

# Impact of Transformational Leadership on Empowerment: Mediating Role of Social Identity

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## Abstract

The relationships between transformational leadership, followers' self-concept, and followers' empowerment were studied using a sample of 113 employees of a network marketing organisation in southern India that employs only women. It was hypothesized that transformational leadership is positively related to followers' empowerment and this relationship is mediated by followers' social identity. Results indicate that transformational leadership is positively related to both personal and social identity of followers. All four factors of followers' psychological empowerment are positively related to transformational leadership and to followers' personal and social identity. In addition, the relationship between transformational leadership and follower empowerment is mediated by followers' social identity.

Keyword: Transformational leadership, empowerment, social identity, self-concept.

## Introduction

Earlier studies have analyzed the relationship between transformational leadership and self-concept of followers (Kark & Shamir, 2002; Kark & Dijk, 2007; Lord & Brown, 2001). Other studies have explored the relationship between transformational leadership and empowerment (Kark, Shamir & Chen, 2003; Menon, 2001). Interestingly, these three variables have not been studied together. The results of prior studies have shown that transformational leadership positively affects followers' self-concept

and transformational leadership results in follower empowerment. When we consider any organisational setting, transformational leadership that affects followers' self-concept should ideally lead to empowerment of the followers. Kark, Shamir and Chen (2003), while researching empowerment and dependency as the twin faces of transformational leadership, encourage future researchers to examine the broader conceptualisation of the concept of empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995) in order to enable a more complete conclusion regarding the relationships among transformational leadership, identification, and empowerment. The present study is an attempt at the same.

This study of members of a network marketing organisation aims to look at the effects of transformational leadership, as opposed to transactional leadership (Bass, 1990), on followers' self-concept and whether this leads to followers' empowerment. All possible relationships between the three variables, transformational leadership, followers' self-concept, and empowerment are hypothesized and tested. Further, the study also tested the mediation of the relationship between transformational leadership and empowerment by followers' social identity. This is an attempt to strengthen existing literature about the effects of transformational leadership on followers' self-concept and follower empowerment.

## Theory and Hypotheses

### Transformational leadership and its effects

Transformational leadership refers to the leader moving the follower beyond immediate self-interests through

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idealized influence (charisma), inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. It elevates the follower's level of maturity and ideals as well as concerns for achievement, self-actualisation, and the well-being of others, the organisation, and society. Followers want to identify with a leader who envisions a desirable future, articulates how it can be reached, sets an example to be followed, sets high standards of performance, and shows determination and confidence thus displaying idealized influence and inspirational leadership. The leader displays intellectual stimulation when helping the followers to become more creative and individualized consideration by paying attention to the developmental needs of the follower (Bass, 1999, pg. 11).

According to Bass (1990), superior leadership performance occurs when leaders broaden and elevate interests of their employees to look beyond their self-interest for the good of the group. The transformational leader instills pride, gains respect, and trust, expresses important purposes in simple ways, and gives personal attention to each individual promoting intelligence and rationality. Such leaders have better relationship with their supervisors and contribute more to the organisation. Bass emphasizes that transformational leadership can be learned and that leaders at all levels can be trained to be charismatic in both verbal and non-verbal performance. Investigations have established that a cascading effect of transformational leadership exists, where such leadership behaviour observed at one level of management is also seen at the next lower level (Bass et al., 1987).

A number of researches have shown that the effects of transformational leadership vary across cultures. Jung and Avolio (1999) conducted a research on individualists and collectivists performing a particular task as individuals and as a group. Results showed that collectivists with a transformational leader generated more ideas than did individualists. Singh and Krishnan (2005) have further highlighted those behavioural aspects of transformational leadership that managers can employ to lead change in the Indian context.

Transformational leadership plays a critical role in an organisation and can make the difference between success and failure. A transformational leader changes the existing organisational culture with a new vision and a revision of its shared assumptions, values, and norms.

Members of transformational teams care about each other, intellectually stimulate each other, inspire each other, and identify with team goals. Transformational teams are high performing and creativity is likely to be high in such an environment (Bass, 1999). Kark, Shamir, and Chen (2003) have shown that transformational leadership is positively related to follower's dependency and empowerment thus enhancing personal identification with the leader and social identification with the work unit.

### **Follower's Self-Concept**

Follower's self-concept refers to the implications of different dimensions of an individual's self-identity. The self-concept of an individual is multifaceted (Markus and Wurf, 1987) consisting of two fundamental loci of the self: as an individual (personal identification) and as an interpersonal being (social identification) (Yukl, 1998). Personal identification is a situation in which the individual tries to be like or be the other person. Personal identification with a leader will increase to the extent to which the leader's identity, values, and attributes are desirable. Social identification is the definition of the self in terms of social category. Leader's behaviour emphasizes a group's distinctiveness, prestige, and competition with other groups. Increased social identification is increased salience of the relevant social identity in individual's self-concept (Brewer and Gardner, 1996). At the independent level, the self is construed in terms of its separation or difference from others whereas at the group level, the social self represents the self in terms of connection or similarity with others (Lord and Brown, 2001). The level of self-identity that links the individual to the leader and the organisation determines the effect transformational leadership has on the follower.

### **Transformational Leadership and Follower's Self-Concept**

According to Shamir, House and Arthur (1993), charismatic leaders, in order to implicate followers' self-concepts, (a) send deliberate and non-deliberate messages with more reference to values and moral justifications (b) refer to history (c) make positive references to follower's worth and efficacy as an individual and as a collective, and (d) express high expectations from the followers.

The more leaders exhibit such behaviour, the more the followers will have (a) a high salience of collective efficacy in their self-concept, (b) a sense of consistency between their self-concept and their actions on behalf of the leader and the collective, (c) a high level of self-esteem and self-worth, (d) a high sense of collective efficacy and will feel a similarity between their self-concept and their perception of the leader (pg. 586).

Various influencing forces activate different aspects of the self-identity at a given point in time enabling transformational leaders to play a major role in shaping followers' self-concept (Kark and Dijk, 2007). The source of activation for self-concepts is the values that are implicit in a leader's action. Theory suggests that such leadership results in various outcomes at a personal level (e.g. follower's empowerment) and at a social level (e.g. collective efficacy). The individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation aspects of transformational leadership prime the personal identity of the follower's self-concept; the idealized influence and inspirational leadership aspects of transformational leadership prime the collective identity of the follower's self-concept (Kark and Shamir, 2002).

*Hypothesis 1a:* Transformational leadership is positively related to followers' personal identity.

*Hypothesis 1b:* Transformational leadership is positively related to followers' social identity.

Kark, Shamir, and Chen (2003), in their study of bank employees and branch managers, have shown that transformational leadership has positive effects on personal and social identification. They have further established that these effects on personal identification enhanced followers' dependence on leader for guidance and inspiration. The effects on social identity enhanced follower's self-efficacy, collective efficacy, and organisation-based self-esteem. Singh and Krishnan (2008) showed that altruism mediates the relationship between self-sacrifice and transformational leadership. Theoretically, the most significant effect of transformational leadership is influencing followers to transcend their self-interests for the sake of the group. Transformational leaders achieve this effect by priming the followers' sense of collective-self and this increases followers' willingness to contribute to group objectives.

Hence, leader's behaviours that increase the attractiveness of the group and foster social identification with it are likely to enhance follower's collective identity over the personal identity (Shamir et al., 1998).

*Hypothesis 2:* Transformational leadership will enhance follower's social identity more than personal identity.

## Empowerment

Empowerment is defined as a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organisational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organisational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). Prior to the establishment of this definition, most management researchers considered empowerment as the process of delegation of authority by a leader or a manager. The emphasis was primarily on the notion of sharing power, which is interpreted as the possession of formal authority or control over organisational resources, with the subordinates. However, Conger and Kanungo (1988) first posited that empowerment is "enabling" (motivating through enhancing personal efficacy) rather than "delegation" (of authority and recourse sharing).

Thomas and Velthouse (1990) further extended the above concept by viewing power as energy: to empower means to energize. The cognitive model of empowerment defines empowerment as increased intrinsic task motivation. Intrinsic task motivation involves positively valued experiences that individuals derive directly from a task. Four dimensions of task assessment are the cognitive components of intrinsic motivation: impact (degree to which person can influence work outcomes), competence (self-efficacy, ability to perform work with skill), meaningfulness (fit between work role and person's beliefs, values and behaviours), and choice (causal responsibility for a person's actions) (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990). Spreitzer (1995) provided empirical support to show that empowerment is multifaceted and not just based on self-efficacy. The two consequences of psychological empowerment and its antecedents, namely locus of control, self-esteem, access to information and rewards, were shown to be managerial effectiveness and innovative behaviour. The underlying assumptions in

this study were that empowerment cannot be generalized across situations but is based on work environment; empowerment is viewed as a continuous variable—a person is viewed as more or less empowered, not as empowered and not empowered; and empowerment is specific to work life and cannot be generalized across different life situations (Spreitzer, 1995). Spreitzer (1996) showed that managerial perception of empowerment is associated with the social structural characteristics at the level of work unit. These include a work unit with little role ambiguity, strong sociopolitical support, access to information and a participative unit climate. A high-involvement system provides an environment in which individuals can assume a more active role in the organisation.

### Transformational leadership and Empowerment

The impact of transformational leadership behaviour on follower's performance often stems from follower's development and empowerment, which increase both their ability and motivation (Kark, Shamir and Chen, 2003). The transformational leadership facets act through empowerment in influencing work outcomes in an organisation (Bass, 1999). Charisma of the leader will influence the followers and enhance their organisational commitment. Intellectual stimulation could enhance followers' competence levels and increase follower self-efficacy. The transformational leader's idealized influence will provide meaningfulness to followers' work roles and individualized consideration will drive followers' choices. Transformational leader behaviours enable the follower, energize the follower through inspiration, influence, and bring about effectiveness and innovation in a group by enhancing collective-efficacy.

*Hypothesis3:* Transformational leadership will be positively related to follower's psychological empowerment.

### Follower's Self-Concept and Empowerment

By definition, empowerment is enhancing follower's self-efficacy, enabling the follower through motivation

and energizing the follower to improve work efficiency. According to Gist (1987), self-efficacy is one's belief in one's ability to perform a task. Spreitzer, Kizilos, and Nason (1997) explain the outcomes of empowerment as effectiveness, work satisfaction and less job-related strain. Empowerment of the follower leads to the better locus of control and self-esteem, which enhances the follower's self-efficacy, and in turn the personal identity. Menon (2001) has shown that empowerment leads to enhancement of perceptions of control over the work environment, perceptions of self-efficacy and organisational goal internalisation. The manager of an organisation empowers subordinates by providing more access to information and encourages them with rewards, thus enhancing followers' collective-efficacy and hence the social identity.

*Hypothesis4:* Follower's psychological empowerment will be positively related to both follower's personal identity and social identity.

### Follower Self-Concept as Mediating Transformational Leadership and Empowerment

As we have hypothesized earlier, transformational leadership will enhance the follower's personal and social identity. Leadership practices that enhance personal identity are likely to result in individual empowerment effects and leader behaviours that increase the attractiveness of the group and foster social identity are likely to empower the group and enhance follower's collective identity (Shamir et al., 1998). Kark, Shamir, and Chen (2003) have shown that social identification mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and empowerment. There is no empirical evidence to suggest that follower's personal identity has any mediating effect between transformational leadership and empowerment. Thus, the effects of transformational leadership on the follower and the psychological empowerment of the follower will be mediated by the social identity of the follower.

*Hypothesis5:* The relationship between transformational leadership and psychological empowerment will be mediated by follower's social identity.

## Method

### Sample and Data Collection

The study was conducted in the Indian city division of an internationally renowned direct selling organisation with the largest women network, marketing premium food storage, preparation and serving products. The organisation which exclusively employs women has a flat organisational structure with only two employee levels – a ‘consultant’ and a ‘unit manager’, who will have at least six consultants reporting to her. Each consultant recruits fresh consultants by conducting home party or any such events and is promoted to unit manager level once she has six consultants reporting to her. The sale of the company products is strictly done by word-of-mouth to the customers and cannot be sold in any other format. All managers within this city report to one of the four distributors, who are the transaction points (for order and delivery) for all company products.

In all, 120 consultants from 23 different work units (working under 23 managers) took part in the study and complete data was available for 113 consultants representing a 94% response rate. The consultants studied were aged between 22 and 64 ( $M = 41.4$ ). All the women were literate with 34% having completed a part or whole of their schooling (8th, 10th, and 12th standard), 53% had an undergraduate degree (BA, BCom, and BSc) and 13% had a postgraduate degree (MCom, M.Phil, and MA). Almost 64% of the consultants (72) had two or more children. More than 70% (80) consultants were with the organisation reporting to their managers for at least 6 months. The average tenure of all the consultants was 32 months (varied from 1 to 192 months) and the average duration of relationship with the manager was 16 months (varied from 1 to 72 months). Of all the 113 consultants 62% (70) were home makers prior to joining the organisation whereas the remaining 38% (43) had been employed in a wide range of jobs such as banks, pharmacy, teachers, beautician, dietician, software engineer and financial investment advisor. Only 3 of the 113 consultants are single and the spouses of the all other consultants are in successful jobs.

### Measures

A five-point scale (0 = Not at all; 1 = Once in a while; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = Fairly often; 4 = Frequently, if not

always) was used for all the questionnaires studying individual variables. The five aspects of transformational leadership variable -- idealized influence attributed, idealized influence behaviour, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration -- were measured using a slightly modified version of the Transformational Leadership Questionnaire (TLQ) developed by Singh and Krishnan (2007) and used by Krishnan (2007). This is a 30-item questionnaire and a sample item is “Makes others feel that they are important members of her group.” The Cronbach alphas for the five dimensions of transformational leadership were above 0.70 (TL\_A  $\alpha = 0.70$ , TL\_B  $\alpha = 0.75$ , TL\_M  $\alpha = 0.74$ , TL\_S  $\alpha = 0.78$ , TL\_C  $\alpha = 0.72$ ). Personal and social identification were measured using the questionnaires developed by Kark (2001) and used by Kark, Shamir, and Chen (2003). Personal identification focused on the respective unit manager (PI  $\alpha = .75$ ). A sample item is “I am very interested in what others think about the unit manager.” Social identification focused on the respective unit (SI  $\alpha = .79$ ). A sample item is “I am proud to tell others I belong to this work unit.” The scale developed by Spreitzer (1995) was used to measure the four dimensions of empowerment namely meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. The empowerment scale focused on the job done for the organisation and a sample item is “The work I do is meaningful to me.” The Cronbach alphas for the four dimensions of empowerment were above 0.70 (E\_M  $\alpha = 0.73$ , E\_C  $\alpha = 0.72$ , E\_SD  $\alpha = 0.76$ , E\_IM  $\alpha = 0.82$ ).

## Results

The means, standard deviations, and correlations between all variables are given in Table 1. Hypotheses 1a and 1b, that suggested a positive relationship between transformational leadership and follower’s personal identity and social identity respectively, found support. However, Hypothesis 2, which suggested that transformational leadership will enhance social identity more than personal identity, did not find support. Hypothesis 3, that suggested a positive relation between transformational leadership and empowerment, and Hypothesis 4, that suggested a positive relation between follower’s personal and social identities and empowerment, found support.

**Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations between all variables**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>
1. Transformational Leadership (TL)	3.35	0.53	(0.93)						
2. Personal Identification (PI)	3.41	0.51	***.69	(0.75)					
3. Social Identification (SI)	3.41	0.54	***.66	***.67	(0.79)				
4. Meaningfulness (E_M)	3.61	0.50	***.37	***.43	***.45	(0.73)			
5. Competence (E_C)	3.41	0.67	** .28	** .30	***.36	***.59	(0.72)		
6. Self-determination (E_SD)	3.49	0.67	** .30	** .30	*.20	***.55	***.61	(0.76)	
7. Impact (E_IM)	2.88	1.04	** .30	***.40	***.48	***.40	***.51	** .30	(0.82)

N = 113. \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ . \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ . \* =  $p < 0.05$ . Standardized Cronbachalphas are in parentheses along the diagonal

Hypothesis 5, which suggested that the relationship between transformational leadership and empowerment would be mediated by follower's social identity, was tested by successive regressions as shown in the following tables. The relationship between the dependent variables, each individual factor of empowerment, the independent variable, transformational leadership and the mediator, social identity was tested based on the causal chain model suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). It was observed that transformational leadership and social identity individually affect each factor of empowerment

positively. However, when both factors are combined social identity affects three factors of empowerment, except self-determination, more than transformational leadership. This shows that the relationship between transformational leadership and empowerment is indeed mediated by social identity. As advocated by Baron and Kenny (1986), Sobel test was conducted to test whether the mediator, social identity, carried the influence of independent variable, transformational leadership, to the dependant variable, empowerment. Tables 2-5 present the linear regression and Sobel test results for the mediation relationships.

**Table 2: Linear regression for predicting meaningfulness**

<i>Dependent variable</i>	<i>Step</i>	<i>Independent variable entered</i>	<i>Parameter estimate</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Model R<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>Model F</i>
Social Identification	1	Transformational Leadership	0.66	***9.30	0.44	***86.47
Empowerment (Meaningfulness)	2	Transformational Leadership	0.35	***4.23	0.14	***17.87
Empowerment (Meaningfulness)						
	3	Transformational Leadership	0.13	†1.21		
		Social Identification	0.33	**3.15	0.21	***14.6

† =  $p < 0.1$ . \* =  $p < 0.05$ . \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ .

The Sobel test statistic for this mediation is 2.98 at p-value 0.00290804.

**Table 3: Linear regression for predicting competence**

<i>Dependent variable</i>	<i>Step</i>	<i>Independent variable entered</i>	<i>Parameter estimate</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Model R<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>Model F</i>
Social Identification	1	Transformational Leadership	0.66	***9.30	0.44	***86.47
Empowerment (Competence)	2	Transformational Leadership	0.35	**3.07	0.08	**9.41
Empowerment (Competence)						
	3	Transformational Leadership	0.09	†0.58		
		Social Identification	0.40	**2.70	0.14	***8.6

† =  $p < 0.1$ . \* =  $p < 0.05$ . \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ .

The Sobel test statistic for this mediation is 2.58 at p-value 0.00990398.

**Table 4: Linear regression for predicting self-determination**

Dependent variable	Step	Independent variable entered	Parameter estimate	t	Model R <sup>2</sup>	Model F
Social Identification	1	Transformational Leadership	0.66	***9.30	0.44	***86.47
Empowerment (Self-determination)	2	Transformational Leadership	0.38	**3.33	0.09	**11.11
Empowerment (Self-determination)						
	3	Transformational Leadership	0.37	**2.45		
		Social Identification	0.01	††0.05	0.09	**5.51

†† = p > 0.5. † = p < 0.1. \* = p < 0.05. \*\* = p < 0.01. \*\*\* = p < 0.001.

The Sobel test statistic for this mediation is 0.05 at p-value 0.95802612.

**Table 5: Linear regression for predicting impact**

Dependent variable	Step	Independent variable entered	Parameter estimate	t	Model R <sup>2</sup>	Model F
Social Identification	1	Transformational Leadership	0.66	***9.30	0.44	***86.47
Empowerment (Impact)	2	Transformational Leadership	0.58	**3.26	0.09	**10.64
Empowerment (Impact)						
	3	Transformational Leadership	-0.06	††-.29		
		Social Identification	0.97	***4.43	0.23	***16.07

†† = p > 0.5. † = p < 0.1. \* = p < 0.05. \*\* = p < 0.01. \*\*\* = p < 0.001.

The Sobel test statistic for this mediation is 4.01 at p-value 0.00005984.

## Discussion

All people identify themselves as individuals, relationship partners, and group members in some context. Yet forces at various levels of analysis (e.g., personality traits, quality of relationship, group norms) can influence the cognitive accessibility of a given self-concept, leading to the activation of a particular identity level at a given point in time. This dynamic enables transformational leaders to play a major role in the activation of the various levels of the self (Kark and Shamir, 2002). The present study reveals that transformational leadership has positive impact on the follower's self-concept and hence on the follower's psychological empowerment. More importantly, the effect of transformational leadership on follower's empowerment ceases to be significant when follower's social identity is also considered. In other words, the follower's feeling of empowerment is dictated more by the sense of self-perception within the social framework rather than the personal identification with the transformational leader. The results also show that transformational leadership affects personal identity more than social identity.

Kark, Shamir, and Chen (2003), had shown that transformational leadership significantly predicted follower empowerment and that the extent of the effect is mediated by social identification. This study lends support to both these hypotheses. Existing literature indicates that transformational leadership is most effective when the leader behaviour influences the follower's inclination more towards the well-being of the group rather than the self (Kark, Shamir and Chen, 2003; Shamir et al., 1998), but the results obtained in this study provide evidence to the contrary. The effect of transformational leadership on follower's personal identity was found to be more positive than that on follower's social identity. Thus, an effective leader should be able to know instinctively which self of the follower to enhance to obtain desired results. This study further lends support to the concept of the gestalt nature of empowerment (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990; Spreitzer, 1995). The follower feels empowered to the extent of the impact a leader has on different factors of follower empowerment. The relationship between the leader and the follower in the context of an organisation is effective when the leader positively influences the public and the private self-image of the follower leading to the follower's psychological empowerment.

## Interpretation and Implications

In a setting such as a network marketing organisation, which functions primarily on the strength of trust and relationships between its members, the effects of transformational leadership will be more visible. The most effective leaders are perhaps those who enhance their followers' self-concept and make the followers feel more empowered. In order to achieve this, idealized influence and inspiration of the leader should enhance the social identity of the follower. This will enable the follower to favourably view successes in a social setting and feel more empowered. In other words, the effect a leader has on a follower is primarily determined by follower's perception of success of self in a social setting.

The working unit, as considered for this study, was restricted to the manager the particular employee reports to and all other employees reporting to that manager. Here the manager is the leader and the employees are the followers. However, the most effective way a network marketing organisation can function is when most if not all members within a group display transformational leadership. Considering this to happen, the measurement of transformational leadership cannot not be restricted to studying the influence one person has over a group of others. Rather the transformational leadership qualities of each person in the unit will affect others in the group at both a personal and group level. Consequently, the feeling of followers' empowerment also need not be restricted to influence of one leader figure. The influence of multiple leaders on the follower, and how all these influences will combine to make the follower feel empowered should be taken into account while measuring the effect of transformational leadership on followers' self-concept.

## Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The study provides findings that support the motivation and leadership literature, but has its limitations. A significant shortcoming of this study was the nature of the organisation sampled. All the employees of this organisation were women and so the generality of the results obtained needs to be verified with research in other organisations that have a heterogeneous mix of employees. The range of duration of relationship between manager and subordinate in the sample space is wide,

which might have skewed some of the responses. The age and education demographics of the respondents might have also influenced their understanding of the questionnaire and hence their responses. Validation and further support for the findings of the study could be obtained by conducting similar studies on other network marketing organisational settings. A longitudinal study measuring the effect of transformational leadership on follower's self-concept can determine which among priming of followers' personal self and social self leads more towards followers' empowerment.

## Conclusion

The increasing research on transformational leadership confirms its importance in the field of motivation and leadership. This study is an attempt to contribute to the existing literature of transformational leadership, self-concept, and empowerment. It was found that transformational leadership affects followers' self-concept and leads to empowerment. The social identity of the follower also determines the extent of empowerment of the follower.

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