

Follower Developmental Characteristics as Predicting Transformational Leadership: A Longitudinal Field Study

Original Publication by Taly Dvir and Boas Shamir

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The world of leadership studies tends to focus, appropriately enough, primarily on the charisma, personality, and abilities of the person identified as the leader of a group in order to predict the success of that group. Opinions often hold that through that person alone achievements can be made if the leader exhibits and acts upon certain traits and styles of leadership previously deemed effective. This notion that one person can, through his or her ability alone, move the masses to action has long been the foundation for many studies of leadership styles and organizational methods.

Far less emphasis has been placed on the role of those masses in the pursuit of a common goal. The follower has generally been pushed aside on the basis that anyone can be led, but few can lead. Previous research that has addressed the role of the follower has maintained that the follower simply “achieve[s] agreed-upon levels of performance.” Leadership theories often label follower characteristics as dependent variables, subject to influence by the leader. The few studies which have focused on follower characteristics as independent variables tend to focus on follower *behavior* instead of follower *characteristics*. Dvir and Shamir note one recent study, conducted by Ehrhart and Klein (2001) which “examined the role of follower characteristics as independent variables within the framework of the new leadership theories.” This study, according to Dvir and Shamir, found that the achievements, work values, and other characteristics were “moderately related” to the followers’ preference for charismatic leadership versus other leadership styles.

The necessity to determine what, if any, links exist between follower behavior and transformational leadership development comes from a desire to examine every facet of leadership in order to determine the best possible overall situation. Such research would then have to include significant inquiry into the role of the follower in determining leadership development. Thus, Dvir and Shamir assume in their study that the “most suitable followers for transformational leaders hold orientations that are more initially compatible with the leader’s orientation.” Their study was conducted during a four-month basic training course for the Israeli Defense Forces. The leaders were identified as fifty-four platoon leaders, and the followers were divided into direct followers (ninety non-commissioned officers) and indirect followers (729 recruits). The subjects involved were all men aged 18-22.

Dvir and Shamir’s study was interested primarily in “the extent to which followers’ initial developmental characteristics at the beginning of the basic training course predict

transformational leadership at the end of the basic training course.” Measures were taken in six different areas of follower development: their self-actualization needs, internalization of the organization’s moral values, collectivistic orientation, critical-independent approach, active engagement in the task, and their self-efficacy. These assessments were made taking into account various task-specific values and evaluating performance and perceptions, often on a scale of 1-5. Transformational leadership in the study was measured using twenty items from the short version of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire 5X.

Measurement I for the study was taken during the first week of basic training. The followers completed questionnaires relating to their “initial developmental level and transformational leadership of their platoon leaders.” The ratings of leadership at Time I were used as a control variable. Measurement II was taken during the final week of basic training, approximately four months later. For Measurement II, both the indirect and direct followers were asked to rate their platoon leader’s transformational leadership.

Analysis of the data relied on “the assumption that leader-follower relationships may theoretically exist at various levels,” and the conclusions of the present study reflected only one of those many levels. Dvir and Shamir also assumed that “leaders differ in the extent to which they exhibit transformational leadership toward their group of followers.” An overall analysis of the data concluded that individual scores could be aggregated to the group level. The data recovered from the study is shown in four separate tables, each dealing with a different aspect of data and thus showing a different conclusion. Table 1, relating to the direct followers, illustrated that the correlation between transformational leadership ratings during Times 1 and 2 was positive and significant. It also showed that the correlation between follower development in Time 1 and transformational leadership in Time 1 was positive and significant. Table 2 dealt with the indirect followers and revealed that, while the correlation between development in Time 1 and leadership in Time 2 was positive and significant for the recruits, it was negative and insignificant for the Non-commissioned officers. Table 3 concludes that “the initial level of direct follower’s development predicted transformational leadership ratings over time,” even though it was a negative correlation among the NCOs. Table 4 depicted that an opposite pattern was discovered regarding indirect followers.

The conclusion that the Dvir and Shamir study reached is that the initial developmental level of the followers does indeed play a significant role “in predicting transformational leadership.” The findings of the study would suggest that either the followers’ shared perception of their leader changed, or the actual leadership of the platoon leader changed. Furthermore, the “initial developmental level of indirect followers positively predicted transformational leadership ratings,” even though this relationship was negative among the NCO followers. Dvir and Shamir conclude by offering three possibilities to explain the discrepancy between the results of the direct followers and indirect followers: a threat mechanism, a compensatory mechanism, or a disillusion mechanism. Each of these could possibly contribute to the differences in the two groups. Dvir and Shamir’s study provides the realm of leadership research with the suggestion that “transformational leadership is not solely inherent within a leader, but can change by leader-follower

relations over time.” They stress the importance of further research into this arena of study, pointing out that “learning about the ways in which followers affect their leaders opens new avenues for research and application in organizations, for managers and followers alike.” The study offers important insight into a realm of research that has been largely dominated by the study of the leader only, insight that will serve to deepen one’s understanding of the complex world of leader-follower relationships.