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# Impact of Follower Personality and Organizational Structure on Transformational Leadership

Haritha Vashti Kandalla  
Venkat R. Krishnan

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*This study uses an experimental design to look at the effects of followers' openness to experience, one of the Big Five personality traits and an organic organizational structure (operationalized as low configuration and large span of control) on transformational leadership. The five factors of transformational leadership measured are idealized influence (attributed), idealized influence (behavioural), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. The sample consists of 96 medical professionals from two homogeneous health-care establishments of the Indian defence services. Results show that followers' openness to experience enhances idealized influence (attributed) and idealized influence (behavioural), as also the composite measure of transformational leadership. An organic structure by itself does not have any effect on transformational leadership, but it does so in combination with follower personality. Idealized influence (behavioural), intellectual stimulation and the composite measure of transformational leadership are higher when followers' openness and organic structure are present than when both of them are absent.*

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There have been very few experiments conducted in the area of transformational leadership, and none where the effect of follower personality and organizational structure (Pillai and Meindl 1998) have been studied, as is attempted in the present study. Burns (1978) defines transformational leadership as leadership that occurs when leaders and

followers engage with each other such that they raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality, directly hinting at the importance of the follower in the interaction process. Conger and Kanungo (1998) state that there were leader-follower influence processes, leader-context influence processes, and context-follower relational

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Haritha Vashti Kandalla is an alumnus of Xavier Labour Relations Institute, Jamshedpur. Venkat R. Krishnan is Professor, Organizational Behaviour, Xavier Labour Relations Institute, Jamshedpur. E-mail: mail@rkvenkat.com.

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processes in any organization. All these processes need careful study if one were to understand leadership fully. Despite such assertions (Bass 1997; Conger and Kanungo 1998), numerous studies have been conducted on the personality of the leader while the follower's personality and organizational structure have been neglected. After a study by Burns and Stalker (1961) comparing organic and mechanistic structures, there has not been much literature devoted to structure. Literature supports the hypothesis that the emergence of transformational leadership is dependent on organizational structure. To this effect, the intention of this study is to look at the effect of structure and follower personality on transformational leadership, which has not been studied in any detail before.

### Theory and Hypotheses

According to Burns (1978), there are two types of leadership, transactional and transformational. The former is based purely on exchange, with the leader rewarding desired behaviour displayed by the follower, while in the latter there is a mutual relationship where both the leader and the follower are elevated from their present to a higher state of morality. Ehrhart and Klein (2001) have found that followers wanting to be actively involved in making decisions and not having a high degree of stability of work are attracted to charismatic leaders, thereby establishing a relationship between follower personality and leader behaviour. Porter and Lawler (1964) mention that a tall structure is good for producing security and social need satisfactions, while a flat structure is

good for self-actualization satisfaction, thereby stating that a fit is required between personality and the organizational structure for effective performance.

### *Transformational Leadership*

Bass (1985) states that transformational leadership consists of four interrelated factors: charisma or idealized influence, inspiration, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration and transformational leader behaviours are positively related to employee satisfaction, self-reported effort and job performance. Idealized influence consists of two sub-factors—idealized influence (attributed) and idealized influence (behavioural). Though Bass considers charisma or idealized influence to be a factor of transformational leadership, authors have used the terms charismatic leadership and transformational leadership interchangeably.

Podsakoff et al. (1990) find that transformational leadership behaviours like articulating vision and high performance expectations result in follower trust in the leader, which in turn have an effect on their organizational citizenship behaviours. Barling et al. (1996) studied branch managers of 20 branches of a large bank and found that on training those managers in transformational leadership, the subordinates perceived higher intellectual stimulation, charisma and individualized consideration in the leaders and their organizational commitment increased significantly. It also resulted in better financial performance. Yammarino et al. (1997) found similar results in a research while studying women and transformational leadership. Seltzer and Bass (1990) questioned 138 followers about 55 managers who were their leaders and

found that potential followers who had an expressive orientation towards work and life and those who were very principled were much more susceptible to the influence of a charismatic leader. Thus, personality of the follower is an important determinant in a leader being transformational, which prompted the inclusion of personality in this study.

### *Follower Personality*

Openness to experience would be the most relevant of the Big Five traits when it comes to transformational leadership or anything pertaining to change. Those who are high on openness to experience enjoy anything out of the ordinary. Anything new excites and stimulates them, and they enjoy doing things never done before. Challenges are easy for them to overcome; they have a vivid imagination, are very open-minded and do not have a narrow focus, but have a very broad perspective about most things. They enjoy discovering new things and try to understand them. They are not derogatory about anything that might seem ridiculous but are ready to try to understand that too.

While relating the Big Five personality construct to the three job performance criteria (job proficiency, training proficiency and personnel data), Barrick and Mount (1991) have shown that conscientiousness is consistently related to all performance criteria, and that openness to experience and extraversion are valid predictors of training proficiency. Their study used a total sample of 23,994 with people belonging to five occupational groups. Taking intrinsic success to be related to job satisfaction and extrinsic success to be related to income and occupational status, Judge et al. (1999) have found

that conscientiousness positively predicts intrinsic and extrinsic success. Taggar et al. (1999) have found that teams perform best when both leaders and followers are high in leadership.

Ehrhart and Klein (2001) found that followers with strong participation and low security work values were more likely to be drawn to charismatic leaders. A study showed that conscientiousness and emotional stability were not related to transformational leadership (Judge and Bono 2000). Proactiveness correlated positively with extraversion and conscientiousness, but not with the other three factors and the higher the score on the proactiveness scale, the more were the chances of identification as a transformational leader by peers (Bateman and Crant 1993). This study used three samples of sizes 282, 130 and 148, with the first two composed of undergraduates and the last of MBA students, and implied that proactive individuals are more likely to be perceived as transformational. Shamir et al. (1993) said that the recognition of a leader as transformational was the result of a dyadic relationship between the follower's perception and the leader's behaviour. The followers who are more open to experience will encourage demonstration of more transformational behaviour by the leader.

*Hypothesis 1* Openness to experience in the follower will enhance transformational leadership.

Based on Burns and Stalker's (1961) typology of organizational structure, Shamir and Howell (1999) hypothesized that charismatic leadership will be found more in organic organizations as it emerges during radical change that characterizes organic

organizations. They said that organic organizations enabled and encouraged expression of individual behaviour by both leaders and potential followers.

### ***Organizational Structure***

An organic structure will have few hierarchical levels, less configuration and a large span of control. An organization that is low on configuration will have a flat structure and the number of levels in the organization will be few. Those at higher hierarchical levels are approachable for anyone in the organization. The structure is not deep, but shallow. This means that there are a number of people working under one person and information is more accurately passed down, unlike in situations where the information is passed down so many levels that it is severely distorted by the time it reaches people who are supposed to implement it. One can meet the superiors anytime, as they are more available for consultation.

As there are very few levels in an organic organization, there is a larger span of control for superiors or supervisors. Many people are at the same level in the hierarchy because of the flat structure. Therefore, there are many people working under one superior. A very simple structure ensures that the motivation to work is not the large number of promotions one gets, but the kind of work one does and the recognition one gets for it. With a greater span of control, the decisions taken by managers influence a large number of people and therefore the responsibility shouldered by them is higher than otherwise. Therefore, the leadership skills of managers have to be more pronounced in this situation.

In a turbulent environment, a mechanistic organization cannot survive (Bass 1998). Organizations need to be flexible to meet new demands and changes as they occur and transformational leadership can enable the firm to do so. Howell and Avolio (1993) studied 78 managers from the top level of a large financial institution. They found that support for innovation in the organization moderated the relationship between transformational leadership and performance. Thus, if the organizational structure is organic with an emphasis on innovation, the job performance of followers increases.

Ivancevich and Donnelly (1975) conducted a study with 295 salesmen from three organizations and found that salesmen in flat organizations faced less pressure from their supervisors, were given more autonomy, were more satisfied and performed better (were more efficient) than those in tall organizations who found being constantly supervised stifling. In another study by Carpenter (1971), teachers from flat schools displayed more job satisfaction compared to those from medium and tall schools in the areas of community prestige, professional authority and participation in determining school goals.

Pillai and Meindl (1998) showed that organic structure and collectivistic cultural orientation were positively associated with the emergence of charismatic leadership. Data was collected from 596 managers and subordinates embedded in 101 work units in a large, complex organization. The study also showed that perceptions of structure and collectivistic orientation drove work performance, ratings of leader effectiveness, satisfaction with leadership and job satisfaction. Garg and Krishnan (2001) found that formalization was not negatively related to

transformational leadership and that decentralization was related to transformational leadership provided value-based leadership was not controlled.

Pawar and Eastman (1997) studied the typology of structure given by Mintzberg (1979) and said that both simple structure and adhocracy forms were more receptive to transformational leadership than the machine bureaucracy, professional bureaucracy or divisional structural forms. An organic, non-formalized organization with a larger span of control would be positively related to the job performance and satisfaction of employees. In addition, such organizations are also the ones that are conducive for transformational leadership to appear. Hence, we have:

*Hypothesis 2* An organic organizational structure would enhance transformational leadership.

*Hypothesis 3* Followers' openness to experience and organic structure would together enhance transformational leadership more than either of them separately would do.

## Method

The data for this experiment was obtained from two health-care organizations associated with the Indian defence services. These organizations have the capacity to handle cases ranging from 25 to 1,500 in number. They are led by people of appropriate seniority according to the size of the organization. The organizational hierarchy has seven levels. There are officer and non-officer cadres, with doctors and nurses being in the former and the ambulance attendants,

maintenance staff, etc., belonging to the latter. There were 137 officers in one organization and 161 in the other. We invited 120 officers to participate in the study, of whom 102 participated, resulting in a final usable sample of 96 officers. The work experience of the respondents ranged from 1 to 33 years. Further demographic data was not available because of the strict rules of confidentiality imposed in the organization.

In this experimental study, follower personality (openness to experience) and organizational structure (organic) were manipulated (yes or no) using a  $2 \times 2$  design and transformational leadership was measured. The basic scenario given to respondents asked them to visualize themselves as officers in the Indian Army Medical Corps, who were on study leave to a civil hospital for a year. While working in the hospital, they notice that relations between the management and employees are not very cordial. One day, matters come to a head between the management and employees when an employee is dismissed for demanding money to remove a dead body. The norm in the hospital is that employees can make money their own way, including charging for removing dead bodies. Thus, the dismissal shocks employees and their union calls for a strike. The respondents are now asked to meet the union representative to resolve the issue.

Follower personality was manipulated by presenting the union representative as either being open to experience or not being open to experience. Organizational structure was manipulated by describing the organization as either being organic or not being organic. The following cells were used: Cell 1—both organic and open to experience ( $n = 28$ ); Cell 2—organic but no openness ( $n = 19$ ); Cell 3—

open but not organic ( $n = 31$ ); Cell 4—neither organic nor open ( $n = 18$ ). Respondents were given the scenario pertaining to their cell, and all were asked to visualize themselves, their union representative (follower), and the organizational structure as given in the scenario. They were asked to answer questions on their own transformational leadership according to how they would have behaved had they been in the same situation in reality.

The success of the manipulation was checked by questionnaires for the personality of the follower and the organizational structure. The questionnaire for the openness dimension of follower personality was the 20-item scale of the NEO five-factor questionnaire taken from the International Personality Item Pool (2002). The Cronbach alpha for the questionnaire was 0.67. Result of a t-test showed that the mean openness score in the yes-openness cells ( $M = 1.88$ ;  $SD = 0.46$ ) was significantly higher ( $t = 2.67$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) than the mean openness score in the no-openness cells ( $M = 1.61$ ;  $SD = 0.49$ ).

Span of control and configuration were the two dimensions of organic structure that were used for this study. The questionnaires for span of control and configuration were framed keeping in mind the elaborations of the constructs given by Robbins (1990). The

Cronbach alphas were 0.70 for span of control and 0.56 for configuration. Result of a t-test showed that the mean span of control score in the yes-organic cells ( $M = 2.11$ ;  $SD = 0.55$ ) was significantly higher ( $t = 4.37$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) than the mean span of control score in the no-organic cells ( $M = 1.45$ ;  $SD = 0.78$ ). Similarly, the mean configuration score in the yes-organic cells ( $M = 1.77$ ;  $SD = 0.46$ ) was significantly lower ( $t = -7.07$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) than the mean configuration score in the no-organic cells ( $M = 2.50$ ;  $SD = 0.55$ ).

Thus, manipulation checks showed that the differences in personality and structure across the cells were significant in the expected direction. Therefore, the cells were seen as intended. The transformational leadership qualities of the respondents were measured using the 47-item Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Bass and Avolio 1991) along five factors—idealized influence (attributed), idealized influence (behavioural), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Descriptive statistics for the five factors are provided in Table 1. The five factors were highly correlated to each other and therefore, a composite score for transformational leadership was calculated by taking the mean of the five factors.

**Table 1**  
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Outcome Variables<sup>a</sup>

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Idealized influence (attributed)	2.93	0.61	(0.76)				
2. Idealized influence (behavioural)	3.05	0.60***	0.74	(0.81)			
3. Inspirational motivation	3.13	0.56***	0.75***	0.76	(0.83)		
4. Intellectual stimulation	2.72	0.64***	0.56***	0.66***	0.56	(0.81)	
5. Individualized consideration	3.00	0.66***	0.71***	0.77***	0.75***	0.72***	(0.85)

<sup>a</sup>  $N = 96$ . Cronbach alphas are in parentheses along the diagonal.

\*\*\* =  $p < .001$ .

## Results

To test Hypothesis 1 and 2, two t-tests were done on the whole sample divided into two parts, one where openness to experience was present or not present, and the second where the organization was organic or not organic separately. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that transformational leadership was higher in the openness cells than in the no-openness cells, thus supporting Hypothesis 1. Looking at the five transformational leadership factors separately, openness enhanced idealized influence (attributed) and idealized influence (behavioural). Table 2 also shows that there was no difference in transformational leadership across the organic and not-organic cells. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Looking at the four cells together, an analysis of variance was done to check for differences in transformational leadership across the four cells. Two-tailed t-tests were also done between pairs of cells to see if there was any significant difference in transformational leadership between Cell 1 (both organic and openness present) and each of the other three cells. The results are summarized in Table 3.

Results of analysis of variance showed that the composite transformational leadership variable and the factors of idealized influence (behavioural) and intellectual stimulation were significantly different across the four cells. Idealized influence behavioural and intellectual stimulation were lower in Cell 4 (no-openness and not-organic) than in Cell 1 (both organic and openness present). There were no differences between the remaining two cells (Cells 2 and 3) and Cell 1. Hypothesis 3 obtained partial support.

## Discussion

In the present study based on an experimental design, it has been shown that followers' openness to experience enhances transformational leadership behaviour, as hypothesized. Earlier studies that emphasized only the leader characteristics may not have given the complete picture, namely, that transformational leadership depends on the follower as much as the leader. This implies that leaders should choose their followers carefully, to ensure that there is a fit between their leadership style and the

**Table 2**  
Results of t-tests for Comparing Openness with No-Openness Cells, and Organic with Not-Organic Cells

	<i>Openness</i> ( <i>n</i> = 59)		<i>No-Openness</i> ( <i>n</i> = 37)		<i>t</i> -statistic	<i>Organic</i> ( <i>n</i> = 47)		<i>Not-Organic</i> ( <i>n</i> = 49)		<i>t</i> -statistic
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Idealized influence (attributed)	3.00	0.65	2.80	0.51	†1.70	2.92	0.65	2.93	0.57	-0.05
Idealized influence (behavioural)	3.18	0.59	2.84	0.57	**2.77	3.05	0.65	3.04	0.56	0.08
Inspirational motivation	3.20	0.58	3.02	0.52	1.56	3.10	0.58	3.17	0.55	-0.64
Intellectual stimulation	2.76	0.65	2.66	0.63	0.70	2.80	0.67	2.64	0.62	1.23
Individualized consideration	3.06	0.66	2.89	0.65	1.29	2.98	0.71	3.01	0.62	-0.26
Transformational leadership	3.04	0.56	2.84	0.48	†1.84	2.97	0.58	2.96	0.50	0.10

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



**Table 3**  
Results of t-tests for Comparing Cell 1 with Each Other Cell Separately and Analysis of Variance

	Cell 1 (n = 28)		Cell 2 (n = 19)		t	Cell 3 (n = 31)		t	Cell 4 (n = 18)		t	F
	Yes-Organic		Yes-Organic			(Cells	No-Organic		(Cells	No-Organic		
	M	SD	M	SD	1-2)		M	SD		1-3)	M	SD
Idealized influence (attributed)	2.95	0.77	2.89	0.42	0.33	3.06	0.53	-0.63	2.71	0.59	1.18	1.29
Idealized influence (behavioural)	3.08	0.72	3.01	0.54	0.37	3.26	0.42	-1.17	2.66	0.56	*2.20	**4.26
Inspirational motivation	3.10	0.70	3.08	0.34	0.13	3.29	0.45	-1.21	2.96	0.66	0.70	1.47
Intellectual stimulation	2.67	0.77	3.00	0.42	†-1.89	2.84	0.52	-0.96	2.31	0.64	†1.73	**4.50
Individualized consideration	3.00	0.85	2.94	0.44	0.35	3.12	0.44	-0.63	2.83	0.82	0.68	0.76
Transformational leadership	2.96	0.70	2.98	0.33	-0.15	3.11	0.38	-1.05	2.70	0.57	1.40	†2.43

Note: The t-tests compare Cell 1 with each of the other three cells separately. The F-statistic is for an overall comparison of all four cells together.

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

followers. In addition, organizations should think twice before deciding that a leader is ineffective, as that too depends on the personality of the followers.

Organic structure does not seem to enhance transformational leadership behaviour. A possible explanation for this can be the very nature of the organization chosen. Although the defence establishment is a very centralized, hierarchical organization, the health-care department has officers who are doctors and experts, and they have full authority to deal with their area of responsibility as they want to. Thus, they are free to exercise their decision-making abilities as if they were working in an organization with an organic structure. They may not have been able to differentiate between an organic and a non-organic structure due to this, and might have shown similar levels of transformational leadership in both situations. Future researchers can think of replicating the study in a non-defence environment.

Ghiselli and Johnson (1970) studied 413 managers in different businesses and found that satisfaction of needs pertaining to individualism, need for autonomy and self-actualization were more highly related to managerial success in flat than tall organizations. This study implied that flat organizations were more progressive as they encouraged behaviour that fulfilled higher order needs. Burns and Stalker (1961) have defined mechanistic and organic structures and stipulated that transformational leadership is more likely to emerge in organic structures, as they are likely to face radical change requiring leadership.

The present study is not in agreement with these researches and goes further to look at structure and follower personality together. The composite variable for transformational leadership and the two factors of idealized influence (behavioural) and intellectual stimulation vary across the four cells categorized by structure and follower personality.

The implication here is that although structure by itself does not affect transformational leadership behaviour, it might do so in combination with openness to experience in the follower. Organizations should thus pay equal attention to the follower personality while designing programmes needing effective leadership rather than focusing only on the structure.

In a study by Judge and Cable (1997), job seekers who scored high on openness to experience were more attracted to innovative organizational cultures and less attracted to detail- and team-oriented cultures. The results of the present study suggest that the follower personality is a stronger variable than organizational structure and that it enhances the effect of structure.

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

Only two dimensions (span of control and configuration) were used to manipulate organic structure. Additional dimensions could have helped capture the variable of organic structure more accurately. Another limitation of the study is that the sample size is not the same across cells, and not large enough. Future researchers could try to get a larger sample.

A significant finding of the study is that it is the follower personality that is the main determinant of transformational leadership, and structure in combination with personality enhances leadership behaviour. This finding is not in agreement with those studies that emphasize only structure and ignore follower personality. Future research can

re-examine the effect of follower personality on transformational leadership, with and without organizational structure, to check if there is indeed an interaction effect.

### **Conclusion**

In this age of knowledge workers, where the success of an organization depends on the extent of effective use of its intellectual capital and retention of key employees, the focus of leadership research has to shift to the follower from the leader. There is a need to understand followers' motives for good performance and satisfaction with a leader. This is among the first experiments to provide evidence concerning the impact of follower personality on transformational leadership. Earlier studies have emphasized the importance of organizational structure on emergence of transformational leadership. This study goes a step further by suggesting that organizational structure may not, by itself, have any effect on transformational leadership, but that there might be an interaction effect between the follower personality and the organizational structure, resulting in an enhanced effect on transformational leadership. The dominant variable is follower personality rather than structure. The domain of transformational leadership cannot remain confined to certain awe-inspiring personalities but should explore followers' personality and the structure of the organization. This study delineates the role of context in any leadership situation and makes transformational leadership less esoteric and more within the reach of all who wish to understand it.

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