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## Article

# Experience of transformative leadership: Subordinate's perspective

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## EXPERIENCE OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP: SUBORDINATE'S PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract.** Despite the growing popularity of transformational leadership (TL) in organization studies, there is a lack of studies trying to reveal subordinate's perspective on experience of TL. The present study examined how subordinates employed in customer service experience TL during organizational change. The participants were people working in two international organizations operating in Lithuania. The data were collected through semi-structured interview. Phenomenological procedures were used to analyze the data. The conducted phenomenological analysis of TL from the subordinate's perspective reveals that subordinates under TL feel secure and empowered, have extensive data about the ongoing change, receive full manager's support and individual attention, share acquired knowledge in performing delegated duties and collectively aspire for a common generally accepted goal set by the manager and consequently are more positive about organizational change. The results of the present study contribute to the better understanding of the inner experiences of TL by subordinates working as customer service specialists in the context of organizational changes.

**Keywords:** transformational leadership, subordinate, experience, manager, qualitative study, phenomenological analysis.

**JEL Classification:** M12.

### Introduction

Recent decades have seen a growing interest in the issue of leadership while the wellbeing of subordinates has been gradually becoming one of the key objectives of an organization (George, 2000). However, meeting employee expectations and finding individual ways of inspiration and motivation often becomes a serious challenge for the organization and in particular for the immediate leader of the team. There is no doubt that a subordinate's physical and emotional state at work has a direct effect on their personal life as experiences are later brought home to affect one's physical state, emotions and personal relations.

Transformational leadership (TL) changes the employees' values and attitudes and raises them beyond egoism using idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration (B. M. Bass & R. Bass, 2008; Nerdinger & Pundt, 2018). A great deal of researchers (Ahmad et al., 2014; Ghasabeh, Soosay, & Reaiche, 2015; McCann, Langford, & Rawlings, 2006) believe that TL may be a good solution in finding individual ways to inspire, motivate and stimulate subordinates thus modeling the desirable professional conduct. Previous research mostly examines associations between

TL and subordinates' performance or work engagement (Brown & Arendt, 2011; Carter et al., 2012; Salanova et al., 2011; Tripiiana & Llorens, 2015). There is little qualitative research on inner experience of transformative leaders in educational context (Tiu, 2016) and leadership influence on subordinates' reaction to change in educational context (Valencic-Miller, 2017), however, research in inner experiences of a subordinate in a business organization under transformative leadership is scarce.

Apart from dealing with abundant information and inevitable procedural changes, the job of a customer service specialist working by telephone entails a twofold responsibility. The employee has to meet corporate standards and customer expectations and expose strong personal characteristics including an ability to analyze client needs and deal with problems in an amicable way. The factors are often difficult to combine and therefore, the role of the colleagues and in particular the immediate manager becomes crucial. It is the role of the latter to mediate between the subordinate and the organization and to help find mutually acceptable solutions. Most scholars agree that TL is suitable in jobs like the aforementioned (Ruggeri & Abbate, 2013; McDermott et al., 2013; Carter et al., 2012); however, in depth qualitative research in inner

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experiences of customer service specialists working by telephone and the TL role in the course of organizational changes is still insufficient.

The question how TL is experienced by subordinates working as customer service specialists by telephone in the context of organizational changes remains open. To deal with the questions, a qualitative phenomenological research allowing an in-depth insight into and revealing inner experiences has been carried out.

## 1. Literature review

The concept of TL defines the importance of application of intellectual stimulations inspiring employees to develop a common vision and paying proper individual attention to each employee in terms of their personal achievements, learning and motivation within the organization. Management of the aforementioned factors facilitates employee training, knowledge acquisition and generation of ideas, encourages aspirations to learn newly developed products or services and consolidates personal employee ambitions, approaches and values to achieve a common goal of the organization (Ghasabeh et al., 2015; Malik, Javed, & Hassan, 2017). While transactional leadership is based on goal setting behaviors combined with contingent reward based on employee performance, TL is based on behaviours seeking to develop, share, and sustain a vision (Andersen et al., 2018). TL is earmarked by the leader's ability to present corporate goals in an attractive manner, dedicate oneself to the team, maintain and encourage personal development and learning of the followers and encourage critical and logical thinking in order to arrive at the best solutions and overcome challenges. A transformative leader must be ethical, consistent and decisive, fully dedicate to the team, inspire subordinates, strongly believe in the goals, vision and mission of the organization and has to encourage employees to accept challenges and motivate and instruct on how to deal with the challenges in view individual qualities of the employees. A transformative leader justifies and explains the importance of a set goal to his people and shows confidence in employee potential to achieve the goal while the subordinates, in their turn, do their best to meet and exceed leader expectations (Ahmad et al., 2014).

The research show that leader's relationship with their subordinates closely associates with employee efficiency and performance (George, 2000; Griffith, Connelly, & Thiel, 2011; Robert, Dunne, & Iun, 2016).

In view of rapidly developing technologies, customer service by telephone is deemed highly economically reasonable and is widely adopted by businesses. The typical challenge of people working in call centers is to create a representative image of themselves by means of their voice, suppress their anger and other negative emotions and foster client trust in the company in view of the market segment they work in (Poster, 2007). Call center employees are directly responsible for creation of the actual company's image. The potential of call centers is constantly

growing in the market generating a significant portion of corporate revenues and therefore, standards set for their selection are very high. In view of frequent changes in pricing, growing quality, efficiency and client expectations and the fact that phone jobs are becoming twofold (include consulting and selling), new challenges arise for both, call center employees and their managers (Aksin, Armony, & Mehrota, 2007). TL is thought to be a proper form of management for such specific teams as call center representatives (McDermott et al., 2013). A transformative leader passes a positive message to the subordinates and encourages them to be flexible and is able to consolidate, motivate and support the team in order to achieve a common goal (Ruggieri & Abbate, 2013). The research shows TL increases customer service employees' self-efficacy, job satisfaction, affective commitment, and affective attitude towards customers, and have a stress-buffering effect. This together with its impact on emotion regulation, leads to an improvement in service behavior (Nerdinger & Pundt, 2018). The research, which has been carried out to reveal links between TL and behaviour of customer service representatives in the course of organizational changes, shows importance of interrelations between the leader and the subordinate. In the period of changes, a crucial role is played by a flexible approach of the leader, who has to inspire employees to change their beliefs, exchange information and focus on team work (Carter et al., 2012). Carter et al. (2012) emphasized insufficiency of research in the field and encourages researcher to extensively analyze a possible TL impact on subordinates. There is little research done to examine how leadership influence subordinates' reaction to organizational change (Valencic-Miller, 2017). The researchers had found no other study that specifically sought to describe how customer service specialists working by telephone experience TL during organizational change. This research was an exploratory investigation and represented a seminal of prospective future studies (Tiu, 2016). The present research deals with the question of how subordinates employed in customer service working by telephone experience TL during organizational change.

## 2. Method

In order to answer the research question, the descriptive phenomenological method of Giorgi (2005) was chosen. Giorgi's method provides a framework for conducting enquiry into the nature of subordinates' experiences of TL during organizational change. The phenomenological method allows disclosure of experiences on the basis of particular situations experienced by participants and not the phenomenon in general. Persons being interviewed are not regarded as subjects, but as participants of reflective research. A primary goal of phenomenology is understanding how individuals make sense of their lived experiences (Patton, 2002).

## 2.1. Participants and procedure

Purposive sampling was used for this study. All the participants met the following inclusion criteria: (a) presently working as customer service specialists by telephone, (b) were subordinates of managers who were identified as transformative leaders, (c) working for more than three months – were selected for further employment within the company after probationary period.

The selection was carried out in three stages.

During the first stage the selection of companies was made. The Internet was searched for Lithuanian companies having call centers to provide customer service. The selected companies were briefly introduced the topic and the objective of the research via email. Two companies agreed to take part in the study.

During the second stage the selection of leaders was made. One of the companies arranged a meeting with leaders of two teams and the other offered interviewing three managers. The companies also offered their premises for interviewing. Questions for the interviews had been compiled using Global Transformational Leadership scale Lithuanian version as to allow identification of TL features (Stelmokienė & Endriulaitienė, 2009). The interviewees were informed about the conversations being audio taped granting use and temporary storage of the record solely for the purpose of the research.

The records later were analyzed to identify leaders exposing TL features (Stelmokienė & Endriulaitienė, 2009). The analysis led to the selection of both participants from the first company and one participant from the second. The selected leaders were later contacted to arrange meetings with their subordinates. The managers agreed to cooperate and arranged the meetings.

During the third stage the selection of the study participants was made. On arrival to the first company, the managers offered a separate meeting room for interviewing subordinates selected at random. The selected subordinates were briefly introduced the topic and the procedure and asked their agreement to take part in the research. In the first group, 3 employees of the 4 questioned, agreed to take part in the study. A similar meeting was held with the manager of the second team to end up with 1 volunteer of 3 questioned. Interview time and venues were individually arranged.

Then, the manager selected from the other company was asked a permission to select their employees for interviewing. The selection was made in accordance to the same procedure as in the case of the first company. 3 employees were questioned and all 3 agreed to take part in the study. Interview time and venues were individually arranged.

All the participants wanted to be interviewed in the premises of the companies they worked for. At the onset of each interview, the general information on the survey was presented once again and the interviewees were informed about the interviews being recorded, granting full confidentiality of the data and eventual deletion of the records.

In total 7 subordinates (2 men and 5 women) aged 24–36 participated in this study. This sample size is rather typical in phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2007). The first question of the interview was: “Can you recall the last change in your organization and your manager’s role in it? How did you feel and what did you experience?”

## 2.2. Data analysis

The interviews were audio taped, transcribed and analyzed according to the procedures of phenomenological method (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2002). The data analysis was carried out in four stages.

During the first stage of phenomenological analysis the descriptions were individually read several times in order to obtain an adequate sense of each as a whole.

During the second stage of analysis descriptions were broken down into meaning units.

During the third stage of analysis each meaning unit of all seven descriptions was transformed into a psychological terminology while keeping the essential meaning expressed by the participant.

During the fourth stage of analysis transformed meaning units were scanned to determine the composite structures that covered the key constituents of each description. The final structure was obtained from the seven descriptions that revealed how subordinates experience TL during organizational change. Both authors discussed and approved the final structure and the composite structures.

## 3. Results

After reviewing the transformed meaning units from all seven descriptions, it was decided that the seven descriptions could be integrated into a single structure depicting how subordinates employed in customer service working by telephone experience TL during organizational change.

The final structure shows that customer service specialists working by telephone perceive organizational change as a considerable experience, often accompanied by negative emotions, confusion, stress, fear, uncertainties (see Table 1). A transformative leader introduces a change as a natural and positive process allowing further professional improvement, learning and skills development. A transformative leader is able to create a friendly working atmosphere and clearly introduce goals to the team thus encouraging employee’s commitment and willingness to be part of the team and collectively pursue a desirable objective. A transformative leader sets an example of constructive knowledge sharing: uses all possible media to inform each subordinate on the ongoing change, delegates duties and encourages learning. Having acknowledged diverse qualities of the subordinates, a transformative leader seeks a better cognition of each team member, arranges individual meetings and training and finds individual means to encourage the team. A transformative leader is flexible and promptly reacts to an ongoing change, is sensitive to the situation and the subordinate, is attentive



and supportive and clearly communicates their message to people.

Table 1. Composite structures with descriptions of participants' experience

Structures	Descriptions of Participants' Experience
Change associated negative experiences	Participant D: <i>sees the change as negative as it took employees' free time: the employees felt stressed because when the change was introduced, they had to reschedule their timetables and reset their personal priorities.</i> Participant E: <i>had no experience in the field before employment and therefore the need to update freshly acquired knowledge was a serious challenge causing negative experiences and stress.</i>
Development of rational and emotional commitment to the team	Participant A: <i>The manager emphasizes the role of individual employees in the teamwork and in the achievement of common goals.</i> Participant C: <i>The manager is not limited to traditional ways of promotion and support: the subordinates are encouraged and supported by means of competitive games in small groups and the awarded prizes promote a deeper cognition of each other and stronger mutual relationships.</i>
Knowledge sharing and development of positive ideas about the change	Participant C: <i>"The manager introduced the upcoming change as a natural process emphasizing its benefits for the client and the employee"</i> Participant D: <i>"The manager arranged a separate meeting to introduce the change and inform on the reasons and the expected positive outcomes"</i>
Individual attention to subordinates during the change	Participant E: <i>The change was facilitated by manager's individual support, mutual trust and the immediate feedback.</i> Participant F: <i>Meetings to instruct employees are rarely held; the manager usually instructs people individually in the most acceptable way.</i>
Importance of manager's personality during the change	Participant C: <i>is very positive about her manager and describes the manager as a calm, caring, reliable, informative and attentive person.</i> Participant D: <i>"The manager exposes outstanding abilities to adapt to the situation: she is very disciplined and good at handling stressful situations and, at the same time, is friendly and sociable with the subordinates."</i>

## Discussion and conclusions

The participants spoke of their experience of organizational change as being stressful. This finding is in agreement with the other research regarding employees' resistance to change (Bradutaanu, 2012; Tanner & Otto, 2016). During organizational change, a very important role is played by team managers who can either facilitate or hamper implementation of the change. Managers support

their subordinates until they feel safe and confident about the ongoing change (George, 2000). Earlier researchers are usually recommended to expose interest in employee feelings and reveals that transformative leadership is a suitable leadership form helping subordinates to survive organizational changes (Carter et al., 2012; Ahmad et al., 2014; Martin, 2015).

Another finding was that participants emphasize the importance for the manager to maintain a rational and emotional commitment to the team in all possible ways. Previous research also shows that a transformative leader invites the team to collaborate, consolidates the team for achievement of the common goal (McCann et al., 2006; Ruggieri & Abbate, 2013), encourages knowledge sharing (Carter et al., 2012), motivates the team to review their beliefs for the sake of the team's benefit (McCann et al., 2006; Carter et al., 2012) and thus, upholds commitment of the team members and maintains positive atmosphere within the team. However, our findings are contrary to the study by Khoo and Bruch maintaining that individual attention paid to each employee, being one of the features of transformative leadership, may as well have a negative impact on the team (focus on individual achievements may hamper the overall team performance and consolidation) (Khoo & Bruch, 2008).

Participants of the present research referred to knowledge sharing and passing a positive message about the change as a key role of the manager. Research by Zhang and Peterson (2011) also shows that when the leader actively advises, carefully instructs and supports the team, the subordinates see it as an opportunity to acquire knowledge and develop professionally and therefore, feel more confident and are more prone to share knowledge with their colleagues.

Participants of our research also spoke of their manager's individual support during organizational changes they had experienced. Manager's individual attention to their subordinates is an inseparable part of TL, frequently referred to as one of the key attributes of a transformative leader (Khoo & Burch, 2008; Ruggieri & Abbate, 2013). Scientific research reveals that subordinates are more likely to achieve success and increase their productive potential when they are paid individual attention by the manager (Boerner, Eisenbeiss, & Griesser, 2007).

Some research, however, comes up with negative consequences of manager's individual attention paid to employees as it may, for example, encourage people to focus on their individual development and learning and adversely affect employee interrelationships and team consolidation (Khoo & Burch, 2008).

It may seem that manager's individual attention to employees and the overall team consolidation are two contradicting attributes of a transformative manager; however, our research shows that in fact, the attributes complement each other. When the manager truly knows their subordinates, he or she can make an impact on and model subordinate's behavior in a favorable way. A transformative

leader is able to shape and modify individual aspirations, values, needs and priorities of the subordinate into those common for the entire team (McCann et al., 2006). A conclusion that the two attributes are closely interconnected and complement each other may be arrived at: on identification of individual characters of subordinates, the manager may establish a close contact with the them and subsequently affect their conduct in the way desired by the subordinate (delegation of duties, peer training), what eventually directs employees towards mutual cognition, support and aspiration for a common goal.

Participants of our research unanimously highlighted importance of the leader's personality. Speaking about leader's personality, several qualities that help employees to survive organizational change may be distinguished, including carefulness, flexibility, impartiality, efficiency, sincerity, supportiveness, stability, discipline, etc. According to the research participants, leader's personal qualities both, inspire and motivate and affect employee's emotional state and conduct at work when important decisions have to be made. A transformative leader develops a sense of confidence and security among their subordinates. Earlier research also shows that a transformative leader is ethical, consistent and decisive, fully dedicates to the team, inspires subordinates to believe in the organization's goals, encourages employees to accept challenges and motivates and instructs on how to deal with the challenges. A transformative leader makes their best to clearly explain importance of a set task and exposes confidence in the subordinate's potential to take up the task (Ahmad et al., 2014; Valencic-Miller, 2017).

All five structures distinguished in the data analysis are closely interrelated and complement each other. Results of our research reveal that a transformative leader is important to both, the organization and the subordinate as they equally represent ambitions and expectations of both parties.

The results of the present study contribute to the better understanding of the experiences of TL by subordinates working as customer service specialists by telephone in the context of organizational changes.

The conducted phenomenological analysis of transformative leadership from the subordinate's perspective reveals that subordinates under transformative leadership feel secure and empowered, have extensive data about the ongoing change, receive full manager's support and individual attention, share acquired knowledge in performing delegated duties and collectively aspire for a common generally accepted goal set by the manager and consequently are more positive about organizational change.

The present research discloses the inner experience of customer service specialists working by telephone of TL during organizational change and corroborates theories described in scientific literature stating that a transformative leader promotes best qualities of the subordinate, earns trust and confidence of and builds up strong relationships with their team.

The present study looks into subordinates working in two organizations. Further research should involve subordinates working in several organizations and in different countries.

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## APPENDIX

### Notations

### Abbreviations

TL – Transformational Leadership.