



A Study of the Transformational Leadership Effect on Employee Work Engagement, Mediating Effect of Followership

Dong Silu*

International Chinese College, MBA, Rangsit University, Pathum Thani, Thailand

*Corresponding author, E-mail: 1721607813@qq.com

Abstract

The 21st century is the humanist century. Undoubtedly, when enterprises are competitive inside and outside, using the advantages of humanity resources to the greatest extent can gain core competitiveness. Confronted with management issues, the theory of transformational leadership became a hot spot and played a huge role in the management academia. At present, the research of the academic community on the investment of reform leaders and employee work has achieved fruitful results. However, it is still of theoretical significance and practical value to introduce original elements into its internal mechanism in combination with the social and economic development situation.

In this study, the inherent mechanism of transformational leadership, followership and employee work engagement is explored through the literature review method and questionnaire survey method. The questionnaire was used to survey 508 samples from different enterprises. Statistical analysis software SPSS 26.0 is used to conduct data analysis. Empirical results show that there is a positive correlation between transformational leadership, followership and employee work engagement; mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and employee work engagement.

Based on the situation of Chinese organization management, this study explores the impact transformational leadership on the work engagement. Taking the followership as the starting point to further study the influence transformational leadership effectiveness. The combination of leadership and followership system is of transformational leadership. It also expands the research on the mechanism of followership and confirms the value of followership.

Keywords: *Transformational Leadership, Work Engagement, Followership*

1. Introduction

Influenced by traditional Chinese culture, the concept of superiority and inferiority makes subordinates fear and obey their superiors, and under certain conditions, leaders have far greater influence on employees than organizations. Therefore, it is very interesting to study the relationship between leadership style and subordinates' attitudes and behaviors. Leadership and following are two levels of the leadership process. Followers appear with the emergence of leaders, and without followers, there will be no leaders (Chen Shirong, 2018). Chinese scholars' research on followership is mostly reflected in the acceptance and absorption of foreign achievements, and empirical research needs to be enriched (Cao Yuankun & Xu Sheng, 2013). At present, the research on followership is not yet mature. In order to cater to the constantly changing environment of organizations, some organizations emphasize the management concept of both followership and leadership to build a harmonious and mutually beneficial relationship between superiors and subordinates, and use the concept of followership to interpret leadership development of fresh direction (Xu Sheng, 2013). With the acceleration of the integration of economic development and the upgrading of electronic information, people pay more and more attention to teamwork to achieve win-win results.

The research objects of transformational leadership at home and abroad are mostly limited to one kind of work field or occupational group. Whether the results are practical and applicable needs further verification. This study also enriches the basic theories in the field of followership, and at the same time discovers the neglected or insufficient problems in the existing theories. The academic circle has a complete and mature understanding of job engagement. The existing research results mainly focus on business management practice, but there is a lack of systematic and in-depth discussion on its formation process and

[275]



mechanism. In addition, most of the existing research stays at the level of observation in specific situations. Therefore, this paper takes transformational leadership as an external environmental factor and followership as an individual factor and an intermediary variable to explore the impact of transformational leadership on work engagement.

2. Objectives

This paper presents the following two research objectives:

- 1) To explore the relationship between transformational leadership, followership and work engagement
- 2) To explore the mediating role of followership between transformational leadership and work engagement

2.1 The effect of transformational leadership on work engagement

The definition of transformational leadership was first described by Downton (1973) in the classics of management "Rebel Leadership", leaders can exert influence on followers from different aspects. Chinese scholars Li Chaoping, Shi Kan (2005) and others, integrated with traditional Chinese cultural concepts, proposed the concept of transformational leadership with four dimensions with Chinese characteristics. Change leadership is a leadership style that can describe the blueprint of the organization, determine the goals of the organization, and mobilize the enthusiasm of employees.

Work engagement was first proposed by Kahn (1990), and it originated in psychology as a concept of self-engagement at work. It emphasizes the perception of work content and controls the integration of self-awareness into work roles. Schaufeli (2002) has a different view. He described work engagement as the positive emotional stimulation of employees' long-term focus. This article refers to Schaufeli's research, and defines work engagement as an individual's positive and proactive mental state towards work, accompanied by identification with work.

Transformational leadership stimulates the high-level needs of subordinates, increases their trust in their superiors, increases their confidence in success, and encourages employees to do more to exceed their goals by creating a vision. (Hayati, Charkhabi, & Naami, 2014). Extra effort is the active work of an employee in order to achieve personal goals. Transformational leaders not only pay attention to the personal development of employees, but also care about their family life and can give them the necessary support, which greatly helps them enhance their sense of belonging so that they are more inclined to stay and work in the enterprise. The studies by Wang Zhen and others have shown that transformational leadership can indirectly affect work engagement through positive emotions (Wang Zhen, Chen Leni, & Li Xupei, 2015). Specifically, transformational leadership will stimulate employees' advanced needs and prompt them to try new ways of solving problems, which will encourage individuals to maintain ample fighting spirit and good ability to resist pressure at work, and concentrate on completing tasks. At the same time, this incentive can also be used to enhance employees' sense of identity with the organization, and ultimately enhance employees' sense of belonging and loyalty. On this basis, the following hypotheses are put forward: H1: Transformational leadership significantly and positively affects employee work engagement.

2.2 The effect of transformational leadership on employee followership

Throughout the research at home and abroad, various scholars have different definitions of followership. Chaleff (1995) started from the perspective of brave followers and behavioral traits, and believed that followership is reflected in the followers' courage to the organization. Bjugstad (2006) believes that followers embody followership by effectively executing leadership orders, completing tasks, believing in and supporting leadership work, and maximizing organizational benefits. Kellerman (2008) proposed levels of behavioral responsiveness of subordinates to leadership ideas and arrangements among leadership employees. Zhou Wenjie et al. (2015) defined followership as a basic behavior reflected in the process of following a leader by an excellent follower in the Chinese cultural context.



Transformational leaders have the strong innovation, initiative awareness, work dedication and business ability. They can continuously learn and improve themselves, are full of enthusiasm for work, dare to grasp and do it, and do not avoid difficult problems. According to the followership theory, followership and leadership exist simultaneously, and leaders' leadership style and working style affect followers' behavior. Followership can be manifested by the behavior of employees and leaders when they take actions, and leadership behavior is an important situational factor that affects employees' follower behavior (Waldman, Ramirez, House, & Puranam, 2001). Transformational leaders are indifferent to personal interests. They put organizational interests before employees. When employees get along with leaders, they don't worry about being taken away by leaders. In the workplace, leaders personally share hardships with employees. When employees join leaders, they will demonstrate active following of leadership. On this basis, this study proposes the following hypotheses: H2: Transformational leadership has a significant positive impact on employee followership.

2.3 The role of followership on work engagement

Followership refers to the emotional state of employees in the interaction between superiors and subordinates. Employees with followership not only show loyalty and obedience to their leaders, but also show great enthusiasm and vigor for communication among team members. They are willing to cooperate with team leaders for a long time, and strive for efficiency and excellence in the workplace, so followership can be regarded as a variable that induces employees to participate in labor. Peng Jian and Wang Xiao (2016) investigated the effect of following prototype conformity on job engagement and job performance based on the role theory. Chen Xiaotun et al. also revealed that the leader's implicit followership prototype positively promotes work engagement (Chen Xiaotun, Zhu Yilin, Zhao Wenwen & Yang Xiaomei, 2022). On this basis, this study puts forward the following hypothesis: H3: Employee followership significantly and positively affects their work engagement.

2.4 The mediating role of followership

Transformational leaders use their behavior to interact with subordinates. In this process, employees not only need to meet their own needs, but also need to help others achieve their goals; at the same time, they must also pay attention to the challenges of personal development caused by environmental changes. Employees with the strong following ability will have positive emotional states in work and leadership; thereby, stimulating a stronger willingness to learn, restraining themselves and establishing interactive relationships with leaders. The previous research by Peng Jian et al. also confirmed that employees with positive follower traits can produce higher work output (Peng Jian, Wang Xiao, Ran Yaxuan & Han Xueliang, 2016). Transformational managers will use the power of example to influence followers in their work. Followers will look up to and emulate their leaders, work with a positive attitude, and create higher performance. On this basis, this study proposes the following hypotheses: H4: Employee followership partially mediates transformational leadership and employee work engagement.

In conclusion, this study examined the relationship between transformational leadership and work engagement, and the mediating role of followership in the above relationship (Figure 1).

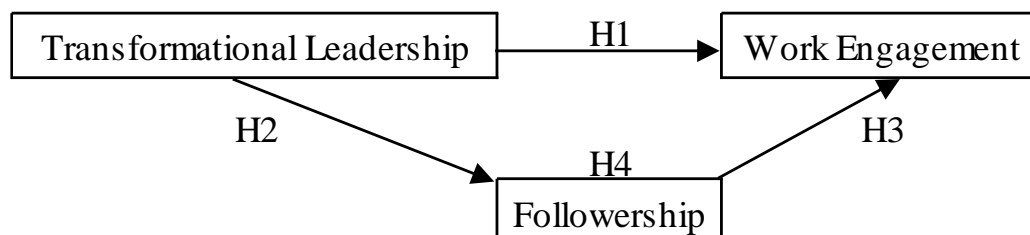


Figure 1 Research framework

[277]



3. Research Methods

3.1 Research sample

The samples of this study are mainly from enterprises in Changchun, Beijing, Shenzhen, Nanjing, Wuxi and other places. The questionnaire collection method is mainly based on the distribution of questionnaires by the questionnaire star platform. A total of 550 questionnaires were distributed, and 508 valid questionnaires were recovered, with a recovery rate of 92.4%. In terms of gender distribution, there are 274 males and 234 females. Males account for 53.9% and females account for 46.1%. The average age is about 30 years old and the average experience is about 6 years. In terms of education, high school and below accounted for only 25.6%. In terms of employee positions, ordinary employees and middle and low-level leaders account for 90 %, and 30% of employees are from state-owned enterprises, private enterprises and foreign companies.

3.2 Research tool

In terms of Transformational Leadership Scale, in 2005, Li Chaoping and Shi Kan developed the TLQ scale according to the Chinese situation, which is divided into 4 dimensions, 26 items, including moral conduct, vision motivation, personalized care and leadership charisma. In this study, $\alpha=0.959$.

As to follow the power meter, followership adopts the scale developed by Zhou Wenjie et al. in 2015, with a total of 21 items and six dimensions. In this study, $\alpha=0.929$.

As regards work engagement scale. The measurement of work engagement adopts the 9- item version scale developed by Schaufeli, Bakker and Salanova in 2006, including three dimensions of vitality, dedication and focus. In this study, $\alpha = 0.912$.

In reference to control variable, this study sets six demographic variables: gender, age, education levels, working years, position, and the nature of the unit. The questionnaire was filled out anonymously and promised to be confidential, using a five-point Likert scale, 1 for " never ", 2 for " rarely ", 3 for " sometimes ", 4 for " often ", and 5 for " always ". In this study, SPSS26.0 software was used to conduct the correlation analysis, the regression analysis and the mediation effect test.

4. Results and discussion

According to Pearson product difference method, the greater the absolute value of correlation coefficient, the closer the correlation between variables, the correlation analysis results are shown in Table 1. It can be seen from the table that transformational leadership is positively correlated with followership ($r=0.39$, $p<0.01$); transformational leadership is positively correlated with work engagement ($r=0.46$, $p<0.01$); and followership is positively correlated with work engagement ($r=0.42$, $p<0.01$).

According to the regression analysis, through linear regression analysis, the specific causal relationship between variables was tested to verify the research hypothesis. Tests for regression models are usually observed for R^2 or adjusted R^2 , and F for significance.

In the Model 1, $R^2=0.209$, $F=135.184$, and P is close to 0.000; therefore, the regression analysis of transformational leadership on work engagement is established, and the regression equation is: work engagement $=0.169 \times$ transformation Leadership $+14.109$. Hence, the assumption H1 was supported.

In the Model 2, $R^2=0.15$, $F=90.207$, and P approaches 0.000, so the regression analysis of transformational leadership on followership is established, and the regression equation is: followership $=0.256 \times$ transformation Lead $+43.69$. Therefore, the assumption H2 was supported.

In the Model 3, $R^2=0.18$, $F=111.041$, and P tends to 0.000, so the regression analysis of followership on work engagement is established, and the regression equation is: work engagement $=0.238 \times$ followership $+12.196$. Therefore, the assumption H3 was supported.

In the Model 4, combining the independent variable and the mediator variable with the dependent variable for regression model analysis, it is found that the mediation model of followership on transformational leadership and work engagement is significant, and this model is a partial mediation model. The regression equation is: work engagement $= 7.029 + 0.128 \times$ transformational leadership $+ 0.162 \times$ followership. Therefore, the assumption H4 was supported.

[278]

**Table 1** Regression analysis

Model	Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	r	t	P	F	R ²	Constant	Coefficient
Model 1	Transformational leadership	Work engagement	0.459	11.627	0.000	135.184	0.209	14.109	0.169
Model 2	Transformational leadership	Followerhip	0.389	9.498	0.000	90.207	0.15	43.69	0.256
Model 3	Followerhip	Work engagement	0.424	10.538	0.000	111.041	0.18	12.196	0.238
Model 4	Transformational leadership	Followerhip		9.498					0.162
		Work engagement		11.627	0.000	99.129	0.278	7.029	0.128

5. Conclusions

This study found that transformational leadership had a positive effect on the work engagement, transformational leadership had a positive effect on the followership, and the followership had a positive effect on the work engagement. This study found that the followership played a partial mediating role in the process of transformational leadership affecting the employees' work engagement.

This study had some theoretical contributions. As the research on the relationship between leadership style and subordinate behavior became more and more popular, it was of great significance to explore its internal methods of influence. As a mainstream, efficient transformational leadership had a positive effect on the work engagement. Some scholars' empirical studies supported that transformational leadership had a positive prediction on the work engagement. More importantly, this study found the mediating role of the followership between transformational leadership and the employees' work engagement, indicating that the employees' performance of the followership can promote more active behaviors. This finding had enriched the theoretical content of followership in the field of organizational leadership.

The results of this study have some management implications. Enterprises can optimize the talent training system, increase the training of transformational leaders, and create a benign development atmosphere. Enterprises advocate transformational leadership style and improve management level and management ability. As an employee, there should be an improvement of the following level, self-development ability, and maintenance of a effective interactive relationship with leaders.

There are also some shortcomings in this study. First, this study is a cross-sectional study; consequently, it is difficult to infer causality. Secondly, this study uses the questionnaire survey method to obtain data, which may be affected by the error of the same method. In the future, longitudinal research methods can be used to obtain data, and more scientific methods can be designed to collect samples.

6. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my mentor, Mr. Yingkai Tang, who is both strict and kind. Being your student is the greatest luck during my postgraduate period. I would like to give thanks to my parents; it is your support that allows me to study with peace of mind, and it is your care that allows me to experience the warmth and tolerance of home. It is your guidance that gives me the motivation to study and allows me to have a wonderful future.

7. References

- Bjugstad, K., Thach, E. C., Thompson, K. J., & Morris, A. (2006). A fresh look at followership: A model for matching followership and leadership styles. *Journal of Behavioral and Applied Management*, 7(3). doi:10.21818/001c.16673
- Cao, Y. K. & Xu, S. (2013). Reflections on some viewpoints in followership theory. *Jiangxi Social Sciences*, 33(02), 203-206. doi: 10.3969/j.issn.1004-518X.2013.02.038



- Chaleff, I. (1995). The courageous follower: Standing up to and for our leaders. *Nassp Bulletin*, 81(81), 119-119. doi:10.1177/019263659708158616
- Chen, S. R. (2018). A study on the path of followership enhancement. *Western Leather*, 33(02), 203-206. doi: 10.3969/j.issn.1004-518X.2013.02.038
- Chen, X. T., ZhuY. L., Zhao, W. W., & Yang, X. M. (2022). The effect of leader implicit follow-through on job engagement: a mediating and moderating model. *Engineering management technology frontier*, 41(02), 91-96.
- Downton, J. V. (1973). *Rebel leadership: Commitment and charisma in the revolutionary process*. New York: Free Press.
- Hayati, D., Charkhabi, M., & Naami, A. (2014). The relationship between transformational leadership and work engagement in Governmental Hospitals Nurses: A survey study. *SpringerPlus*, 3(1), 25-31. doi:10.1186/2193-1801-3-25
- Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4), 692-724. doi:10.5465/256287
- Kellerman, B. (2008). *Followership: How followers are creating change and changing leaders*. Boston: Harvard Business Press.
- Li, C. P. & Shi, K. (2005). Structure and measurement of transformational leadership. *Acta psychologica Sinica*, 37(6), 803-811. doi: 10.1007/s11782-008-0032-5
- Peng, J. & Wang, X. (2016). Does connecting with your boss make you better at your job? -- Follow archetypal consistency, engagement, and performance. *Acta psychologica Sinica*, 48(09), 1151-1162. doi:10.3724/SP.J.1041.2016.01151
- Peng, J., Wang, X., Ran, Y. X., & Han, X. L. (2016). Does positive pursuit of traits necessarily increase work output - The activation of benevolent leadership. *Nankai Management Review*, 25(04), 135-146. doi: CNKI:SUN:LKGP.0.2016-04-013
- Schaufeli, W. B., Salanova, M., González-romá, V., & Bakker, A. B. (2002). The Measurement of Engagement and Burnout: A Two Sample Confirmatory Factor Analytic Approach. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 3(1), 71-92. doi:10.1023/a:1015630930326
- Waldman, D. A., Ramirez, G. G., House, R. J., & Puranam, P. (2001). Does leadership matter? CEO leadership attributes and profitability under conditions of perceived environmental uncertainty. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44(1), 134-143. doi: 10.5465/3069341
- Wang, Z., Chen, L. N., & Li, X. P., (2015). Transformational leadership and job engagement: a moderating mediation model from an emotional perspective. *Management review*, 27(9): 120-129. doi: 10.14120/j.cnki.cn11-5057/f.2015.09.011
- Xu, S. (2013). *Followership: connotation, influencing factors, and the mechanism of followership on leadership effectiveness*. (Doctoral dissertation). Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics, China.