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# The Impact of Transformational Leadership on Followers' Duty Orientation and Spirituality

VENKAT R. KRISHNAN

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*The relationships between transformational leadership and followers' karma yoga (duty orientation), spirituality (oneness with all beings), organizational identification and normative organizational commitment were studied using a sample of 144 teachers of a prominent high school in western India. Spirituality is the goal of all existence according to the Upanishads, and karma yoga is a simple means to enhance spirituality. It was hypothesized that karma yoga enhances spirituality, transformational leadership enhances karma yoga and spirituality, and all the three in turn enhance organizational identification and normative organizational commitment. Results of structural equations analysis shows that transformational leadership enhances followers' karma yoga; both transformational leadership and karma yoga enhance followers' oneness with all beings; both transformational leadership and oneness enhance organizational identification; and both karma yoga and organizational identification enhance normative commitment. The implications of transformational leadership addressing both followers' real needs (karma yoga and oneness) and organizational interests (identification and commitment) are discussed.*

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Texts from ancient times are replete with examples of those who felt their oneness with all other beings, and such people were considered to be higher in the ladder of human evolution. The Upanishads, which comprise the foundations of Indian culture, are emphatic in claiming that spirituality or oneness with others is the ultimate

goal of all beings. 'To live in perfect goodness is to realize one's life in all. This ideal for which the moral nature of man cries can be attained only if the finite self transcends its narrow individuality and identifies itself with the whole' (Radhakrishnan 1929: 209). Organizations have a major role in contributing towards achieving this goal. There

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is an increasing recognition of the importance of spirituality in the workplace. *Karma yoga* or duty orientation has been traditionally seen as an effective means for achieving this goal of spirituality. However, there has been no empirical study to support this traditional assumption. This article reports a study done to demonstrate the effect of *karma yoga* on spirituality. The study also looks at two outcome variables—organizational identification and normative commitment towards the organization.

In this age of rapidly changing business environment, leadership is more important than ever. The present organizational focus on revitalizing and transforming organizations to meet competitive challenges ahead has been accompanied by increasing interest among researchers in studying transformational leadership. Such leadership is necessary for quickly identifying new market opportunities and for developing appropriate competencies within organizations. Over the last two decades considerable literature has accumulated on transformational leadership (Bass 1998). There exists a relationship between transformational leadership behaviours and various outcomes measured at individual and organizational level. In this article I look at the relationship between transformational leadership and followers' *karma yoga* and spirituality, and how they in turn affect organizational identification and commitment.

## Theory and Hypotheses

Spirituality results in connectedness among beings and has the potential to transform the workplace into something remarkable. In fact, it could be the ultimate competitive advantage. Spirituality implies morality, contributing to the formation of a moral framework, and informing ethical deliberation for leaders (Harter 2004).

## Spirituality

Spirituality comes from the Latin word *spiritus* meaning 'breath of life'. It can be defined as the valuing of the non-material aspects of life, and intimations of an enduring reality (ibid.). It is a way of being and experiencing that comes through the awareness of a transcendental dimension.

Spirituality refers to the direct feeling-level experience of the ground of being, or of the process or flow of the universe. It refers to an experience in which one feels at one with creation, deeply meaningful, and in pervasive union with all things. The first trait of this unitive experience or spirituality involves the quality of oneness. We participate in oneness or unity to the extent that self-defining activities cease. In other words, it is not the addition of a unitive feeling, but the subtraction of self-definition that characterizes true spirituality (Russell 1992). Spirit is actually not a thing at all; rather, it is relationship and a process of integration. Spirit connects individuals together, sewing or knitting them, as it were, into a larger fabric of community. Indeed, the essence of spirituality is a sense of unity or the oneness of everything. It is through this sense of oneness that people experience meaning in their work (Harter 2004).

Spirituality is perceived in the way people seek, find, create, use and expand personal meaning in the context of the entire universe. Spirituality involves the integration of three dimensions—knowledge base and belief systems, interior life and inner self, and exterior life and institutional activity. These three domains overlap and interact with each other. They form the individuals' own life experiences and influence the world at large. Extending this concept of personal meaning to the workplace, spirituality is being part of a larger community, having work that has meaning and is

purposeful as well as consistent with the spirit, and being able to work in an integrated fashion. Spirituality is the experience of connection to something that transcends our ordinary lives (ibid.).

In this article spirituality has been operationalized in the context of Indian culture. The most prominent feature of spirituality in Indian culture is the ideal of oneness of all beings in the universe (Radhakrishnan 1929). Hence, in this study, I operationalized spirituality as oneness with all other beings.

According to the Upanishads, which comprise the foundations of Indian culture, the ultimate reality in this world is the universal spirit, which lies deep within us. Often it remains so deep within us that we are unaware of its existence. Hence, we falsely imagine that we are individuals composed only of body, senses and mind. We imagine further that this individual being has a separate and independent existence, whereas in fact, it is only an appearance—a light upon a screen, the source of which is the spirit that we do not see (Prabhavananda 1960: 51). A story from one of the Upanishads explains this concept well:

A disciple on being asked by a teacher saw a potter repeatedly lifting a lump of clay resembling a mass of dough on his right and shaping it into a variety of objects of different sizes and shapes arrayed on the left. Later, with the disciple's inability to answer what he learnt from the process, the teacher explained that the original mass of clay was a unity and a homogeneity, while the differentiated objects a secondary derivative.

The latter alone is not the truth. Similarly, when individuals are seen as different from each other,

it is only a secondary fact of existence; the primary, original fact is that of unity, of the oneness of all existence (Chakraborty 1995: 24–25).

The process of realizing the spirit for what it is (the reality) and our individual being for what it is (a mere appearance) is the process of spiritual growth (Prabhavananda 1960). When a person is aware of this reality, he or she begins to feel that, for instance, backbiting a colleague is a denigration of himself or herself. Cheating, lying or concealing for selfish gain at someone else's expense is really harm done to oneself. Hating someone else is hating oneself (Chakraborty 1995: 25).

Those who are high on spirituality or those who perceive their oneness with others can be characterized by certain qualities. Spirituality or oneness makes individuals friendly and compassionate, and love all living beings. When people see no difference between themselves and others, they cannot be prejudiced or biased with respect to one particular person and will, thus, be fair to all. Oneness involves sympathy, empathy and identification not only with the feelings of others, but also with their goals and objectives. Spirituality is characterized by sensitivity, such that the person can identify with the feelings, needs, demands and aspirations of people around.

### **Karma Yoga**

A simple means of achieving the goal of spirituality or oneness with others is *karma yoga*. In fact, it is the suggested means for active people, for example, managers of business organizations. It involves discharging our normal duties and roles by being totally dedicated to work, without bothering about what we gain from our efforts. The culture of India, where this study was conducted, fundamentally differs from many others in one essential aspect related to work. The people

who are socialized in this culture consider themselves to be born with duties rather than with rights. 'It is through work that we are brought into relation with the rest of the world... The finite centres should look upon themselves as members of an organism and work for the sake of the whole' (Radhakrishnan 1929: 566–67).

According to the Indian world-view, not even for a moment is anyone not working. One works under compulsion by one's very nature. If a person withdraws physically from work, succumbs to inertness and sits around mentally recollecting various actions, he or she is deluded and hypocritical. One has a duty to perform one's prescribed activities since performing actions is better than renouncing actions; by ceasing activity even bodily maintenance will not be possible. The objective of human existence is to transcend nature and realize oneness with others, and this is best done by carrying out one's duty in a dedicated manner. Therefore, prescribed actions or duties should be performed without too much attachment to the personal gains of work, without interruption and with complete dedication. It is only thus that a person attains the highest satisfaction. Steadfastness in action is required without much thought of the fruit (Chakraborty 1995; Radhakrishnan 1929). *Karma yoga* is an indirect though simple path for achieving the goal of oneness.

Thus, according to Hypothesis 1: *Karma yoga* is positively related to spirituality or oneness with all beings.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Burns (1978) identified two types of leadership: transactional and transformational. The more traditional transactional leadership involves an exchange relationship between leaders and

followers, but transformational leadership is based on leaders' shifting the values, beliefs and needs of their followers. It is known to result in superior performance in organizations facing renewal and change. Burns (ibid.: 20) defined transformational leadership as occurring 'when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality'. Transformational leaders, thus, serve as an independent force in changing the makeup of followers' motive base through gratifying their motives.

Bass (1985) built on Burns' (1978) work and described transformational leadership in terms of the impact that it has on followers: followers feel trust, admiration and loyalty towards the leader. Transformational leaders motivate followers to do more than the latter originally expected to. According to Bass (1985), there are four dimensions of transformational leadership—charisma (later subdivided into attributed charisma and idealized influence), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration.

Transformational leadership occurs when the transformational leaders' end values like those of integrity, honour and justice are adopted by followers thereby producing changes in their attitudes, beliefs and goals, which transforms them. Transformational leaders hold a sense of moral obligation to the organization as an end value, which in turn is also adopted by followers (Kuhnert and Lewis 1987). Menon and Krishnan (2004) found that transformational leadership was positively related to a follower's *karma yoga* in the case of male followers. Mehra and Krishnan (2005) developed a scale to measure *svadharma* orientation (following one's own dharma or duty) and found a positive relationship between it and

transformational leadership. Therefore, Hypothesis 2: Transformational leadership is positively related to a follower's *karma yoga* and oneness.

*Karma yoga* and oneness are expected to result in some desirable outcomes for organizations. Two such outcome variables are organizational identification and normative commitment to the organization.

### **Identification with Organization**

The social identity theory argues that the self-concept is comprised of a personal identity encompassing idiosyncratic characteristics, and a social identity consisting of salient group classifications. Ashforth and Mael (1989) described social identification (a sense of group or collective identification) as the perception of oneness with some human aggregate, which leads to the belief that the fate of the group is one's own. Self-concept includes the social identity of the individual, and social identification leads to activities that are congruent with the identity.

An individual's motivation to perform a task would be enhanced to the extent that: (a) job-related identities are salient in the person's self-concept; (b) actions required in the job are consistent, or can be performed in a manner consistent with the person's self-concept; and (c) career opportunities on the job are congruent with the person's possible selves. Human beings are not only goal-oriented, but also self-expressive, and are motivated to maintain and enhance their self-esteem and self-worth. We do things because of what we are; by doing them we affirm and establish our identity.

When human beings grow up from childhood to adulthood, their self-concept includes more and more aspects of their social self. Those who feel their oneness with all other beings are likely to

find it easier to identify themselves with social units like organizations. Thus, a general feeling of oneness may help enhance organizational identification.

Therefore, Hypothesis 3 says: Spirituality or oneness with all beings is positively related to organizational identification.

Shamir (1991) reviewed the existing literature on motivation and concluded that it had an individualistic utilitarian bias at odds with the concept of transformational leadership, which emphasizes transcending self-interest for the sake of the collective. Shamir et al. (1993) offered an explanation of the process of leader influence over followers in terms of leader behaviour implicating the self-concept of followers. Specifically, charismatic leadership is an interaction between leaders and followers that results in making the followers' self-esteem contingent on the vision and mission articulated by the leader. The self-concept-based theory thus links transformational leadership and motivational mechanisms of followers through the followers' self-concept. Lord and Brown (2001) noted that powerful leadership effects are realized only when values and self-identities form coherent patterns.

The followers of transformational leaders experience a total and unqualified belief in and identification with the leaders and their mission. Kark and Shamir (2002) proposed that transformational leadership influenced two levels of follower self-concept—the relational and the collective self—thus fostering personal identification with the leader and social identification with the organizational unit. Shamir et al. (2000) found that staff members' (inner circle's) identification with the unit fully mediated the relationship between the leader's emphasis on collective identity and soldiers' (outer circle's) identification

with the unit. Kark et al. (2003) showed that transformational leadership was positively related to both followers' dependence and their empowerment, and that personal identification mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and followers' dependence on the leader, whereas social identification mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and followers' empowerment. If the task of transformational leadership is uniting followers in some common higher purpose, this could be achieved by enhancing organizational identification in followers and in their groups, and by creating a unifying culture and then nurturing its values and customs among followers. Leadership depends on group members sharing a consensual social identity and leaders can play a fundamental part in constructing this shared identity (Collinson 2006). Hence, Hypothesis 4: Transformational leadership is positively related to follower's identification with the organization.

### **Normative Commitment**

According to Porter et al. (1974: 604), commitment is a 'strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values, a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization, and a definite desire to maintain organizational membership'. Commitment consists of three distinct components— affective, normative and continuance. 'Affective commitment refers to an employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization.... Normative commitment reflects a feeling of obligation to continue employment' (Meyer and Allen 1991: 67). Continuance commitment develops 'as employees recognize that they have accumulated investments...that would be lost if they were to leave the organization, or as they

recognize that the availability of comparable alternatives is limited' (Meyer et al. 1993: 539).

According to Meyer et al. (ibid.: 67), 'Employees with a strong affective commitment remain with the organization because they want to, those with a strong continuance commitment remain because they need to, and those with a strong normative commitment remain because they feel they ought to do so.' Finegan (2000) illustrated that the best predictor of commitment was the employee's perception of the work environment. Pearson and Chong (1997) studied the nursing staff of a large Malaysian hospital and reported that the task content properties of identity, significance and autonomy, as well as the interpersonal task attribute of dealing with others were significant contributors of organizational commitment. According to Finegan (2000), affective, normative and continuance commitment were each predicted by different clusters of values. It was found that individuals who valued adherence to convention were more likely to score high on normative commitment. Given that normative commitment describes the feelings of obligation that a person has to remain with an organization, it is perhaps not surprising that people who value obedience, cautiousness and formality are more likely to be normatively committed. Hence, Hypothesis 5: *Karma yoga* and organizational identification are positively related to normative commitment.

### **Method**

Data for this study were collected from the principal and 144 teachers of a prominent high school in western India. The school had 200 teachers and 4,000 students. The current incumbent had taken over as the school principal five years before the data were collected. She was recruited from outside the school, though she had prior experience

as a teacher in other schools. The teachers answered the transformational leadership questionnaire on their principal; they also answered questions on their identification with the school, normative commitment to the school, *karma yoga* and spirituality or oneness. It was made clear to the respondents that all responses would be confidential.

### **Demographic Details of Sample**

Data were collected in total from 174 teachers. Of them, 30 had spent less than one year with the school, and were therefore excluded because they would not have had enough opportunities to know the principal. Of the finally used sample of 144 teachers, 130 were female and 14 male. Their median age was 36 years, the range being 24 to 57. The minimum number of years they had spent with the school was 1, the maximum was 33, and the median was 6. Their total work experience including their tenure at the current school ranged from 1.5 to 33 years, with a median of 10.

### **Measures**

#### *Transformational Leadership*

The most widely used scale to measure factors in transformational leadership is the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Tejeda et al. 2001). Bass and Avolio's (1995) short version of the MLQ was used to measure transformational leadership of the principal as perceived by each teacher. Transformational leadership is a dyadic relationship and the score would, hence, vary from teacher to teacher. Five factors of transformational leadership—idealized influence attributed, idealized influence behaviour, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration—were measured through

four items per factor. The respondents were asked to answer the MLQ by judging how frequently their principal displayed the behaviours described in the questionnaire, using a 5-point scale (1 = Not at all; 2 = Once in a while; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Fairly often; 5 = Frequently, if not always). There was a significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) positive correlation between the five transformational leadership factors. The mean of the five factors was taken as the score for transformational leadership.

#### *Karma Yoga and Oneness*

*Karma yoga* was measured using the following five items:

1. I work for the intrinsic pleasure of doing work rather than for the fruits thereof;
2. I go about doing my duties irrespective of ridicule or praise;
3. The sense of duty towards others is the driving force behind most of the work I do;
4. I simply do whatever is expected of the role in which I am placed, without bothering about the consequences; and
5. Whenever duty towards others conflicts with my personal pleasure, I give greater importance to duty.

Spirituality or oneness was measured using the following two items: (a) all beings in this world are fundamentally connected to each other; and (b) the various beings in this world are like the leaves and branches of one tree.

#### *Identification and Normative Commitment*

The four items used by Shamir et al. (1998) were slightly modified and used to capture identification with the organization. The items used were:

1. I identify strongly with the other teachers in my school;
2. The values of most of the teachers in my school are similar to my values;
3. My school is like a family to me; and
4. I feel loyal towards other teachers of my school.

The slight modifications to the identification scale were done by replacing the words ‘employees’ and ‘organization’ with ‘teachers’ and ‘school’ respectively, to better reflect the sample studied and thereby enhance validity of findings. Normative commitment was measured using the 6-item scale of Meyer et al. (1993). The respondents were asked to judge how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each statement in the questionnaire, using a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither disagree nor agree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree).

## Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for and correlations between all variables in the study—transformational leadership, *karma yoga*, oneness, identification with organization and normative organizational commitment. It also presents reliability coefficients for the variables. Each variable was

constructed by computing the mean of the items comprising the scale. *Karma yoga* was positively related to oneness ( $p < 0.10$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Transformational leadership was significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ) positively related to the follower’s *karma yoga* and oneness, thus supporting Hypothesis 2. Spirituality or oneness with all beings was positively related to organizational identification ( $p < 0.10$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported. Transformational leadership was significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ) positively related to the follower’s identification with the organization, thus supporting Hypothesis 4. *Karma yoga* and organizational identification were significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ) positively related to normative commitment. Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was supported as well.

I used structural equations modelling to test the goodness of fit of the following model: transformational leadership affects *karma yoga*; transformational leadership and *karma yoga* affect oneness; transformational leadership and oneness affect organizational identification; and identification and *karma yoga* affect normative commitment. The model is given in Figure 1. Covariance structure analysis using maximum likelihood estimation yielded Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) of 0.99, GFI Adjusted for Degrees of Freedom (AGFI) of 0.94, Bentler’s Comparative Fit Index

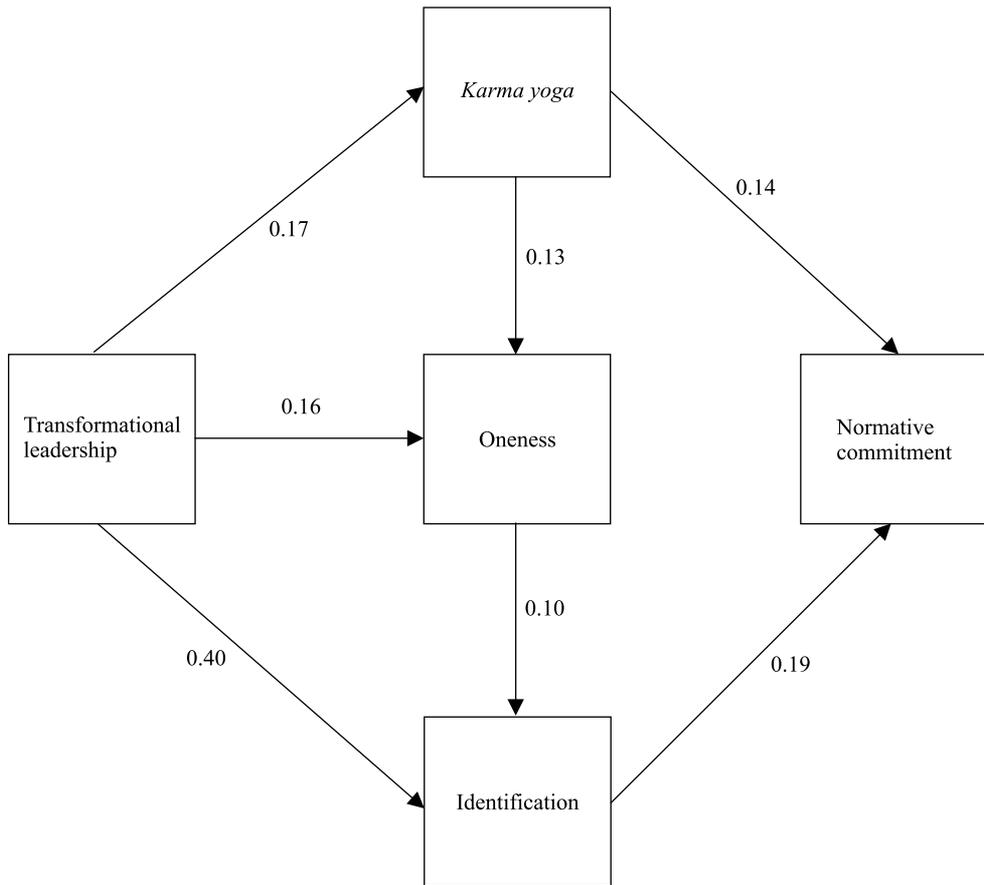
**Table 1**  
*Means, Standard Deviations, Cronbach Alphas and Correlation Coefficients*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Transformational leadership	4.03	0.47	(0.87)				
2. <i>Karma yoga</i>	3.55	0.68	0.18*	(0.48)			
3. Oneness	3.99	0.61	0.18*	0.16†	(0.34)		
4. Identification	3.58	0.62	0.41***	0.11	0.17†	(0.56)	
5. Commitment	3.82	0.61	0.17*	0.20*	-0.07	0.20*	(0.43)

**Notes:** *N* varies from 137 to 143. Standardized Cronbach coefficient alphas are in parentheses along the diagonal.

† =  $p < 0.10$ . \* =  $p < 0.05$ . \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ .

**Figure 1**  
*Structural Equations Model*



**Note:** The numbers mentioned are standardized estimates in the manifest variable equations under maximum likelihood estimation (covariance structure analysis).

of 0.98, and Root Mean Square Residual (RMR) of 0.01 (Chi-Square = 4.00; Chi-Square DF = 3;  $Pr > Chi-Square = 0.26$ ).

## Discussion

The results of this study reveal that transformational leadership enhances followers' *karma yoga* and oneness with others, and oneness enhances

organizational identification, which in turn enhances normative commitment. Thus, transformational leadership not only addresses the real needs of followers in terms of enhancing their oneness, but also addresses the goals of organizations by enhancing followers' organizational identification and normative commitment.

A transformational leader goes beyond the transactional needs and responds to the moral

development of the follower, and as such appeals to and also effectively influences the more general values of the follower. Impersonal channels of communication may not facilitate such influencing since there is not much depth of interaction between the leader and the follower through such channels. Communication channels such as e-mails may not help a leader much in highlighting the importance of some values or in emphasizing spirituality. On the other hand, they could hinder the identification, trust building, and other processes involved in charismatic leadership.

Kirkpatrick and Locke (1996) conducted experiments that showed that a leader's vision was most strongly related to attitudes, and these attitudes played an important role, inducing outcomes such as organizational commitment. One can possibly increase effectiveness of transformational leadership by increasing leader-follower interaction. This may be done by means of mentor programmes. Gatherings of project teams with their leaders could also be organized, which the leaders can use to generate enthusiasm and involvement with the organization or the project teams' cause. In addition, study circles can be arranged. These study circles could be forums used by leaders to encourage employees to challenge old assumptions and drive them to learn more, and, hence, intellectually stimulate them.

It is possible that transformational leaders would be able to change the cognitive framework, including value systems and spirituality of only those followers who have been working with the leader for a significant duration. Perhaps some critical initiatives undertaken by the leader during the initial period and witnessed personally and directly by the followers are necessary for this change. This suggests that it might be a good idea to identify the crucial followers and take steps to ensure that they continue to work with the leader.

This has implications for organizations where a transformation is planned and a leader is recruited for that purpose.

### ***Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research***

There exist limitations stemming from the nature of the sample. The leader and a huge proportion of the subordinates sampled were females. This was representative of the organization studied, but further studies are needed before we can generalize the findings to other organizations. The entire sample of teacher-respondents had a common leader (the school principal); this study needs to be replicated across a larger set of leaders to confirm the findings. This study combined followers who were with the organization since the time the leader joined the organization with those who joined subsequently. Of the 144 followers surveyed, only 55 joined the organization after the leader had. Future studies could test whether the relationship duration has any differential effect on various outcomes.

A study that includes different sectors like services and manufacturing could help generalize the findings beyond the educational sector wherein this study was conducted. In addition, transformational leadership that can be observed at a given point in time should set in motion effects for some time in the future. In this case, however, being a cross-sectional study, transformational leadership as well as the other variables were measured at the same time. A longitudinal study in which the outcome variables are measured subsequent to measuring transformational leadership could throw more light. Future research could also study the effect of specific organizational variables such as structure and environmental characteristics of a particular industry, and quantify how much

variance in the effects of transformational leadership is caused by each of these organizational variables.

## Conclusion

The importance of spirituality or oneness, which is the final goal of all existence according to the Upanishads, is being increasingly realized by organizations. The complex environments that business organizations face today and the rapid change that has become a part of life for many organizations highlight the importance of transformational leadership for effective management

of organizations. This study addresses the relationship between transformational leadership and followers' spirituality, both directly and indirectly through *karma yoga*. In addition to addressing the real needs of followers in terms of enhancing their oneness, transformational leadership also addresses the goals of organizations by enhancing followers' organizational identification and normative commitment. Thus, transformational leadership effectively blends the goals of both followers and organizations. As further research provides greater support, our understanding of the lasting effects of transformational leadership could be enhanced.

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