



Effects of leader intelligence, personality and emotional intelligence on transformational leadership and managerial performance

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effects of intelligence, personality traits and emotional intelligence on transformational leadership and the effective performance of leaders in the organizational context. Data were collected from 134 midlevel managers from a large Brazilian company that operates in the energy sector. Our findings suggest that leadership effectiveness, as measured by the achievement of organizational outcomes, is a direct function of a leader's transformational behaviors, and is an indirect function of individual differences (experience, intelligence and conscientiousness) that work through transformational behaviors. A negative effect of neuroticism on leadership effectiveness was also observed. In addition, while emotional intelligence seemed to be statistically related to transformational leadership if considered in isolation, when ability and personality were controlled for, the effect became non-significant. We discuss implications for theory, research and practice.

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1. Introduction

Transformational leadership theory has been an important field of inquiry in the organizational sciences, one that has attracted the attention of a large number of researchers (Gardner, Lowe, Moss, Mahoney, & Cogliser, 2010; Lowe & Gardner, 2001). Various studies have found a relationship between transformational leadership and the efficacy of organizations (Avolio, 1999; Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1995; Dum Dum, Lowe, & Avolio, 2002), and meta-analytic reviews have corroborated positive connections between transformational leadership of superiors and the performance of their subordinates (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramanian, 1996). However, despite the apparent relevance of transformational leadership for organizational outcomes, a smaller number of studies have empirically investigated the antecedents of transformational leadership (Lim & Ployhart, 2004).

While previous research has indicated that intelligence and certain personality traits of leaders seem to be related to transformational leadership and leadership efficacy (e.g., Bono & Judge, 2004; Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002), many doubts persist specifically regarding emotional intelligence (e.g., Antonakis, Ashkanasy, & Dasborough, 2009; Schulte, Ree, & Carretta, 2004). Moreover, studies testing the effects of emotional intelligence on leadership are rarely done effectively and simultaneously controlling for ability and personality or correcting for measurement error (Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, & Lalive, 2010). Such restrictions of research designs are quite problematic because the results observed for the effects of new predictors can be highly distorted if there is no control for traits that have been shown to affect leadership, particularly when old and new factors are correlated. When based on biased coefficients, reports on the connections between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership fail to

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comply with evidence-based principles (Rousseau, 2006; Rynes, Giluk, & Brown, 2007), and therefore, their theoretical implications and practical recommendations are undermined.

In this study, we investigate the effects of emotional intelligence on transformational leadership and on the effective performance of leaders in managing work units, while assessing the full breadth of individual differences supported as predictors of leadership by the literature, i.e., intelligence and the five-factor model. We also apply a widely used measure of emotional intelligence endorsed by publication in leading journals (Law, Wong, & Song, 2004; Wong & Law, 2002). This is done in a sample of practicing managers in a large Brazilian company that operates in the energy sector. Besides this, we also examine the role of transformational leadership in the relationship between individual differences and work performance, thereby assessing its effect as a mediating factor in the unfolding of the leadership process (Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001).

2. Transformational leadership and individual differences

Transformational leaders, in contrast to transactional leaders, are seen as agents of social and organizational change (Bass, 1985; Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003). They are described as models for conduct and as being able to articulate a new and stimulating vision in their followers. In this way, they raise morale, inspire followers and motivate them toward greater achievements or conquests (Bass, 1985). Theories of transformational leadership (Avolio, 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1994) propose four dimensions inherent to the construct: *idealized influence*, often referred to as *charisma*, is related to the role played by the leader as a model for followers, prompting them to emulate the leader, follow the leader in all actions and adopt the leader's values and principles; *motivational inspiration*, describes leaders who have the ability to convey ambitious expectations to followers, inspiring them to reach objectives that result in important advances for the organization or for society; *intellectual stimulation* is exhibited by leaders able to question the status quo and appeal to the intelligence of their followers so as to promote thinking processes that favor creativity and innovation; and *individualized consideration* concerns leaders who develop an environment of personal support for their group, who understand and treat every follower as having distinctive characteristics, needs and desires.

2.1. Intelligence and transformational leadership

Following Schmidt and Hunter (1998), we conceive intelligence as a broad mental capacity which, among other things, involves the ability to understand and think about complex ideas to deal with abstractions and solve problems, as well as to learn quickly (Schmidt & Hunter, 2000). Leadership scholars have emphasized that analytical and critical thinking skills can be an asset for assessing situational contexts, acquiring new knowledge and engaging in creative problem-solving (Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, & Marks, 2000) as well as strategic thinking (Sashkins, 1988). Reviews of the literature on intelligence and leadership suggest that the former is the personal characteristic having the greatest positive correlation with leadership (Zaccaro, Kemp, & Bader, 2004). In a meta-analysis of intelligence and leadership emergence and effectiveness, researchers have observed corrected correlations of 0.33 when both intelligence and leadership were objectively measured (Judge, Colbert, & Ilies, 2004).

Although there are hardly any studies investigating the connections between intelligence and transformational leadership, skills such as those mentioned above could favor more effective communication and image-building strategies that fuel idealized influence (House, 1977) and could foster the talent to build more compelling visions that can inspire and motivate followers (Bass, 1985). Cognitive ability could also improve a leader's capacity to resourcefully engage followers' intellects in collective problem solving, another important facet of transformational leadership (Avolio, 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1994). Therefore, we introduce the following hypothesis:

H1. The intelligence of a leader is positively related to transformational leadership.

2.2. Personality and transformational leadership

Studies on the effect of leader personality on leadership outcomes are based on the premise that a certain set of characteristics is essential for an individual to exercise influence (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Bono & Judge, 2004; Judge, Piccolo, & Kosalka, 2009). The five-factor personality model was established as a taxonomy that parsimoniously and systematically combined a broad group of personality characteristics under the traits *extraversion*, *agreeableness*, *conscientiousness*, *openness to experiences* and *neuroticism* (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Goldberg, 1990), bringing renewed interest to the study of dispositions as predictors of leadership (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Judge et al. (2002) conducted a meta-analytic study in which the five-factor model explained 28% of the variability in leadership emergence and 15% in leadership effectiveness. Another meta-analysis specifically on the five factors and transformational leadership (Bono & Judge, 2004) observed positive correlations for extraversion (0.24), conscientiousness (0.13), openness (0.15) and agreeableness (0.14), and a negative correlation for neuroticism (-0.17). Therefore, in our study we tested the following hypotheses:

H2. Extraversion of a leader is positively related to transformational leadership.

H3. Conscientiousness of a leader is positively related to transformational leadership.

H4. Openness to new experiences of a leader is positively related to transformational leadership.

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