japanese sponsor. We found that (a) knowledge/information based (contextual dimensions) leadership by the alliance head was associated with higher innovation and strategic contributions to the sponsors and (b) transformational leadership by sponsoring executives was dysfunctional for alliance innovation but contributed positively to the strategic contribution the alliance provided a sponsor and, (c) the linkage between leadership by the alliance head and performance was much more important for some types of alliance governance (administrative) structures than others. That is, we argue that appropriate leadership is embedded in its context.

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1. Purpose and preview

Leadership research appears to be entering a new era. Researchers are rediscovering the potential importance of organizational context (e.g., Porter & Mc Laughlin, 2006), levels of analysis (e.g., Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005), and potential boundary conditions on a most popular view – transformational leadership (e.g., Antonakis, Avolio, & Sivsubramaniam, 2003). As Porter & Mc Laughlin (2006) reminded leadership scholars, “Leadership in organizations does not take place in a vacuum. It takes place in organizational contexts (p. 559).” They call for research that makes context, “a primary object of interest, rather than treating it as almost an afterthought (p. 571).” In this article we place considerable emphasis on the context of our sample innovation seeking international alliances in research intensive sectors. Consistent with the new era, the purpose of this article is to investigate aspects of contextual leadership, transformational leadership and the success of these unusual entities.

Innovation seeking international alliances are popular and important forms for conducting joint research and development in many research intensive sectors (e.g., Hagedoorn, 2002). For leadership researchers, they provide a unique setting that goes beyond the boundaries of the typical bureaucracy and pushes the theoretical boundaries of leadership research. As shown below there are multiple leaders for the entities, there are inherent tensions between the sponsors and the measures of success were not, as expected, highly related.

[☆] We thank a scholar in a Japanese firm who wishes to remain anonymous for data collection and analysis (work deserving of co-authorship) as well as James G. (Jerry) Hunt, Lawrence R. Jauch, Kenneth Garner, Michael D. Mumford, and Mary Uhl-Bien for their valued suggestions to improve this manuscript.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 313 577 4519; fax: +1 313 993 7664.

E-mail addresses: aa4322@Wayne.edu (R.N. Osborn), marion2@clemson.edu (R. Marion).

While several alliance scholars have recently speculated that leadership is a key to their success (e.g., Ellis, 1996; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Judge & Ryman, 2001; Li, Xin, Tusi, & Hambrick, 1999), leadership in and for these entities has yet to be studied with the methods and instruments most commonly used by leadership scholars. In examining these entities for potential leadership influences, it was also necessary to investigate the “three party” view of alliance success (each sponsor plus the alliance itself) and to detail the types of governance (administrative) structures used. Consistent with the three party view we found that strategic contributions to the sponsors and the goal attainment for the alliance were separable and not highly related. Further, we found the superiority of an unusual administrative form – an administrative form that favors specific influence attempts drawn from the contextual view of leadership.

For many leadership researchers, this article will be of interest because there were some unusual findings regarding transformational leadership. Specifically, we postulated and found that while the transformational leadership of sponsoring executive was functional for the strategic contribution to their sponsoring firms, it was dysfunctional for the innovation of the alliance. We discuss these findings in terms of potential boundary conditions on transformational leadership in new cooperative forms emerging in the global economy.

In regard to the contextual leadership literature, we found support for the importance of knowledge and information based influence attempts and the interplay between contextually based leader influence attempts and the setting for all aspects (the three parties) of alliance success.

In a contextual view leadership is embedded in the context; that is the demands, constraints and choices for leaders stem from the context. Thus, we will first discuss the sample entities, chart the unusual character of innovation seeking alliances and take particular care to delineate three separate aspects of alliance success. This approach is somewhat unusual in leadership studies because many studies draw performance expectations from the analysis of senior leaders or merely select a performance measure commonly used in the sample units (see Osborn et al., 2002, for a discussion). After a discussion of alliances we will then develop specific hypotheses, detail the methods, present results and discuss the findings.

2. International innovation seeking alliances

2.1. What are alliances

An international corporate alliance is defined here as, “a publicly recognized exchange and/or joint value creation arrangement between two or more firms (sponsors) that are headquartered in separate nations where (a) the area for exchange and/or joint value creation is specified and, (b) the arrangement is expected to cover several distinct transaction periods (see Osborn, Hagedoorn, Denekamp, Duysters, & Baughn, 1998: 618).” While extremely important in research intensive economic sectors, alliances are inherently unstable and prone to a premature demise (see Hagedoorn, 2002; Osborn et al., 2002).

All of the sample alliances examined in this paper are comparatively small, but they are far from simple entities. While all had relative stability in their leadership structure (an identified head of the alliance and a sponsoring executive from each sponsor), most had a comparatively small core of dedicated scientists and engineers with a larger number of scientists temporarily assigned to the alliance at any given time. Thus, over time the composition of the scientists and engineers working in the alliance could vary substantially. Further, in all cases the scientists and engineers in the alliances were a mix of U.S. and Japanese citizens.

2.2. Tension and the performance demands on leaders

A most important feature of alliances as noted by Huxham & Vangen (2000), is the tension between the sponsoring firms arising from “differences between (the sponsoring) parties on, for example, organizational purpose, procedures and structures, professional languages, accountabilities and power” (p. 1161). For alliances where the sponsoring firms are from different nations, as in this study, one needs to add a host of economic, institutional, socio-cultural and language challenges.

There is further tension due to the dual demands placed on innovation seeking alliances for exploration (innovation) and exploitation (strategic return) (see Vanhaverbeke, Beerkens, & Duysters, 2004). Essentially sponsors want to quickly *exploit* any learning gained from the alliance for their own strategic purposes while the alliance itself was charged with *exploration* to develop innovations. This natural tension is also reflected in other studies of alliances and has led to what is known as a three party view of alliance performance (Robins, Tallman, & Fladmoe-Lindquist, 2002).

For the current sample the three party view refers to the interests of the alliance (and alliance head) plus each of the sponsoring firms (and their respective sponsoring executives). The three party view is also consistent with other analyses of organizational effectiveness. Specifically, the alliance can be judged on its primary goal, or what Sirmon & Lane (2004) labeled as its achievement on “primary value creating activities (p. 308).” In this study, the alliance’s primary value creating activity is innovation. There is ample evidence in the alliance literature to support assessment of alliance goal accomplishment as an important aspect of alliance performance (e.g., Dhanaraj, Lyles, Stensma, & Tihanyi, 2004). Several studies suggest that at least two of the alliance parties (one executive in one of the sponsors and the alliance head) often agree on the degree of alliance goal attainment (Stensma & Corley, 2000).

The sponsoring firms for an alliance are both the primary contributors to, and the intended primary beneficiaries of, the alliance’s activities (e.g., Blau & Scott, 1962). Thus, firms sponsor alliance arrangements to increase their competitive stature (e.g., Kogut, 1988; Osborn et al., 1998). *Sponsoring executives* in the parent firms may expect an international alliance to contribute directly to their firm’s strategy (e.g., Ellis, 1996). Where an alliance is established to pursue innovation, sponsors may not exclusively seek immediate short-term profits, production efficiencies or market share increases from the cooperation. Instead, sponsors may seek a more generalized contribution to their overall innovative capacity (e.g., Hagedoorn, 2002).

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