Does Character Add to the Success of Transformational Leadership?

Key Concept
Character and transformational leadership do not necessarily overlap. New research shows that positive character traits will increase the level of success obtained by transformational leadership. Negative character traits can reveal the dark side of transformational leadership — a dark side that leads to poor results.

Idea Summary
Research has shown the positive impact on transformational leadership on organizational outcomes. Other research has focused on character traits of effective and/or ethical leaders.

A new study from Harvard University Kennedy School of Government and Clemson University explores the combination of both character and transformational leadership on organizational outcomes. The research centred on two issues. The first was whether leadership character added to the success of organizational outcomes above and beyond the impact of transformational leadership. The second area of study was on the interaction of high and low scores of character and transformational leadership. Specifically, the research looked at: 1) whether high scores on both character and transformational leadership led to the best organizational outcomes; and 2) whether a dark side of transformational leadership existed in some participants (based on a high score on transformational leadership but a low score on character).

The five organizational outcomes targeted in the study were: organizational commitment, job satisfaction, work group performance, organizational citizenship behaviour, and intent to leave the organization.

For the study, the research team, which included former Air Force Brigadier General Dana Born, now at Harvard, used survey data from a sample of nearly 280,000 active-duty military and civilian U.S. Air Force personnel. These data was drawn from the Chief of
Staff Air Force (CSAF) Climate Survey, administered annually to Air Force personnel to identify strengths and areas needing improvement in the Air Force organizational climate. Survey questions related to transformational leadership, leadership character and the five outcomes were embedded in the CSAF Climate Survey.

The data from the survey showed that both transformational leadership and leadership character significantly increased the likelihood of positive results related to organizational commitment, job satisfaction, work group performance, organizational citizenship behaviour, and intent to leave the organization. An analysis of the data also showed that leadership character adds significantly to the positive results on the five outcomes obtained through transformational leadership.

After the character and transformational leadership results were split into high and low groups, the researchers could test the interaction of the high and low scores. The analysis of these groups confirmed that high leadership scores on both transformational leadership and character led to positive organizational outcomes, while low leadership scores on both transformational leadership and character led to negative organizational outcomes.

The researchers also studied the results that indicated high scores on transformational leadership but low on character (the so-called 'dark side' of transformational leadership), and vice-versa. Although such results existed — indicating the existence of a dark side — the percentage of responses that fell into the high/low or low/high groups was so low (3.5% in each case) that only tentative conclusions of their significance can be drawn.

**Business Application**

This research is significant in showing the impact of a leader’s character on organizational outcomes. Even a transformational leader — whose positive impact on the performance of a firm has been previously proven — will increase the success of the organization even more if he or she demonstrates high character traits, such as honesty and a rigorous ethical foundation.

An important implication of this result is that transformational leadership does not necessarily imply leaders with positive character traits. Transformational leadership and leadership character are separate.

As a result, succession planning or the search for a new CEO should always include character criteria in addition to transformational leadership qualities. Although the sample of transformational leaders with a dark side was small in the data used for this research, such a dark side does exist. Make sure that the transformational leaders you hire always have the needs and interests of the organization, and not themselves, foremost in their minds.

As for transformational leaders, your success will be
heightened if you remain committed to high ethics and positive character traits.

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**References**


**Further Reading and Relevant Resources**

Dana H. Born's profile at Harvard Kennedy School
Harvard Business School's Executive Education profile at IEDP

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