

Enhancing transformational leadership: the roles of training and feedback

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Abstract

Investigated the effect of leadership training and counseling feedback on subordinates' perceptions of transformational leadership. A total of 40 organizational leaders participated in a 2 (training) × 2 (feedback) design. Data from 150 subordinates showed that both training and feedback resulted in increased subordinate perceptions of leaders' transformational leadership. Results suggest that both training and feedback are effective means of changing leadership behaviors but that the combination of training and feedback did not result in enhanced transformational leadership.

The roles of training and feedback

Considerable data now support the effectiveness of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985, 1998) in enhancing employee attitudes and performance. Transformational leadership has been defined as superior leadership performance that occurs when leaders "broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group" (Bass, 1990, p. 21). Empirical data largely support the effectiveness of such behaviors. For example, leaders' use of transformational leadership behaviors is associated with subordinates' satisfaction (Hater and Bass, 1998; Koh *et al.*, 1995), commitment to the organization (Barling *et al.*, 1996; Barling *et al.*, 1996; Bycio *et al.*, 1995; Koh *et al.*, 1995), trust in management (Barling *et al.*, 1993), and organizational citizenship behaviors (Koh *et al.*, 1995). Laboratory-based experimental investigations show that transformational leadership styles result in higher task performance (e.g. Howell and Frost, 1989; Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1996; Sosik *et al.*, 1997). Field studies also support the performance impact of transformational leadership. In longitudinal studies, for example, Howell and Avolio (1993) linked transformational leadership to unit financial performance. Similarly, Barling *et al.* (1998) showed that subordinates' perceptions of supervisors' transformational leadership led to enhanced affective commitment to the organization and, through the effect on affective commitment, to enhanced group performance. Barling *et al.* (1996) reported on a field experiment in which training leaders in transformational leadership resulted in

improved branch-level financial performance.

Given these data, the question of whether transformational leadership can be enhanced assumes increasing importance (Barling *et al.*, 1996). Bass (1996) initially described two primary methods for transformational leadership training. In the first, subordinate ratings of a leader's transformational leadership style are collected and presented to the leader in an individual counseling session. The counselor typically draws attention to discrepancies between subordinate and self-ratings of leadership behaviors, and focuses on specific behaviors that may have led to the subordinate ratings. The individual counseling sessions result in the development of specific action plans for enhancing the individual's transformational leadership behaviors (Barling *et al.*, 1996). This method, therefore, relies on personal feedback and goal setting.

In the second, leaders participate in workshops on transformational leadership. Common activities in the workshops include brainstorming the behaviors displayed by effective and/or ineffective leaders, linking these concepts to transformational leadership theory, and watching videos depicting a variety of leadership styles in action. The development of specific action plans for implementing transformational leadership is also emphasized in the workshop training (Barling *et al.*, 1996; Bass, 1990).

Barling *et al.*'s (1996) field experiment assessed the effectiveness of a training intervention comprising both the workshop and individual counseling sessions. Bank managers were randomly assigned to either an experimental group or a control group. Participants in the experimental group initially participated in a one-day workshop on transformational leadership, and subsequently attended four individual "booster sessions" in which subordinate ratings were presented for each leader, and

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specific goals were developed and monitored. Comparison of subordinate ratings collected two weeks before and five months after the intervention suggested that subordinates' perceptions of leaders' intellectual stimulation, and subordinates' organizational commitment were significantly enhanced by the intervention. Importantly, comparison of sales data from the branches also suggested that sales activity was enhanced when the manager participated in the training program.

While Barling *et al.*'s (1996) findings indicate that transformational leadership can be changed, the relative contributions of "training" (workshop) and "counseling" (individual goal-setting sessions) remains in question. Several possibilities exist. First, it is possible that only one of these methods is necessary; and that the other adds nothing. Second, the two methods may exert additive or interactive effects; and third, they may exert differential effects on different types of transformational leadership. Resolving this issue has both conceptual and pragmatic implications.

Conceptually, identification of effective methods for creating behavior could plausibly lead to a greater understanding of the mechanisms underlying such change. For example, Barling *et al.*'s (1996) field experiment isolated the mediating role of affective commitment to the organization; they showed that improved transformational leadership affected work performance by initially raising affective commitment. Pragmatically, assessment of the relative contributions of "training" versus "counseling" approaches to leadership development would lead to the development of more effective interventions. Consequently, the current study was designed to provide an assessment of the relative roles of training and counseling.

We report on a field experiment designed to assess the effects of training and counseling leaders on subordinate perceptions of transformational leadership. We argue that the key to a successful intervention is subordinates' perceptions of transformational leadership (Barling *et al.*, 1996). Behavioral changes on the part of the leader that are not noticed by subordinates will not affect subordinate attitudes or performance. In contrast, subordinates' perceptions of transformational leadership have been demonstrated to result in enhanced commitment to the organization and, ultimately, performance (Barling *et al.*, 1996). Accordingly, we will assess the effects of leadership training and counseling on

subordinates' perceptions of transformational leadership behaviors.

Method

Participants

Participants in the current study were employees of a provincial health care corporation in Eastern Canada. In response to a growing demand for rationalization, the health care corporation was formed in the early 1990s as an amalgamation of several hospitals. The management structure for the new corporation relied on functional, rather than site-based, supervision. That is, rather than have a department manager in each geographic location (i.e. hospital), departments sharing similar functional responsibilities (e.g. surgery, internal medicine) were grouped into one department under one manager.

Participants in this study ($N = 40$) were department managers in the health care corporation. Most were nursing supervisors, with a few managers drawn from administrative support department (e.g. medical records). To preserve the anonymity of all participants, the organization did not allow the collection of demographic information on participants or their subordinates. Subordinates completed both pre-intervention and post-intervention ratings of their supervisors. The current study is based on the 180 subordinates who provided both pre- and post-intervention ratings on the 40 managers.

Measures and procedure

Prior to the commencement of the program, managers were asked to obtain subordinate ratings of their transformational leadership behaviors from at least five subordinates. Subordinate ratings were based on Form 5 of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Bass and Avolio, 1990). Subordinate ratings were collected again six months following the intervention. Because the particular focus of this study was on transformational leadership (i.e. individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and charisma), only scores on these dimensions were used in the current study. However, previous research has suggested that these dimensions may form a single common factor (e.g. Bycio *et al.*, 1995; Carless, 1998). Similarly, Barling *et al.* (1996) reported correlations in excess of 0.90 among the subcomponents of transformational leadership. Because these measures were also strongly correlated in the current study,

we combined these measures into a single, highly reliable ($\alpha = 0.91$) measure.

Managers were randomly assigned to one of four groups in a 2 (training) \times 2 (counseling) design. The initial intent was to have ten managers assigned to each group. However, logistical difficulties resulted in unbalanced cells with eight managers in the control (i.e. no training, no counseling) group, ten managers in the training only group, ten managers in the counseling only group and 12 managers receiving both training and counseling. Because the interventions were conducted in one organization and because of the ethical implications, all participants were told that there were two sessions of training and feedback. The assignment of individuals to condition was explained as a function of scheduling and approximately one month after the cessation of data collection a second session of training/feedback was administered such that all participants eventually received individual feedback and participated in the training session. While there remains the possibility of diffusion of treatment across groups, we note that such diffusion would work against finding group differences making our current study a conservative test of the hypothesized effects.

Manager participants who received training participated in a one-day workshop described by Barling *et al.* (1996). The purpose of the one-day workshop was to familiarize participants with transformational leadership concepts and how they could be applied in the workplace. Participants began the day by identifying the characteristics of the best and worst leaders they had ever encountered. These behaviors were then placed in the context of transformational leadership theory. Transformational leadership theory was then defined more formally, case examples were discussed, and research results supporting the effectiveness of the theory were presented. Goal setting (Locke and Latham, 1985) theory was also presented and the participants were encouraged to set challenging and achievable goals that could be sustained over time.

Manager participants who received counseling met for one hour with one of the authors. During the hour-long session, participants reviewed subordinate ratings of their leadership style, and the meaning of the scores was explained and discussed. The session concluded with the development of specific goals for each manager; the goals focused on specific behaviors that the managers could undertake on a daily or weekly basis. Following Barling *et al.* (1996)

and the tenets of goal setting theory (Locke and Latham, 1985), particular focus was placed on the development of specific, challenging, yet achievable goals that could be sustained over time.

Results

To assess the effectiveness of training and feedback in enhancing transformational leadership, we conducted a series of 2 \times 2 MANOVA in which subordinate ratings of supervisors' transformational leadership served as the dependent variable. The independent variables were whether the supervisors had participated in the training session and/or the counseling session.

Based on data collected prior to the intervention, there were no differences in subordinates' ratings of leaders' transformational leadership ($F(3, 177) = 1.12$, ns). Leaders who participated in the training ($M = 2.58$) were not rated differently than leaders who did not participate in training ($M = 2.62$), $F(1, 177) = 0.28$, ns. Leaders who participated in feedback sessions ($M = 2.56$) were not rated differently than leaders who did not receive feedback ($M = 2.61$), $F(1, 177) = 0.28$, ns.

Post-intervention data resulted in a significant model ($F(3, 177) = 4.92$, $p < 0.05$). First, leaders who participated in the training were rated as displaying more transformational leadership ($M = 2.84$) than those who did not participate in the training ($M = 2.67$), $F(1, 177) = 6.09$, $p < 0.01$. Similarly, leaders who participated in feedback sessions ($M = 2.85$) were rated higher than those who did not receive feedback ($M = 2.56$), $F(1, 177) = 7.14$, $p < 0.01$. Finally, those who received training ($M = 2.81$), feedback ($M = 2.83$) or both ($M = 2.87$) were rated higher than leaders in the control group ($M = 2.31$), $F(1, 177) = 4.38$, $p < 0.01$.

Discussion

Earlier investigations had suggested that the combination of leadership training and personal feedback resulted in enhanced transformational leadership (Barling *et al.*, 1996). Our current results replicate and extend these earlier findings (Barling *et al.*, 1996). We replicate earlier research in showing that transformational leadership can be changed. More importantly, however, we extend these findings in dismantling the role of training and feedback. Specifically, our results suggest that training and feedback may be interchangeable to some extent. That is, the combination of training

and feedback was not associated with higher ratings of transformational leadership than either intervention alone. These results may suggest that either approach can "stand on its own" as an effective intervention to increase leaders' transformational leadership behaviors.

In some respects, these results are not unexpected. Although the focus of delivery (i.e. group versus individual) was different between the training and feedback sessions, both forms of intervention focused on setting specific, challenging, achievable, and sustainable goals related to transformational leadership behavior. In other respects, our results call into question the utility of common practices in leadership development. Specifically, the lack of difference between training and feedback groups in our study may suggest that individual feedback of results and individual counseling do not add to the effect that can be obtained through group-based training.

These results have considerable importance for practitioners designing interventions to enhance leadership abilities. First, depending on the goal of the intervention, either training or feedback may be sufficient to result in the desired change. Second our results suggest that the more expensive feedback sessions (based on individual interaction and subordinate ratings) may not represent a "value added" component of the intervention. Similar results were obtained in both the training and the feedback conditions; all things being equal, group-based training represents a more cost-effective means of intervention to enhance transformational leadership.

Our results also have implications for future research. First, like Barling *et al.* (1996) we emphasized the enhancement of intellectual stimulation and, to a lesser extent, individualized consideration in the training and feedback. Although both the theory (e.g. Bass, 1990) and specific interventions (e.g. Barling *et al.*, 1996) delineate components of transformational leadership, the existing measures do not allow for this degree of differentiation. Future research might profitably invest in new measures with demonstrable discriminant validity in order to further examine the most effective means of enhancing specific aspects of transformational leadership. Through such investigations it should be possible to identify the most effective way of creating behavioral change across the full range of transformational leadership behaviors. Our current results suggest that a multi-modal

approach to such change is most likely to be effective.

Second, our results echo Barling *et al.*'s (1996) in suggesting that aspects of transformational leadership can be changed through training and feedback. Barling *et al.* (1996) demonstrated increases in affective commitment and financial performance as a result of a leadership intervention. Future investigations could profitably consider other outcomes (e.g. job satisfaction, well-being, employee safety behaviors, organizational citizenship) and, equally importantly, the mechanisms through which these outcomes are obtained. In addition, the focus on the training of Barling *et al.*'s (1996) study was intellectual stimulation; it is possible that changing different aspects of transformational leadership will have differential effects on outcome variables.

In summary our results suggest that training and feedback have effects on transformational leadership. While both interventions were effective, the combination of the two did not result in enhanced ratings of leadership suggesting that training and feedback may be interchangeable approaches to leadership development.

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