

# The Emotional Intelligence of Transformational Leaders: A Field Study of Elected Officials

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**ABSTRACT.** Participants were 80 elected public officials in the United States and 3–6 direct-report staffers for each leader. Together they composed 388 leader–member dyads. The authors surveyed them to explore the relationship between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership. The authors considered the 80 officials as leaders and the staffers as members. The present results showed that the emotional intelligence of the leaders shared significant variance with self-perceptions and rater-perceptions of transformational leadership. The present results also somewhat support the predictive value of emotional intelligence in antecedent leadership field research.

**Key words:** antecedents, emotional intelligence, transformational leadership

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THE THEORY OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP is among the most researched leadership theories of the past 20 years (Bass, 1985). Extensive research has shown that leaders who exhibit positive leadership behaviors—such as intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence—achieve greater employee performance, effort, satisfaction, and organizational effectiveness (see Lowe, Kroek, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996).

Despite the popularity of transformational leadership in the research literature, researchers know much more about its outcomes than about its antecedents. This disparity is unfortunate because those people seeking trans-

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formational leaders have few means for predicting what behaviors characterize such leaders. Efforts to determine the dispositional and situational antecedents of transformational leadership are essential to advancing the transformational leadership field.

The majority of antecedent research for transformational leadership has focused on aspects of personality (e.g., Atwater & Yammarino, 1993), life experiences (e.g., Avolio, 1994), motivation (Barbuto, Fritz, & Marx, 2000), or contextual aspects of the situation (see Hunt, 1999). Bass and Avolio (1990) lauded transformational leaders for providing the symbolic and emotional force behind organizational change. It may be that leaders' emotional intelligence relates to their use of transformational behaviors.

The relationship between the emotional intelligence of leaders and their use of transformational leadership needs more investigation. Past studies that were based entirely on self-report data for emotional intelligence and transformational leadership have shown relationships between the two, but no study that was based on multiple sources of data has confirmed these relationships (e.g., Barling, Slater, & Kelloway, 2000; Gardner & Stough, 2002; Sivanathan & Fekken, 2002). By studying the relationship between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership further, we aimed to contribute to the transformational leadership literature and to test leadership applications for emotional intelligence.

## **Theory and Hypotheses**

### *Transformational Leadership*

The concept of transformational leadership has its roots in earlier work on rebel leadership (Downton, 1973). Burns (1978) studied political leaders and found a contrast between two divergent: transforming and transactional leadership styles. Bass (1985) extended this work by articulating three behaviors of transformational leadership: charisma, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Bass and Avolio (1990) expanded the three-factor model by adding a fourth factor: inspirational motivation. Later, Antonakis, Avolio, and Sivasubramaniam (2003) replaced the term *charisma* with *idealized influence*. Much research has shown that leaders' use of the four transformational behaviors relates to positive organizational behavior outcomes (e.g., Lowe et al., 1996).

### *Hypotheses: Linking Emotional Intelligence With Transformational Leadership*

The focus on the leader's ability to manage complex social and personal dynamics, centered in the concept of emotional intelligence, has made the role of emotions in organizations prominent in the leadership literature (e.g., Cann, 2004; Mayer, DiPaolo, & Salovey, 1990; Weisinger, 1998). Efforts to apply emotional intelligence to leadership have started to emerge in the literature (e.g., Caruso, Mayer, & Salovey,

2002; Cooper & Sawaf, 1997; Goleman, McKee, & Boyatzis, 2002; Ryback, 1998) and have coincided with findings that emotional intelligence is a strong requisite for effective leadership (e.g., Higgs & Aitken, 2003; Sosik & Megerian, 1999).

Mayer and Salovey (1997) conceptualized *emotional intelligence* as an aptitude. However, most scholars have conceptualized emotional intelligence as a mix of skills and traits (e.g., Bar-On, 1996; Goleman, 1995; Petrides, 2004; Schutte et al., 1998). Building on other works in the emotional intelligence literature, Carson, Carson, and Birkenmeier (2000) developed a measure of emotional intelligence with five underlying factors: (a) *empathetic response*, the ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people; (b) *mood regulation*, the ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods; (c) *interpersonal skill*, proficiency in managing relationships and building networks; (d) *internal motivation*, a passion to work for reasons that go beyond money and status that involves the ability to delay gratification in pursuit of a goal; and (e) *self-awareness*, the person's ability to recognize and understand his or her own moods, emotions, and drives and their effects on others.

*Empathetic response.* Transformational leaders rely on empathy to understand followers' thoughts, feelings, and points of view. Studies have shown that empathy is related to leadership emergence in self-managed teams (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002; Wolff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002). A person's disposition for empathy is a strong determinant of their supportive responses to people expressing distress (Trobst, Collins, & Embree, 1994). Empathy has been associated with interpersonal effectiveness (Conway, 2000) and a relationship-oriented style of leadership (Woodall & Kogler Hill, 1982). Leaders with empathetic qualities inspire greater depth of self-exploration in followers (Long & Schultz, 1973) and the supportive interpersonal orientation increases followers' positive perceptions about the leader, feelings, and job satisfaction (Haddad & Samarneh, 1999).

To bring about organizational change through higher performance, transformational leaders must fully engage and connect with their followers. Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) considered the evocation, framing, and mobilization of emotions as key to the leader's ability to change the organization through commitment. Emotional bonds are implicit in transformational leadership behaviors. Leaders who respond empathetically to coworkers can improve organizational effectiveness.

*Mood regulation.* When attention is directed inward, people become aware of their own affective states; this simple manipulation often seems sufficient to reduce negative feelings and improve judgment (Berkowitz, Jaffee, Jo, & Troccoli, 2000). In close relationships, people attempt to reciprocate both the positive feelings and the negative feelings that they perceive others to be expressing (Gaelick, Bodenhausen, & Wyer, 1985). Leaders increase the emotional impact of followers' thoughts and attention to tasks when they enable self-determination (Wenzlaff & LePage, 2000).

Mood regulation is an important skill for leaders to develop because those who can manage their own emotions cope better with stressful situations than do others. Pearlin and Schooler (1978) found distancing strategies to be most successful for dealing with stressful impersonal situations; on the other hand, those researchers found committed and engaged strategies with relevant others to be most successful in reducing emotional distress in more personal situations. Mittal and Ross (1998) indicated the possibility that people in a positive mood are more likely to see opportunities in problems, whereas Leith and Baumeister (1996) indicated the possibility that bad moods foster risk-taking by impairing self-regulation.

*Interpersonal skills.* Forgas and George (2001) reported numerous studies showing the influence of affect on such work-related behaviors as those involving worker motivation, creativity, and performance, interpersonal judgments and communication, performance-appraisal judgments and selection interviews, organizational spontaneity, employee flexibility and helpfulness, absenteeism, and bargaining and negotiation. Isen (2001) presented evidence that positive affect enhances problem solving and decision making, leading to cognitive processing that, in addition to being flexible, is innovative, creative, thorough, and efficient. Staw and Barsade (1993) found that people with positive dispositions, which tend to be stable, make more accurate decisions and improve interpersonal performance. They also suggested that dispositional affect may be a useful predictor of organizational performance precisely because it allows for a continual attitudinal and affective influence on behavior. Lewis (2000) confirmed that a leader's display of negative emotions causes followers to rate the leader's effectiveness lower. Barsade (2002) found that the spreading of positive emotions among a group could enhance group cooperation and reduce group conflict. Leader behaviors that contribute to feelings of self-efficacy lead to higher subordinate creativity (Redmond, Mumford, & Teach, 1993).

Transformational leaders change their organizations by persuading followers to embrace positive visions and ideals (Keller, 1995; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990). Also, transformational leadership enhances subordinates' satisfaction (Hater & Bass, 1988) and trust (Barling et al., 2000; Pillai, Schriesheim, & Williams, 1999; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer, 1996).

*Internal motivation.* Transformational leaders are actively engaged within their organization and feel empowered; because they believe that they can influence their environment, they are self-motivated to do so (Sosik & Megerian, 1999). Successful leaders persist in the face of obstacles. Seibert, Crant, and Kraimer (1999) found proactive personality to be positively associated with career satisfaction. How feedback is given by leaders affects employees' intrinsic motivation (Shalley & Perry-Smith, 2001; Zhou, 1998; Zhou & Oldham, 2001). Howell and Avolio (1993) found a significant relationship between inner-directed locus of control and transformational leadership behaviors. Gibbons (1986) found self-

assessed inner direction of executives to be correlated with subordinates' ratings of transformational leadership behaviors.

*Self-awareness.* One's ability to perceive emotions within oneself accurately is related to the ability to assess them in others (Zuckerman, Hall, DeFrank, & Rosenthal, 1976; Zuckerman, Lipets, Koivumaki, & Rosenthal, 1975). Church (1997) found that leader self-awareness led to greater management performance and that self-monitoring was positively related to self-awareness. Shipper and Dillard (1994) attributed leaders' derailment to lack of self-awareness. Followers rated leaders who were high in self-awareness as more effective than those who lacked self-awareness (Sosik & Megerian, 1999). Church and Waclawski (1999) found that direct-report staffers rated transformational leaders significantly higher on all behaviors than they did transactional (exchange process) leaders and that transformational leaders were significantly more self-aware regarding the practice of these behaviors. Atwater and Yammarino (1992) found that the extent to which U.S. Naval Academy students were self-aware moderated relationships between transformational leadership and performance.

Ashkanasy and Tse (2000) supported the emotional underpinnings of transformational leadership. In three empirical articles, they reported relationships between leaders' emotional intelligence and transformational leadership. Other researchers have sampled from only self-report data and shown relationships between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership (Barling et al., 2000; Gardner & Stough, 2002). One of the studies involved dual sources for data collection, linking self-reported emotional intelligence to follower ratings of transformational leadership, and showed a significant relationship between the two (Sivanathan & Fekken, 2002). Testing the relationship between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership by using both self-reports and rater reports of transformational leadership provides the researcher with an opportunity to isolate the effects of common method differences and perception differences in these relationships.

*Hypothesis 1:* Emotional intelligence (and each of its five aspects) will positively relate to transformational leadership (inspirational motivation, idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration).

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 80 elected community leaders and 388 direct-report staffers working with them in the Midwest of the United States. Leaders were members of a statewide professional organization who attended a leadership development workshop for elected officials sponsored by the organization. The mean age of participants was 51 years old. Of the participants, 50% had earned

a baccalaureate degree, and 20% had earned an advanced degree; 65% were women. The direct-report staffers, who did not attend the workshop, were direct employees of the leaders and reported a mean age of 46 years old. Of the direct-report staffers, 42% percent had earned a baccalaureate degree, and fewer than 10% had earned an advanced degree; 53% were women. The direct-report staffers functioned as raters in the present experiment.

### *Procedures*

We apprised all participants of the objectives of the present study and gave them letters of informed consent. Participating leaders completed the self-report instrument of emotional intelligence 6 weeks prior to attending the workshop and completed the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) at the workshop. The 6-week spacing was intended to limit the effects of common method bias, because leaders were asked to provide both emotional intelligence and transformational leadership data. We asked each participating leader to solicit four-to-six colleagues (raters) to complete the rater version of the MLQ. We coded these instruments to protect anonymity, and participants returned them directly to John E. Barbuto Jr. via U.S. mail. The colleagues were all direct-reports (close proximity) to the leaders. Of the eligible 92 elected officials, 80 participated in the study (86% response rate). We received 388 usable rater packages from a target population of 552 raters (70% response rate).

### *Measures*

*Emotional intelligence.* We measured emotional intelligence with the instrument developed by Carson et al. (2000). This instrument contains 30 self-report items that participants rate on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Each of the five subscales (empathetic response, mood regulation, interpersonal skills, internal motivation, and self-awareness) consisted of 6 items. Because the measure is relatively new, we also calculated a single-factor subscale consisting of all 30 items, which we labeled *emotional intelligence* for analytic purposes. The measure demonstrated internal consistency, as evidenced by the acceptable Cronbach's coefficient alphas in Table 1.

*Transformational leadership.* We used four of the eight subscales from Bass and Avolio's (1995) Multi-Factor Leadership Questionnaire to measure transformational leadership, with permission from Mind Garden. Our interest was in the transformational leadership behaviors, so our measure consisted of these complete subscales: idealized influence (behaviors), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. In the present study, the four subscales performed reasonably well; however, we calculated a coefficient alpha below .70 for self-reported individualized consideration, as shown in Table 1.

## Results

We calculated correlations among all subscales measured and show them in Table 1. We assessed statistical power for the dyadic sample size ( $N = 388$ ) with a two-tailed test, at  $p < .05$ . Correlations with  $r > .15$  achieved the desired statistical power rating of .80 (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). Relationships satisfying this criterion were plentiful when we related the emotional intelligence subscales to self-reported transformational leadership subscales. However, only empathetic response appeared to share significant variance with rater-reported intellectual stimulation,  $r = .16$ ,  $p < .01$ , and individualized consideration,  $r = .16$ ,  $p < .01$ . Leader self-reported and rater-reported transformational behaviors demonstrated little—if any—statistically significant relationship across perceptions. This result may reflect the dyadic differences across many leader–member relationships. It also may demonstrate the vast differences in perceptions of behaviors between leaders and raters. Whichever is the case, this finding is consistent with findings in a large-scale meta-analysis of transformational leadership and its outcomes (Lowe et al., 1996).

## Discussion

The present study tested the relationships between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership. We found several correlations that reinforce the role of emotional intelligence in leadership. Emotional intelligence (all items parceled) shared positive relationships with each self-reported subscale of transformational leadership. This finding is consistent with past studies that showed positive significant relationships between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership (Barling et al., 2000; Gardner & Stough, 2002). However, in the present study, emotional intelligence shared little significant variance with rater reports of intellectual stimulation and idealized influence. This result weakens support for previous findings that demonstrated a relationship between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership (Sivanathan & Fekken, 2002).

Empathetic response also shared positive statistically significant relationships with each subscale of transformational leadership. This finding is consistent with the findings of Kellett et al. (2002) and Wolff et al. (2002) that empathy predicts leader emergence. That is, leaders with empathy for colleagues are more likely to view themselves as transformational leaders. These relationships also were consistent with rater-reported transformational leadership behaviors, although the relationships were smaller. This finding indicates that leaders' empathetic responses relate to raters' perceptions of their uses of intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. Leaders demonstrating more empathy also exhibited greater degrees of intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration.

Leaders' mood regulation was negatively related to leaders' self-reported intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence, indi-

**TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities, and Intercorrelations**

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Emotional Intelligence (EQ)—Total	78.64	7.72	(.91)			
2. EQ—Empathetic response	16.13	3.31	.54**	(.90)		
3. EQ—Mood regulation	11.52	3.56	.52**	-.09	(.76)	
4. EQ—Interpersonal skills	14.30	1.78	.53**	.48**	.10*	(.81)
5. EQ—Internal motivation	25.32	4.40	.60**	.07	-.02	.08
6. EQ—Self awareness	11.35	2.29	.34**	-.13**	.28**	-.11*
7. TL—Intellectual stimulation	11.00	2.46	.21**	.33**	-.12*	.07
8. TL—Individualized consideration	11.99	2.13	.29**	.42**	-.08	.30**
9. TL—Inspirational motivation	11.50	2.35	.26**	.32**	-.16**	.35**
10. TL—Idealized influence	11.32	2.35	.42**	.53**	-.16**	.35**
11. RTL—Intellectual stimulation	11.76	2.84	.09	.16**	-.04	.06
12. RTL—Individualized consideration	12.45	2.86	.13*	.16**	.05	.13*
13. RTL—Inspirational motivation	12.32	3.00	.12*	.13*	.02	.13*
14. RTL—Idealized influence	12.13	2.88	.07	.11*	-.02	.11*

*Note.* RTL = raters' perception of leaders' transformational leadership; TL = self-reported transformational leadership. Reliability coefficient estimates (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) are in parentheses along diagonals. Statistical power of .80 was achieved for all correlations greater than .15 (two-tailed tests;  $p < .05$ ).

\* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ .

cating that leaders who are less prone to regulating their moods display greater degrees of transformational leadership (self-reported); however, mood regulation does not precede their behavior. This result was counter to our expectations, because researchers have previously shown self-regulation of moods to be aligned with effective leadership (see Barling et al., 2000; Berkowitz et al., 2000; George, 2000). Because greater attention is being paid to the sincerity and authenticity of transformational leaders (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Price, 2003), the present



5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
(.86)									
.03	(.75)								
.19**	-.09	(.79)							
.01	.07	.55**	(.65)						
.25**	-.24**	.60**	.58**	(.76)					
.22**	.08	.53**	.58**	.65**	(.76)				
.11*	-.10	.12*	.03	.12*	.08	(.87)			
.07	-.08	.05	.07	.08	.04	.74**	(.86)		
.08	-.03	.09	.06	.17*	.10	.71**	.75**	(.90)	
.08	-.09	.07	.05	.13*	.06	.73**	.79**	.81**	(.84)

finding offers some support for a transparency in leadership attitude and disposition. Leaders less likely to manage their moods are more likely to be perceived as authentic and effective by their colleagues.

Leaders' interpersonal skills were positively related to (both self-reported and rater-reported) individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence. This result is consistent with research on the importance of interpersonal skills and social astuteness in positive leadership practices (Barling

et al., 2000; Forgas & George, 2001; Redmond et al., 1993). Leaders who develop strong interpersonal skills have a greater likelihood of exhibiting transformational behaviors.

Leaders' internal motivation was positively related to their self-reports of intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence. However, leaders' internal motivation correlated only modestly with rater reports of intellectual stimulation. Past researchers have suggested that internal motivation would relate well to transformational subscales (see Barling et al., 2000; Gibbons, 1986; Howell & Avolio, 1993; Sosik & Megerian, 1999). However, the role of internal motivation does not appear to be as strong in transformational leadership as they may have expected. Other aspects of emotional intelligence appear to play a larger role in transformational leadership.

Leaders' self-awareness shared little relationship with transformational leadership in the present study, relating only negatively to leaders' self-reported inspirational motivation. This result was unexpected, because other researchers have found that self-awareness leads to greater leader performance (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992; Barling et al., 2000; Church, 1997; Shipper & Dillard, 1994; Sosik & Megerian, 1999). In the present study, leaders' self-awareness explained little variance in transformational leadership, with the exception that as leaders became more self-aware, they perceived themselves as being less inspirational, a finding that was counter to our expectations. Perhaps this finding shows the humility of self-aware leaders, because this finding also reveals that leaders low in self-awareness are likely to view themselves as exhibiting more inspirational motivation.

In all cases, we found stronger correlations between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership in leader self-reports than in rater reports. This finding is likely best explained by common method bias, because leaders completed both the emotional intelligence questionnaire and the self-report version of the multi-factor leadership questionnaire. According to the emotional intelligence subscales, empathetic response is the most consistent antecedent of transformational leadership behaviors. The findings across methods indicate a modest relationship between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership.

Additional research is needed to ascertain the relationship(s) between emotional intelligence and leadership. In the present study, we sampled elected officials and found some relationships. However, elected officials have unique employment contracts, relying on popularity, impression management, public perception, and set terms of employment that create unique work and organizational dynamics. Future researchers should assess the relationships between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership in the private sector. Replication of these findings in an organizational setting would generalize them.

More research is needed to test the relationship of emotional intelligence to other leadership behaviors and to test the relationship in other populations. Research testing the relationship between emotional intelligence and other leader behaviors—such as leader–member exchange, authentic leadership, servant lead-

ership, influence strategies and tactics, conflict resolution styles, political skills, and implicit-leadership theories—also may prove fruitful. An objective measure of emotional intelligence, such as an ability-based emotional intelligence test (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002), may perhaps offer a more objective assessment of emotional intelligence than the standard self-report format used in the present study. Future researchers examining the antecedents of transformational leadership should use the complete set of subscales (transactional and transformational) to capture the full range of leadership behavior. A field study replicating the present work with other populations may prove valuable and lead to a greater ability to generalize findings.

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