Do happy people lead better?

One of the most prominent leadership theories in management science pertains to transformational leadership. According to Bass (1985), leaders are "transformational" when they provide the following four things: (1) "idealised influence," or role modelling of high standards of moral, ethical, and personal conduct; (2) "inspirational motivation," or an optimistic vision for the future; (3) "intellectual stimulation," or encouragement for employees to challenge existing norms and to think creatively; and (4) "individualised consideration," or attention to employees' developmental needs.

Among the benefits of transformational leadership is its tendency to be associated with higher levels of creativity (e.g., Shin, Kim, Lee & Bian, 2012), performance (e.g., Barling, Weber & Kelloway, 1996), and organisational citizenship (e.g., Wang, Law, Hackett, Wang, & Chen, 2005).

If we do not know what causes some leaders to be more transformational than other leaders, then the possibility of having high-performing employees in all of the ways just noted is uncertain. Therefore, it behooves organisations as well as employees to understand what the "mechanisms" are that lead to transformational leadership. Our study's purpose was to investigate this.

In a U.S.-based study of 357 full-time managers and their 1,404 subordinates, we found that leaders who tended to be viewed by their employees as more transformational were leaders who reported feeling more positive mood-states during their business days. We assessed leaders' mood-states — in terms of the extent to which they felt happy, satisfied, calm, relaxed, excited, and enthusiastic — once every business day for 27 consecutive business days.

The mood-states leaders reported on regarded the extent to which they felt, at that moment: happy, satisfied, calm, relaxed, excited, enthusiastic). For brevity, we refer to leaders who scored higher on these mood-states as those who experienced more "pleasantness" at work.

Additionally, we found that leaders' pleasantness tended to be associated with higher levels of two types of work-attitudes that they held (which we assessed a month after assessing leaders' mood-states): (1) leaders'

organisational commitment and (2) leaders' job satisfaction. We expected to see these patterns; additionally, we expected each of the latter work-attitudes to be associated with higher levels of transformational leadership.

However, only leaders' organisational commitment (and *not* leaders' job satisfaction) were associated with higher levels of transformational leadership. More specifically, leaders' organisational commitment partially mediated the positive relationship we found between leaders' pleasantness and transformational leadership. Surprisingly, however, we found a significant *negative* association between leaders' job satisfaction and transformational leadership.

So, what does our result mean to practicing managers and/or leaders?

First, organisational authorities may need to pay close attention to how leaders are treated, not just how leaders treat their subordinates. This is because leaders who experience more positive affect (or more positive mood-states) at work tend to be more transformational leaders. Since sources of positive affect are multi-directional (e.g., potentially from higher-ups, peers, subordinates, and even customers), paying close attention to how leaders are treated likely requires being cognisant of all directional sources of leaders' pleasantness at work.

Second, organisational authorities may need to increase leaders' affective organisational commitment, which itself is likely to be associated with the extent to which leaders experience positive affect. This is because leaders who feel more attached and committed to the organisation tend to be more transformational leaders. Asking leaders to help identify experiences at work that strengthen their positive moods and their feeling of organisational commitment, and then infusing such experiences into training programs designed for leadership-development may be one way to strengthen leaders' organisational commitment along with the pleasantness of work and, ultimately, the extent of leaders' transformational behaviours.

Third, given our surprise-finding regarding more job-satisfied leaders being less transformational, it is unclear (without future research) what advice to give practising managers or leaders about effects of job satisfaction on transformational leadership. For now, we can only say that all job attitudes are *not* equal in how they influence transformational leadership; and therefore, caution ought to be used when attempting to increase positive job attitudes all at once. As just one possible example, the likely benefits of increasing leaders' organisational commitment may be neutralised if leaders' job satisfaction (and possibly preference for maintaining the status quo) is also increased.

In summary, our study suggests that antecedents of transformational leadership, both of which relate to leaders' affect, include: (1) leaders' positive affective experiences at work and (2) leaders' affective organisational commitment. These antecedents are more malleable and transient than other trait-like factors such as personality- or dispositional-qualities that have been the focus in past studies of transformational leadership.

Organisations that provide practices and actions that increase leaders' pleasantness at work and organisational commitment may be better able to develop transformational leaders.

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Notes:

- *The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*

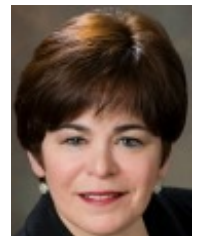- *Before commenting, please read our Comment Policy.*

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