Unveiling The Dark Side of Transformational Leadership: Examining Leader Dependency and Its Influence on Organizational Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

While transformational leadership is often praised for its capacity to inspire change and drive innovation, this paper aims to delve into the less-explored negative repercussions of this leadership style, particularly in terms of fostering excessive leader dependency. The study examines how leader-centric dynamics may compromise team autonomy, stifle creativity, and lead to organizational inefficiencies over time. Through a mixed-method approach involving case studies and survey data from multinational organizations, this research unveils that transformational leader, while empowering, can unintentionally cultivate a reliance on their vision and guidance, thereby constraining the cultivation of self-sustaining leadership within teams. The findings underscore the significance of striking a balance between transformational leadership and autonomy-promoting practices to steer clear of dependency traps. This paper contributes to the expanding body of literature on leadership dynamics by offering a nuanced comprehension of the potential risks associated with transformational leadership. Furthermore, it discusses the implications for leadership development, organizational design, and employee empowerment.

Keywords: *Autonomy*, *Leader Dependency*, *Leadership Development*, *Organizational Dynamics*, *Transformational Leadership*

BACKGROUND

Transformational leadership is recognized as an effective style for encouraging innovation and boosting employee motivation (Ardi *et al*., 2020). This approach inspires followers to prioritize the greater good, leading to increased job satisfaction and performance. Foundational scholars like Burns (1978) and Bass (1985) deemed this style essential in dynamic environments.

However, a significant drawback is leader dependency, where followers overly rely on their leader's guidance, hindering individual growth and organizational resilience. While transformational leaders empower their teams, this reliance can stifle creativity and disrupt team dynamics (Kark & Shamir, 2021).

Additionally, this leadership style may concentrate power among a few, limiting the emergence of new leaders and inhibiting innovation (Kovjanic *et al*., 2019). Such dependency complicates long-term leadership planning and leaves organizations vulnerable in transitions (Shao *et al*., 2020).

This paper will examine the downsides of transformational leadership, focusing on how its strengths can lead to dependency that restricts innovation. By analyzing qualitative data from global case studies, it will identify associated risks and propose strategies to promote autonomy and sustainable leadership development.

1. Literature Review
2.1 Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership, introduced by Burns in 1978 and expanded by Bass in 1985, emphasizes a leader's ability to inspire and motivate followers towards better performance and ethical standards. This approach fosters a shared sense of purpose, delegates authority, and encourages creativity (Bass & Riggio, 2005).

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Bass identified four key components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Together, they promote a focus on organizational well-being over individual self-interest.

However, recent studies highlight the potential drawbacks of transformational leadership, particularly in creating leader dependency. While it aims to empower, it can lead to employees becoming overly reliant on the leader's vision (Kark & Shamir, 2021). This review will examine the negative aspects of transformational leadership, especially regarding its impact on organizational dynamics.

Transformational leadership is associated with positive organizational outcomes, including enhanced employee engagement, improved performance, and greater innovation. Research by Kovjanic *et al.* (2019) shows that these leaders create a culture of psychological empowerment, allowing employees to feel confident in decision-making. Bass and Avolio (1993) found that transformational leadership strengthens followers' commitment to organizational values, which is vital for sustainability.

Leaders who demonstrate idealized influence and inspirational motivation build trust and respect. By encouraging intellectual stimulation, they foster creativity and problem-solving, promoting innovation (Bass & Riggio, 2005). Consequently, transformational leadership is linked to higher job satisfaction, reduced turnover intentions, and improved organizational performance (Shao *et al.*, 2020).
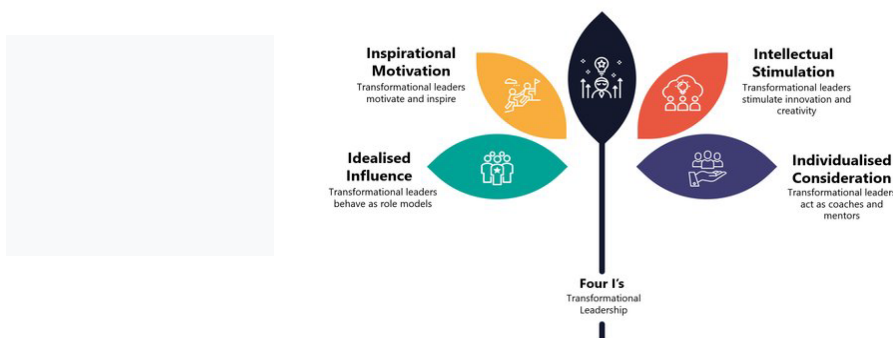

Figure 1. Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985)

2.2 The Dark Side of Transformational Leadership

While transformational leadership has garnered extensive acclaim for its favorable impacts, the potential adverse facets of this leadership approach have received comparatively limited attention. Scholars have initiated inquiries into whether the attributes that render transformational leadership effective, such as the leader's formidable influence and vision, may inadvertently engender reliance among followers (Tourish, 2019). A primary critique of transformational leadership pertains to its capacity to cultivate excessive dependence on the leader, thereby impeding autonomy, creativity, and innovation at lower organizational echelons (Kark & Shamir, 2021).

As emphasized by Ardi *et al.* (2020) in "Digital Transformational Leadership," this leadership style proves especially efficacious in the realm of digital and organizational transformation. Transformational leaders play a pivotal role in shaping vision, fostering innovation, and empowering followers to align with overarching organizational objectives (figure 2). Nevertheless, notwithstanding the well-documented positive outcomes of transformational leadership, recent research has delved into potential drawbacks, such as the emergence of leader dependency, which can curtail followers' autonomy and creativity. This dependency poses a threat to organizational sustainability, particularly in dynamic environments where adaptability is paramount.

The research conducted by Kark and Shamir (2021) sheds light on the dual effect of transformational leadership. They posit that while transformational leaders can empower their followers, they can also inadvertently foster a sense of dependency, leading followers to overly rely

on the leader for guidance and direction. Consequently, this reliance may diminish employees' inclination to take initiative or make independent decisions, potentially resulting in a stagnation of innovation and organizational growth. Thus, transformational leadership may impede rather than promote long-term sustainability and resilience within organizations.

2.3 Leader Dependency

Leader dependency arises when followers excessively rely on their leader's vision, guidance, and decision-making, often at the expense of their own autonomy and leadership development. This phenomenon poses significant challenges in organizations where the leader wields substantial influence over strategy and culture. Tourish's (2019) research underscores the perils of charismatic authority within transformational leadership, wherein the leader's personal sway becomes so dominant that followers are disinclined to cultivate their own leadership capabilities.
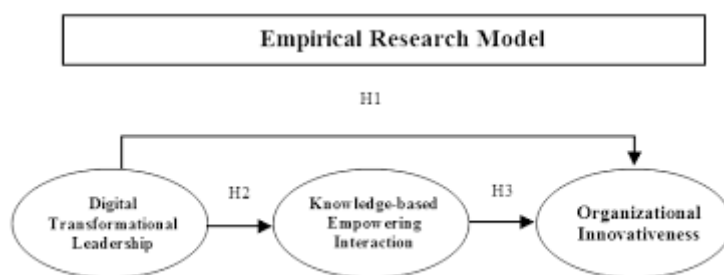

Figure 2. Digital Transformational Leadership (Ardi *et al*, 2020)

Several scholars have scrutinized the concept of leader-follower dependency within the context of transformational leadership. Kark and Shamir (2021) posit that while transformational leaders inspire and motivate followers, they also establish a power dynamic that may render followers hesitant to act without the leader's endorsement. This dynamic may lead to a dearth of initiative and creativity among team members, as their focus shifts from contributing their own ideas to meeting the leader's expectations. The ramifications of this reliance are especially pronounced in organizations heavily reliant on visionary leadership, where the leader's personal charisma and vision are pivotal to organizational success.

Leader dependency profoundly impacts organizational dynamics. When followers overly depend on a transformational leader, the organization becomes susceptible to performance downturns during leadership transitions. In the leader's absence, teams may struggle to sustain performance levels due to their reliance on the leader for direction and motivation (Shao *et al*., 2020). This issue is particularly worrisome for organizations operating in dynamic industries, where adaptability and agility are imperative for success.

Kovjanic *et al*.'s (2019) research suggests that leader dependency can also disrupt team dynamics, leading to diminished collaboration and independent idea generation among followers. In teams dominated by transformational leadership, the focus often shifts to aligning with the leader's vision, stifling diversity of thought and creativity. This dependency not only affects individual team members but also curtails the organization's capacity to innovate and respond to market changes.

2.4 Balancing Transformational Leadership and Autonomy

To mitigate the risks of leader dependency, organizations should balance transformational leadership with practices that encourage autonomy. Research by Shao *et al*. (2020) emphasizes the role of transformational leaders in setting strategic directions while empowering followers to make decisions and take ownership of their work. Fostering a culture of empowerment and shared leadership can reduce dependency risks and promote long-term sustainability.

Leaders can enhance development by supporting initiatives that enable employees to assume leadership roles. This approach strengthens resilience and distributes leadership capabilities more equitably. Reducing reliance on a single leader fosters a culture of innovation and adaptability, which

is crucial for success (Tourish, 2019).

The literature on transformational leadership highlights both its benefits and risks. While it can inspire exceptional outcomes, it may also lead to dependency that hinders autonomy and innovation. Understanding these risks and implementing strategies to promote autonomy allows organizations to maximize the advantages of transformational leadership while minimizing its drawbacks.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework examines the relationship between transformational leadership and its potential negative effects, particularly regarding leader dependency and its impact on organizational dynamics. Transformational leadership, defined by Bass (1985), includes four dimensions: idealized influence (H1), inspirational motivation (H2), intellectual stimulation (H3), and individualized consideration (H4). These dimensions can lead to increased reliance on the leader (H5).

Hypothesis 6 (H6) explores how transformational leadership affects organizational
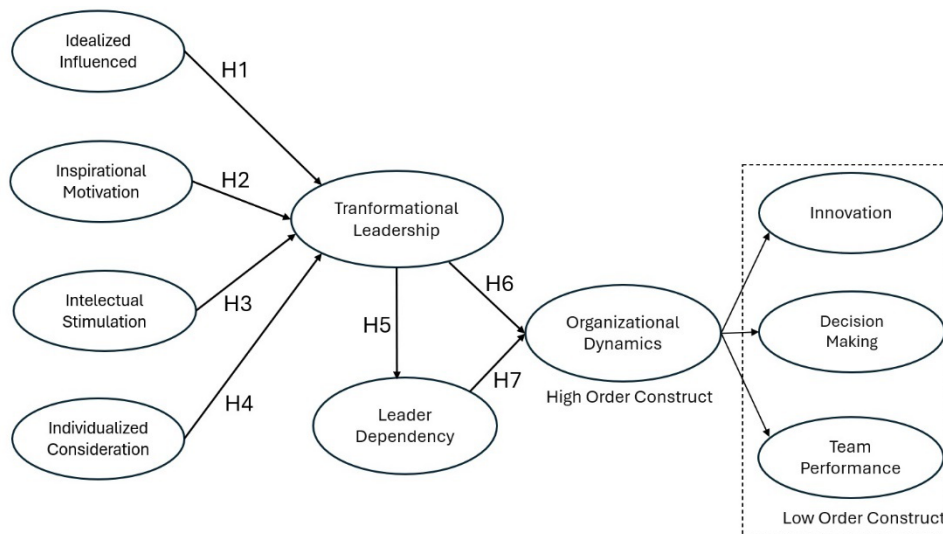

Figure 3. Theoretical Framework

dynamics. While this leadership style promotes motivation and innovation, it can also escalate expectations placed on leaders. H6 posits that the effectiveness of transformational leadership directly influences communication, decision-making, and team interactions, with outcomes varying based on the leader's management of dependency.

Leader dependency can result in followers attributing their success to the transformational leader, which, if excessive, may hinder innovation, decision-making, and team performance (H7). Increased dependency can reduce organizational adaptability and efficiency. The framework suggests that leader dependency mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and organizational outcomes.

Hypothesis 1 (H1) looks at idealized influence's role in transformational leadership, while H2, H3, and H4 investigate how various leadership aspects contribute to leader dependency. Additionally, H6 analyzes transformational leadership's effects on organizational dynamics, with H5 and H7 proposing that leader dependency directly influences innovation and decision-making.

2. Methodology

The study will employ a qualitative explanatory method to investigate and elucidate the manner in which transformational leadership engenders reliance on leaders and the consequential effects on organizational processes, encompassing decision-making and performance. The methodology will be meticulously structured to encompass real-world instances, experiences, and theoretical analyses,

ensuring a comprehensive and profound exploration of the phenomenon.

The selection of an explanatory research design is deemed fitting as it aims to unveil obscured or underdiscussed facets, commonly referred to as the "dark side," of the well-established phenomenon of transformational leadership (Creswell, 2019). Qualitative data collection methods, such as textual analyses, will facilitate the capture of the subjective and social dimensions of leader dependency.

3. Result

The research highlights findings from a case study and existing literature on transformational leadership. It reveals unintended negative effects, such as creating dependence on leaders, hindering innovation, and impacting decision-making and team performance.

4.1 Transformational Leadership and Leader Dependency

The study finds that while transformational leadership is generally seen as beneficial—encouraging innovation, commitment, and performance—it can inadvertently foster leader dependency. Followers may become overly reliant on their leader's vision and problem-solving skills. Research (Bass & Riggio, 2005; Yukl, 2013) shows that followers often display strong loyalty to transformational leaders. However, when leaders are absent, these followers may struggle to make independent decisions and implement changes, supporting Hypothesis 5 of the framework.

This dependency can reduce followers' self-efficacy in decision-making. Many participants reported decreased confidence in making judgments, often deferring to their leader. Kark and Shamir (2021) similarly found that while transformational leadership strengthens leader-follower bonds, it can also limit follower independence, creating excessive reliance on the leader for direction.

4.2 Transformational Leadership on Organizational Dynamics

The concept of leader dependency significantly impacts organizational dynamics, including decision-making, innovation, and team performance. Interviews revealed that in teams reliant on a transformational leader, decision-making became centralized, slowing response times and limiting flexibility, especially in fast-paced environments. This concentration of power led to bottlenecks, reducing team members' contributions and hindering the innovation cycle.

Additionally, leader dependency stifled innovation, as team members were less likely to take risks or propose new ideas without the leader's approval. While participants valued their leader's guidance, they felt hesitant to challenge established processes, which aligns with Podsakoff et al. (2020) and suggests that transformational leaders may unintentionally suppress diverse thinking.

One interviewee noted that their organization missed key market opportunities due to employees' reluctance to act without guidance, echoing Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) Leader-Member Exchange Theory, which indicates that strong leader-follower bonds can reduce adaptability.

Overall, while transformational leaders can enhance short-term performance, prolonged dependence can diminish team initiative and engagement, as highlighted by Schyns and Day (2010).
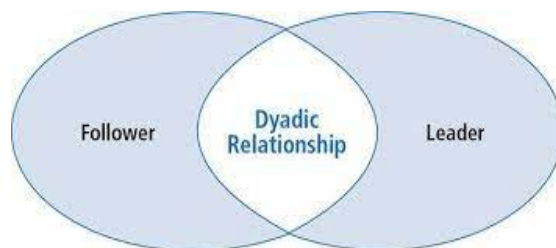

Figure 4. Leader-Member Exchange Theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien's, 1995)

4.3 High and Low-Order Constructs in Organizational Dynamics

The theoretical framework distinguishes between high-order constructs, like organizational cohesion and leader-follower trust, and low-order constructs, such as decision-making and team performance. Transformational leadership positively influences the high-order constructs, but

excessive leader dependency can undermine them, particularly affecting innovation and decision-making.

Innovation relies on balancing leadership influence and follower autonomy. Transformational leaders who promote intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration encourage team members to innovate. In contrast, high leader dependency can diminish this innovation, as followers may lack the confidence to pursue new ideas independently. Transformational leadership is celebrated for its ability to inspire and transform organizations; however, this study reveals that its effectiveness can be compromised by unmanaged leader dependency. This issue is particularly crucial in complex, high-stakes environments where quick decision-making and team autonomy are essential.

The study confirms that leader dependency mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and organizational performance, highlighting the need for a leadership style that empowers followers to solve problems independently, reducing reliance on a single leader.

A notable theme was the disempowerment of middle management, as managers reported frustration when transformational leaders communicated directly with lower-level employees, bypassing them. This approach, while promoting inclusivity, undermines managerial authority. One manager expressed, "I feel my role is redundant... Employees seek answers from me, but the final decision rests with our CEO." This dynamic creates ambiguity in roles and weakens middle management. This aligns with Zhu *et al*. (2019), who noted that excessive transformational leadership can disrupt managerial hierarchies and create power imbalances.

5. Discussion & Implications

The findings of this study underscore the intricate nature of transformational leadership, with particular emphasis on its less-explored potential drawback: the development of leader dependency. This phenomenon introduces a paradox within leadership literature, wherein the empowerment of followers, a distinguishing feature of transformational leadership, can coexist with an increasing reliance on the leader for guidance, vision, and issue resolution (Tourish, 2019). The ensuing discourse delves into the formation of this dependency and examines its ramifications for organizational dynamics.

Discussion

Transformational leadership, characterized by behaviors such as idealized influence and individualized consideration, is designed to elevate followers to a higher level of performance and commitment (Bass & Riggio, 2005). However, this study suggests that this elevation can sometimes compromise follower autonomy. Leader dependency emerges when followers perceive the transformational leader as indispensable, often leading to a diminished sense of self-efficacy among followers in making independent decisions. This aligns with Kark and Shamir (2021) findings, demonstrating that while transformational leadership can empower followers, it can also cultivate dependence by fostering an emotional attachment to the leader.

A deeper examination of leader dependency reveals its significant implications for organizational dynamics. High levels of leader dependency can impede decision-making processes within teams. As followers consistently defer decisions to the leader, the capacity of teams to operate autonomously is reduced, resulting in slower decision-making, bottlenecks, and decreased responsiveness to evolving organizational conditions (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Furthermore, leader dependency negatively impacts innovation, as followers become less inclined to take risks or propose new ideas in the absence of explicit leader approval. This reliance on the leader's guidance can hinder the organization's overall adaptability and curtail its potential for creativity (Wang *et al*., 2011).

Interestingly, the relationship between transformational leadership and team performance is nuanced. In the short term, transformational leaders can enhance performance by inspiring followers and articulating a clear vision. However, over the long term, teams may struggle to maintain high performance levels when the leader's influence wanes. This underscores the importance of striking a

balance between leadership influence and follower autonomy, as excessive leader control can lead to disengagement and diminished initiative among followers (Schyns & Day, 2010).

Transformational leaders who fail to strike a balance between leadership and autonomy may inadvertently nurture dependency, thereby creating bottlenecks hindering employees from making independent decisions. Consequently, this can have deleterious effects on organizational agility, diminish the overall capacity for innovation, and curtail the development of future leaders within the organization. Furthermore, reliance on a solitary leader can engender vulnerability, particularly during leadership transitions or in the leader's absence (Lanaj *et al.*, 2021).

The concept of "the dark side" of transformational leadership suggests that leader dependency should be considered a moderating factor in leadership effectiveness. Organizations heavily reliant on transformational leaders should be cautious about fostering dependency, as it can result in unintended negative outcomes, particularly in decision-making and innovation. Future research should explore strategies for reducing leader dependency by creating environments where followers are empowered to make independent decisions and take ownership of their roles.

Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for leadership development and organizational strategy. Organizations should recognize the dual nature of transformational leadership, focusing not only on empowering leaders but also on fostering follower autonomy (Liu *et al.*, 2021). Adopting shared leadership models can help reduce leader dependency by distributing responsibilities among team members (Pearce & Conger, 2003). Additionally, organizations must emphasize follower self-efficacy and decision-making skills to encourage initiative and innovation without heavy reliance on leaders.

Leadership programs should train leaders to identify and address dependency signals and to delegate authority, creating an environment where followers feel empowered. Mentoring can further enhance followers' problem-solving abilities. Regular assessments of team dynamics can help organizations proactively tackle dependency issues before they affect performance.

4. Conclusion

This study elucidates a frequently disregarded facet of transformational leadership: its potential to engender leader dependency. Transformational leadership exerts a positive influence on organizational dynamics, yet it carries the inherent risk of fostering dependency. This, in turn, has the potential to hinder innovation and decision-making processes unless offset by the implementation of empowering shared leadership structures. While transformational leadership has demonstrated efficacy in augmenting follower performance and allegiance, it can concurrently diminish follower autonomy and ingenuity, resulting in decision-making impediments and stifled inventiveness. Resolving this paradox necessitates organizations to nurture shared leadership frameworks and cultivate follower self-efficacy to alleviate these adverse ramifications and heighten organizational adaptability. Subsequent research endeavors should persist in scrutinizing the intricate dynamics of leader dependency within transformational leadership.

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