



# The Development of Transformational Leadership in Public Higher Education

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**Abstract:** Nowadays, transformational leadership plays an increasingly important role in the construction and management of universities. In terms of the leadership system, most countries in the world adopt the leadership system combining the committee system and individual responsibility. For example, the Board of Directors is used in the United States, the University Council is used in Britain and Germany, and the University Council is used in France. In China, the president assumes responsibility under the leadership of the party committee. In recent years, the application of transformational leadership has been gradually popularized in the government and enterprises, which has played a great role in promoting social development. However, the development of transformational leadership in public universities is always slow. In this paper, I will review a number of literature to critically analyze transformational leadership and its characteristics, as well as the application of leadership in public university management, so as to explore its development in higher education.

**Keywords:** transformational leadership, higher education, public universities

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## 1. Introduction

In a time when vision, direction, and trust is needed, the case for strong leadership with higher education administration is vital (Lamm, 2021). As a new paradigm of leadership behavior theory, transformational leadership theory has received more and more attention in the past decades. Many studies have found that compared with other leadership styles, transformational leadership is more conducive to the construction of organizational culture, organizational innovation, performance improvement, characteristic brand building and comprehensive strength of colleges and universities (Wu & Yang & Hu, 2015). However, previous researches mainly focus on enterprises in China, and there are very few researches in the context of colleges and universities, and even fewer researches on transformational leadership in public universities. In China, the president of each university is not only the head of administration, but also the leader of the party committee, and they play an important and decisive role in the work of the university (Kang, 2010). Most of the presidents of each university are administrative personnel selected by the government. They are not only the service providers, but also the reformers of the development of the university. In this context, it is necessary to study how the leaders of the party committee break through the ideological imprisonment and institutional shackles in the development of transformational leadership in public universities.

## 2. Transformational leadership

The research on leadership is vast. As Storey et al (2016) said, the study of leadership - at least in written form - can be tracked back to Plato in the West and Sun Tzu in the East. In the field of pedagogy leadership research, transformational leadership theory has been a hot topic in western leadership theory research in recent 20 years, and has become a new paradigm of leadership research. Liu & Song (2012) hold the view that we should apply the theory to the practice of university management and discuss more about the innovation mechanism of university management from the aspects of the idea of running a university, the incentive mechanism, the construction and direction of the mechanism of attracting excellent talents, which has very important practical and theoretical significance. It is helpful to deepen and enrich the connotation of university transformational leadership theory, and to build public university management innovation mechanism.

### 2.1 The concept of transformational leadership

Transformational leadership is developed on the basis of the concept of leadership. Different from transactional leadership, transformational leadership does not reward followers only for obedience or motivate followers to achieve a single goal. Transformational leadership must help followers realize their self-worth and make them work hard for themselves and the organization.

Transformational leadership is similar with charismatic leadership in some extent, but charisma is just part of it. Many

charismatic leaders with a dark side exhibit many of the elements of transformational leadership (especially charismatic), but also have personal, exploitative, and self-aggrandizement motives (Conger et al., 1998).

Bass & Riggio (2006) report in the second edition of *Transformational Leadership* that transformational leaders tend to set more challenging expectations for their followers and generally achieve higher performance. They also usually have more loyal and satisfied followers. In addition, transformational leaders share power with their followers, take their individual needs and development into consideration, and help followers achieve their leadership aspiration.

But according to some domestic scholars described, due to the party organization of public universities in accordance with the directive of the government, school leaders often exchange, they usually have short term in their work. So most of the leaders entrench bureaucracy thought, take their career development as a first consideration, their common pursuit of tenure is not to make trouble, they often ignore the teachers' needs and development, so they have relatively few followers.

## **2.2 Components of transformational leadership**

Bass's work is the most representative of the past research on transformational leadership components. He proposed a comprehensive theoretical framework for transformational leadership behavior and developed corresponding measurement tools (Li & Ling, 2007). Bass et al (1995) believe that the specific dimensions of transformational leadership is mainly obtained through factor analysis of the descriptive Questionnaire which is called MLQ (Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire). In the latest version of the questionnaire MLQ-5X, transformational leadership contains four dimensions, namely Charisma or Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation and Individualized Consideration. Charisma refers to the ability or level of a leader that makes employees fully convinced and thus becomes a model for employees to learn and imitate. Inspirational motivation refers to inspiring employees by depicting attractive visions to employees, providing meaningful and challenging work and expressing high expectations for employees, so that they can work hard for their own future development in enthusiasm and prospect. Intellectual stimulation refers to motivating employees to challenge the current situation, dare to be the first, and have the courage to walk forward. Individualized consideration focuses on the individual development of employees, especially their achievements and growth needs.

Besides Bass's research, other scholars have obtained different results on the components of transformational leadership. In a study, Avolio et al (1999) use 14 samples and nearly 4,000 leadership reports, finding that a six-factor model (combined the 4 components which we mentioned above and management by exception-active, and management by exception passive *laissez-faire*) can be excellently represented the structure of transformational leadership.

In addition, according to Hu & Sun's (2013) research, through literature retrieval, interviews with 43 university presidents and their direct subordinates, and through expert discussion, the transformational leadership behavior scale of Chinese university presidents was developed. The results of distinctive factor analysis of 515 data and verified factor analysis of 461 data show that the transformational leadership components of Chinese public university presidents is a five-factor structure, that is, moral model, caring motivation, vision motivation, leadership charm, solidarity and cooperation.

Under the specific background of higher education system, transformational leadership behavior of universities is a multi-dimensional concept, it includes the basic characteristics of transformational leadership behavior, also has the unity cooperation under the leadership of the party committee team, at the same time, also can produce lag, swing, the negative effect of excessive compliance bureaucracy, this requires our in-depth investigation and analysis.

## **3. The role of transformational leadership in public higher education**

The development of transformational leadership is indispensable in higher education, so that public universities can adapt to the changing economic and humanistic academic environment and occupy their own place in the new era of education. Leaders who encourage and support transformational leadership share power, are willing to learn from others, and are sensitive to each team member's needs for achievement and growth (Gous, 2003).

### **3.1 Transformational leadership and motivation**

Transformational leaders have a strong incentive effect on followers through their own personality charm, excellent ability and humanized care. Bian (2016) believes that a good incentive environment should be a spiral mechanism, and the constantly rising organizational morale can accomplish the strategic goals. Transformational leadership requires leaders to have a deep understanding of employees' psychological expectations, including their incentive expectations and career development expectations, and to formulate an incentive mechanism in line with employees' expectations, so that everyone realizes that they are working hard to realize their expectations.

For new employees, both vision and virtue of transformational leadership have a great positive impact on the motivation of new employees. However, the results of Li & Mao's (2018) structural equation model analysis show that the individualized

consideration and charisma of transformational leaders have no significant effect on the motivation of new employees. At the first time of entering an organization, the fresh employees usually have no access to feel the leader's ability and initiative in the workplace, so the effect of the charisma of transformational leaders on the motivation of new employees is not obvious.

However, in the context of China, leaders of public universities tend to give personalized care to employees in a subtle way, emphasizing 'smoothing things silently'. Therefore, the particular findings enrich the research on transformational leadership, and help us understand the role of transformational leadership in motivating new employees in higher education effectively.

### **3.2 Transformational leadership and commitment**

For a public university to be successful, its president must have the individual quality of commitment demonstrated with passion, intensity, and persistence which will supply the energy and momentum, motivating and stimulating the stakeholders to strive toward a group effort (Basham, 2012).

In the 1990s, Meyer and Allen, Canadian scholars, showed clearly that organizational commitment has a strong psychological link that maintains the relationship between employees and the organization. At the same time, a three-factor model of organizational Commitment is proposed, namely, affective commitment, continuance commitment and normative commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

Through research, Yu et al (2009) found that transformational leadership has an important impact on teachers' organizational commitment, and the cumulative explanation rate for teachers' organizational commitment is 33%, which is attributed to the principal's caring motivation, vision motivation, virtue modeling and leadership charisma. This tells us that in addition to relying on all kinds of rules and regulations for daily management, it is more important for university leaders to require their own noble quality and commitment.

### **3.3 Transformational leadership and innovation**

In the study of Howell & Avolio (1993), the intellectual stimulation and motivation of transformational leaders play an important role in organizational innovation. Through virtue modeling and providing employees with innovation direction, the administrative planning of public universities is more forward-looking, and the administrative measures can better integrate the opinions of university members and pursue innovation and optimal efficiency.

In China, since many leaders of universities are not professional teachers, they are willing to share power with the directors of colleges at all levels. They actively support the construction of teaching and researching teams, encourage university teachers to innovate in teaching programs and curriculum setting as well as motivating students to actively participate in innovation competitions. Transformational leaders use organizational vision to motivate staff, increase their willingness to work, promote the adoption of innovative approaches, raise motivation levels, and enhance organizational innovation (Wu & Yang, 2014).

### **3.4 Transformational leadership and organizational performance**

According to the research of Li (2014), transformational leadership has a significant positive impact on team performance and team satisfaction. Moreover, transformational leadership theory will not only affect the effectiveness of leadership from the personal perspective, but also affect the effectiveness of leadership at the team level.

Scholars Zhu & Zhou (2016) drew the same conclusion by using meta-regression analysis that transformational leadership can directly improve organizational performance, and the relationship between transformational leadership and organizational performance is not affected by cultural differences. Under different cultural backgrounds in the east and the west, transformational leadership has no significant impact on organizational performance. At the same time, through the study of organizational performance literature in the field of higher education worldwide, we find that transformational leadership has a very obvious effect on improving the organizational performance of colleges in public universities.

## **4. Limitation**

In this analysis, due to the literature of transformational leadership in the higher education field around the world is not rich, cause for transformational leadership in the practical application of scene and model analysis of public universities is not very clear. In the future research, I will expand the scope as much as possible and conduct detailed and critical analysis for different countries and regions.

## **5. Conclusion**

With the increasing expectations and requirements of the society on the management system and education quality

of public universities, the top administrators how to understand, establish and regulate their own leadership behavior and improve the effectiveness of their leadership has become an urgent problem to be studied. Transformational leaders in the new era of higher education management, not only must be able to achieve charisma or idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. They should also pay attention to the cultivation and discovery of the organization's internal capabilities and the integration of innovative resources, and focus on the cooperation and integration of external forces and internal forces, and continue to know well about the interests and needs of stakeholders in public universities, so as to achieve the goal of continuous progress of college education.

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