



Umbrella Summary

Transformational Leadership

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What is transformational leadership?

Transformational leadership refers to leadership behaviors that transcend the basic employment contract and help motivate followers to achieve beyond expectations (Antonakis et al., 2003; Bass, 1999). Transformational leaders seek to “uplift the morale, motivation, and morals of their followers” (Bass, 1999, p. 9). Through the four facets of transformational leadership (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration), transformational leaders help followers create meaning, self-actualize, feel part of a collective, find greater self-worth, and achieve great things (Bass, 1999). The dimensions of transformational leadership are further detailed below.

- ▶ **Idealized influence:** This dimension of transformational leadership is sometimes broken down into two parts based on whether the idealized influence is an *attribution* of the leader or a *behavior* (Antonakis et al., 2003). Attributed idealized influence is thought of in terms of a leader’s level of charisma, their personal ethics and ideals, and whether they come across as powerful and confident. Idealized influence as a behavior is defined in terms of whether the leader behaves in a charismatic manner and takes actions based on their values and beliefs. Leaders displaying idealized influence are often seen as role models in the workplace due to the integrity of their actions and their desire to put their followers’ needs before their own (Bass et al., 2003).
- ▶ **Inspirational motivation:** Leaders displaying inspirational motivation work to “energize their followers by viewing the future with optimism, stressing ambitious goals, projecting an idealized vision, and communicating to followers that the vision is achievable” (Antonakis et al., 2003, p. 264). These leaders bring the team together around a common goal, help followers find meaning in their work, and challenge the limits of what followers may deem possible (Bass et al., 2003).
- ▶ **Intellectual stimulation:** Leaders display intellectual stimulation by challenging followers to higher levels of creativity and innovation. To do so, they may question existing assumptions, reframe problems so they can be seen in a different light, and find new ways of going about existing tasks (Bass et al., 2003). These leaders create a psychologically safe work environment where followers are free to make mistakes and openly share ideas without facing ridicule.
- ▶ **Individualized consideration:** Leaders who display individualized consideration pay attention to each of their followers’ specific needs and act as a mentor to advise and support their endeavors (Antonakis et al., 2003). They may provide growth opportunities tailored to each individual and create a supportive environment to try

these opportunities out (Bass et al., 2003). In doing so, they help develop each follower to reach their full potential.

Transformational leadership is most often contrasted with laissez-faire leadership and transactional leadership. Laissez-faire leadership is considered the most ineffective form of leadership, and refers to an absence of leadership, in which the leader avoids using their authority, does not make decisions, and pushes responsibility onto others (Antonakis et al., 2003). Transactional leadership is based on an economic exchange process whereby the follower works to fulfill contractual obligations in exchange for rewards, resources, praise, or the avoidance of negative consequences (Antonakis et al., 2003; Bass et al., 2003).

Transactional leadership is generally thought to be made up of three categories of behaviors: contingent reward, active management-by-exception, and passive management-by-exception. Contingent reward leadership refers to leadership behaviors that focus on clarifying expectations for followers regarding their tasks and roles and providing rewards when these role obligations are upheld (Antonakis et al., 2003). Active management-by-exception occurs when leaders keep track of followers' progress toward goals and take action to ensure that followers are meeting these goals (Bass, 1999). Conversely, passive management-by-exception involves waiting for mistakes and problems to occur before finally intervening (Bass, 1999).

Transformational leadership is most often measured using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) Form 5X, a 45-item scale with four items for each of the nine identified leadership dimensions as well as nine items that reflect outcomes of leadership (Avolio & Bass, 2002). Specifically, this questionnaire breaks leadership into the components of transformational leadership (consisting of five dimensions including idealized influence-attitudes, idealized influence-behaviors, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration), transactional leadership (consisting of three dimensions including contingent reward, management by exception-active, and management by exception-passive), and laissez-faire leadership. Thus, this questionnaire aims to capture the full range of leadership and rests on the assumption that every leader will display transformational and transactional leadership behaviors, albeit to varying degrees (Bass, 1999). Items are also included to measure three outcomes of leadership, which include generating extra effort, generating satisfaction, and being productive. Therefore, this scale provides a comprehensive measurement approach to transformational leadership in that it measures both leader behaviors and perceived outcomes of these behaviors. Using this scale, followers rate the frequency of their leader's behavior on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4 (frequently, if not always).

Like most theories, transformational leadership is not without its flaws. Transformational leadership has strong correlations with other types of leadership, which some researchers have argued is indicative of construct redundancy (Banks et al., 2016; Rowold et al., 2015). Some of the leadership factors measured by the MLQ appear to be so highly correlated as to be indistinguishable from each other, leading some researchers to question the underlying factor structure of the measure (Antonakis et al., 2003; Bass, 1999). Although these concerns do exist, research still generally supports the nine-factor structure purported by the MLQ (Antonakis et al., 2003). Because of the high correlations between sub-dimensions, researchers often average their data into the three overarching factors, allowing them to compare effects of transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and laissez-faire leadership on a variety of outcomes (Antonakis et al., 2003).

Why is transformational leadership valuable?

Transformational leadership is valuable because it has been associated with positive behavioral and attitudinal workplace outcomes for followers. Research indicates that there is a moderate relationship between transformational leadership and task performance both when using follower self-ratings and when using non-self-report measures of performance (Ng, 2017). Transformational leadership also has moderate positive associations with follower organizational citizenship behaviors, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (Ng, 2017). The relationship between transformational leadership and turnover is unknown. Transformational leadership is also linked to follower health and wellness. Specifically, transformational leadership has been found to have moderate positive associations with follower well-being and moderate negative associations with follower burnout, stress, and health complaints (Montano et al., 2017). Thus, having a leader who displays transformational leadership may not only be related to one's attitude and behavior at work, but is also related to one's wellness.

Can transformational leadership be developed?

Though there is no meta-analytic research on strategies for developing transformational leadership skills, several primary studies show positive changes among leaders after participating in interventions that involve various forms of group training and/or individualized coaching (e.g., Abrell et al., 2011; Barling et al., 1996; Cohrs et al., 2020; Kelloway et al., 2000; Mullen & Kelloway, 2009). Transformational leadership programs are not standardized, but common strategies include providing information on transformational leadership in general, giving participants their own transformational leadership assessment results (provided by their subordinates), and working with participants to translate the generic concepts into domain-specific transformational leadership behaviors. Participants also engage in goal setting or action planning, discussion, role playing, and feedback. The number and duration of each session has varied significantly, with some programs only involving single sessions and some involving multiple sessions over time. For agencies or researchers who are interested in exploring transformational leadership, these studies provide useful insight on what a training intervention could look like.

QIC-WD Takeaways

- ▶ Transformational leadership consists of four dimensions including idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.
- ▶ Transformational leadership is often contrasted with transactional leadership and laissez-faire leadership.
- ▶ There is a moderate positive association between transformational leadership and task performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction.
- ▶ The relationship between transformational leadership and turnover is unknown.

- ▶ Transformational leadership has positive associations with follower well-being and moderate negative associations with health complaints, stress, and burnout.
- ▶ Though a meta-analysis has not been conducted on transformational leadership interventions, there are several primary studies that have shown positive effects.
- ▶ Practitioners or researchers seeking to assess transformational leadership should consider using the 45-item [Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire \(MLQ\) Form 5X](#).

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Author(s)

Sarah Stepanek, MA, University of Nebraska at Omaha

Megan Paul, PhD, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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