



# A multilevel study of transformational leadership, identification, and follower outcomes <sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Using a sample from a large diversified company, this study examines the influence processes of transformational leadership (TFL) at both the individual and group levels concurrently and explores cross-level relationships. Results showed that, at the individual level, followers' personal identification with the leader mediated the effects of individual-focused TFL behavior on individual performance and empowerment. At the group level, group identification mediated the effect of group-focused TFL behavior on collective efficacy. Results also supported two cross-level effects from the group level to the individual level. The paper addresses the implications for leaders of motivating individuals and teams, at the same time.

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## 1. Introduction

As teams become more important in many organizations, today's leaders face a challenging balancing act. On the one hand, they need to develop and motivate individual followers so as to ensure that each employee is capable of, and willing to, complete his or her own tasks; on the other hand, they need to facilitate collaboration and build trust among team members so that the team functions effectively as a whole. Overcoming this challenge requires capabilities in both individual and team leadership. However, traditional leadership models have not made a clear distinction between leader–follower interactions and leader–team interactions (Zaccaro, Heinen, & Shuffler, 2009). Previous research has investigated the leadership phenomenon from a multilevel perspective (Chun, Yammarino, Dionne, Sosik, & Moon, 2009; Jung, Yammarino, & Lee, 2009; Markham, Yammarino, Murry, & Palanski, 2010; Yammarino, Dubinsky, Comer, & Jolson, 1997; Yammarino, Spangler, & Dubinsky, 1998); however, researchers have yet to fully investigate the interplay and connections between those two levels (Zaccaro et al., 2009).

Leadership is inherently multilevel (Yammarino & Dansereau, 2008), so our understanding of effective leadership will be limited if we fail to integrate individual-level processes with group-level processes (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003). In order to fill this gap, Chen, Kirkman, Kanfer, Allen, and Rosen (2007) recently conducted a multilevel study to examine the effects of leadership on individual- and group-level outcomes, respectively. They reported that, at the individual level, leader–member exchange was related to individual performance via individual empowerment; whereas, at the group level, leadership climate related to group performance through group empowerment.

The purpose of the present study was to extend this line of multilevel research to the domain of transformational leadership (TFL). Transformational leaders express high expectations, provide individualized development, articulate a compelling collective

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vision, and achieve extraordinary results (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In particular, we aim to investigate the influence processes of TFL at both individual and group levels simultaneously and to explore cross-level relationships between the group level and the individual level. Previous research has shown that some TFL behaviors are targeted at the individual level, whereas others are at the group level (Kark & Shamir, 2002; Wang & Howell, 2010; Wu, Tsui, & Kinicki, 2010). Specifically, *individual-focused TFL behavior* develops individual followers' abilities and skills, increases their self-efficacy, and empowers them to develop their full potential (Wang & Howell, 2010). The influence target is individual followers, meaning that the leader takes an interest in all followers, understands their unique characteristics and abilities, and tailors coaching accordingly (Kark & Shamir, 2002). In other words, the leader may set different goals or provide coaching on different skills for different followers according to their experiences and abilities. Thus, the content of individual-focused TFL behavior may vary across followers.

In contrast, *group-focused TFL behavior* communicates the importance of group goals, develops shared values and beliefs among followers, and inspires unified effort to achieve group goals (Wang & Howell, 2010). The influence target is the whole group, meaning that the leader exhibits similar behavior toward different members of the group (Yammarino & Bass, 1990). Unlike individual-focused TFL behavior, the content of group-focused TFL behavior remains the same across different followers. Specifically, the leader may articulate the same group vision and stress the same shared group identity to all group members, regardless of which member she or he is addressing.

Dividing TFL behaviors into two levels lays the groundwork for multilevel TFL studies. The current study contributes to this line of research in four ways. First, to our knowledge, the underlying mechanisms of TFL have not been fully explored from a multilevel perspective, even though the direct effects of TFL on followers have been investigated using a multilevel approach (Yammarino et al., 1997; Yammarino et al., 1998). Previous studies examining the influence processes of TFL have mainly focused on either the individual level (e.g., Bono & Judge, 2003) or the group level (e.g., Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003). The only exception is Liao and Chuang's (2007) study, in which they examined how TFL influences employee service performance from a multilevel perspective. The authors found that, at the individual level, employee self-efficacy mediated the relation between TFL and employee service performance, whereas at the group level, service climate mediated the cross-level effect of group-level TFL on employee service performance.

Although this study was the first one to explicitly explore the dual-level process of TFL, it has two limitations. First, it did not measure any group-level outcomes, and therefore did not fully test the dual-level TFL model. Second, the group-level TFL was calculated by averaging team members' evaluation of a leader's individual-level TFL scores. In other words, Liao and Chuang's study did not distinguish individual-focused TFL from group-focused TFL. However, as stated above, recent developments in TFL research have demonstrated that TFL behaviors may involve different components at the individual versus group levels (Wang & Howell, 2010; Wu et al., 2010). The present study draws on this advance to examine the influence processes of each TFL component at its designated level (i.e., leader identification as the mediator at the individual level and group identification as the mediator at the group level), and thus renders a complete test of the dual-level TFL model (Kark & Shamir, 2002).

The second contribution of the present study is that the dual-level TFL process model allows us to test the cross-level effects from the group level to the individual level, which will shed light on the dynamic interplay between individuals within a team and the team as a whole (Chen & Kanfer, 2006; Chen et al., 2007; Kozlowski & Bell, 2003). According to the Open Systems Theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978), the individual- and group-level phenomena of leadership, motivation, and performance are strongly connected. The cross-level approach goes beyond the traditional single-level approach and delineates a synergistic and complementary way through which group-level and individual-level inputs jointly affect individual motivation and performance. Specifically, the cross-level approach is able to explain additional variance in individual-level motivation and performance over and beyond the individual-level antecedents, and thus help us better understand employee motivation and performance at the individual level. Furthermore, the cross-level approach is crucial for advancing research on leadership, especially transformational leadership. Although recent research has divided TFL into two levels (Wang & Howell, 2010; Wu et al., 2010), researchers have treated the two levels separately and have yet to consider the top-down effect of group-focused TFL on followers at the individual level. We argue that, although group-focused TFL is targeted to the group as a whole, it will also have a trickle-down effect on followers' personal identification with the leader. In other words, leading the group also leads the individuals within it. Investigating such a cross-level effect can demonstrate how group-focused TFL influences the motivation of individual followers over and beyond individual-focused TFL.

Third, this study investigates the motivating role of leader identification in TFL processes. Although previous evidence has shown the impact of TFL on leader identification (Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003), it remains unclear whether such identification has positive or negative effects on followers. Howell and Shamir (2005) posit that since leader identification involves idealizing and romanticizing the leader, followers may end up blindly adoring and heavily depending on their leader, "over-empowering" him or her and creating harmful consequences. In contrast, other theorists (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Kark & Shamir, 2002; Kelman, 1958, 1961) contend that leader identification may cause followers to internalize the leader's values and vision and adopt a positive attitude, and motivate them to improve their individual performance. For example, Sosik, Jung, and Dinger (2009) found that leaders with self-transcendent values tend to have a more salient collective self, which in turn motivates them to display more altruistic behavior. Thus, followers who identify with such leaders are expected to internalize those self-transcendent values and exhibit more altruistic behavior towards others. Therefore, the current study tests whether leader identification mediates the positive effects of TFL on followers at the individual level.

Finally, the present study attempts to answer managerially relevant questions such as: how can leaders motivate individual followers and the whole team at the same time? Are individual- and group-focused TFL behaviors equally important or one is more favorable than the other? Answers to those important questions will help managers conquer the challenge of leading individuals and the team simultaneously and provide guidance on how to hone their leadership skills accordingly.

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