

Enhancing Safety Performance via Safety-Specific Transformational Leadership

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Introduction

The importance of transformational leadership has been touted in the business and organizational literature as transformational leadership affects employee attitudes, work-related outcomes, trust in management, organizational commitment, work performance and satisfaction with leadership (Avolio & Bass, 2002 & Barling, Loughlin & Kelloway, 2002). More importantly for the safety and health professional, the application of safety-specific transformational leadership tactics and strategies provides an opportunity to enhance safety climate, occupational safety and health performance and occupational injury outcomes. This paper presents an overview of transformational leadership, safety-specific transformational leadership tactics and strategies, and highlights the relationship between safety-specific transformational leadership and safety climate, occupational safety performance and outcomes. This information is of practical importance to the field of occupational safety as it provides direction for interventions and strategies that can be incorporated into an organization's efforts to manage occupational safety and health.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership was first proposed by James MacGregor Burns (1978) and was later researched and expanded upon by Bernard Bass (1985). Following Burns' work, Bass elucidated the need for a broader view of leadership. As part of Bass' initial work he sought to extend the definition of the transactional leader and to enhance a model for transformational leadership, citing his differences with Burns. Transactional leadership, which is based on instrumental compliance, motivates followers to perform through an exchange relationship (i.e. followers receive a wage for complying with a leader's directions). In contrast, transformational leadership motivates followers to achieve performance beyond expectations through transforming the followers' attitudes and beliefs versus merely gaining compliance (Bass, 1985; Yukl, 2006; Rafferty & Griffin, 2004). In his book, *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations*, Bass originally indicated that transformational leaders transform and motivate followers through the following three inter-related manners:

1. by raising levels of awareness and levels of consciousness about the importance and value of outcomes,
2. by getting individuals to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the group, team or organization, and
3. by stimulating higher-order needs.

Bass (1985) also further delineated his transformational model, indicating that there were multiple sub-dimensions to transformational leadership including charisma (now commonly referred to as idealized influence), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. These dimensions are commonly referred to as the Four-I's of transformational leadership. A summary of each of the dimensions, based on Bass' work, is provided below.

Idealized Influence

Transformational leaders often consider the needs of workers over themselves. These leaders are often admired, respected and trusted by their followers. And, we see that these leaders serve as role models and employees often want to emulate the behaviors exhibited by the leaders.

Inspirational Motivation

Transformational leaders are enthusiastic, optimistic, use inspirational communication and can articulate their visions to their followers. These leaders are also able to build confidence through these techniques.

Intellectual Stimulation

Transformational leaders stimulate followers to be creative and innovative. They encourage followers to question assumptions, challenge the status quo, be critical thinkers and to try new approaches to tasks and operations.

Individualized Consideration

Transformational leaders pay attention to each individual and his/her needs. These leaders effectively listen and ensure open communication by allowing a two-way communication exchange. These leaders also foster supportive relationships and exhibit concern for their followers.

Bass' model and theory for transformational leadership has been researched and empirically examined more than other models of transformational and transactional leadership, including Burns' seminal work (Yukl, 2006). Additionally, Bass' theoretical framework continues to serve as the basis for current studies and workplace interventions. Despite the continued use of Bass' model and framework, it has not come without some criticism due to the lack of empirical support for hypothesized factor structures and narrowly focused sub-dimensions (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004 & Yukl, 2006).

Today, revised and expanded models of transformational leadership theory also include laissez-faire leadership. The Full Range Leadership Model highlighted by Bass & Riggio (2006) indicates that laissez-faire leadership is the avoidance or absence of leadership and is the most ineffective style of leadership. Bass and Riggio also state that in laissez-faire leadership necessary decisions are not made, actions are delayed, responsibilities of leadership are ignored and authority remains unused. This form of leadership, beyond transactional theory, including management by exception is indicative of non-transaction.

Safety-Specific Transformational Leadership

Over the last decade, there has been an increased interest in trying to understand how organizational factors, including leadership, impact and influence occupational safety and health outcomes. Some of this interest has been based on transformational leadership theory. Much of this work has focused on safety-specific transformational leadership (SSTL). Safety-specific transformational leadership incorporates transformational leadership tactics and strategies, but emphasizes occupational safety (Barling, Loughlin & Kelloway, 2002).

Safety-specific transformational leadership provides an opportunity to enhance safety climate and to improve occupational safety and health outcomes, including safety consciousness, safety voice, safety behaviors, communication and incidents and injury outcomes. Previous empirical research does illustrate that significant relationships exist between safety-specific transformational leadership and occupational safety and health outcomes. The relationships are through both direct and indirect, whereby safety climate often mediates the relationship between safety-specific transformational leadership and outcomes. While safety-specific transformational leadership provides an opportunity to enhance safety climate and improve worker safety and health, laissez-faire leadership can be detrimental to occupational safety and health outcomes and injury. Laissez-faire leadership is passive, is devoid of effective decision-making and exhibits little concern for the worker and their health and well-being.

Indirect Influence and Safety Climate

Specific empirical studies illustrate the significance that safety-specific transformational leadership exerts on safety-related events and workplace injury (Barling, Loughlin & Kelloway, 2002; Zohar, 2002 & Kelloway, Mullen & Francis, 2006; Mullen & Kelloway, 2009). In the studies, it was evident that safety climate mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and occupational safety. While there is no universally accepted definition of safety climate, a consistent working definition of the concept is the shared perceptions among members of an organization concerning the importance of workplace safety (DeJoy et al, 2004; Flin et al, 2000 & Zohar, 2003). As a measurement, safety climate is an assessment of surface level manifestations of the organization's safety culture. Consistently, management commitment to safety appears to be the core aspect in safety climate.

Barling, Loughlin & Kelloway (2002) tested and confirmed the link between transformational leadership and occupational injuries. Barling et al., in a study using structural equation modeling with food and beverage employees determined that there was strong support for a mediation model linking transformational leadership and occupational injuries through safety climate. In the study, the researchers also concluded that perceived safety climate exerted a significant negative effect on safety-related events, or accidents for a more general definition. The study also did illustrate the significant, positive relationship between safety-related events or accidents and occupational injuries.

Barling et al. support the literature that safety climate can be enhanced through safety-specific transformational leadership. Through addressing Bass' (1985) four influence processes or the Four-I's (Bass & Avolio, 1994) with an emphasis on safety, safety climate can be enhanced. Prior research provides insight as to how the overall model or relations impact safety-related events, as perceptions of safety climate ultimately shape behavior-outcome expectations. A strong and positive safety climate developed through safety-specific transformational leadership should support and reinforce both compliance and contextual

behaviors. Contextual behaviors would include promoting and supporting safety, going beyond the required safety standards and taking initiative for health and safety through extra-role behaviors or organization citizenship behavior (Zohar, 2003). While Barling et al. did not measure these behaviors, it is postulated that the negative relationship associated with accidents is attributed to enhanced safety performance and behaviors of the worker in the context of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). Throughout the safety climate literature, the concept of social exchange theory is the main theoretical construct linking safety climate and successful safety-related outcomes. Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) posits that an obligation for reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) is created when one party acts in a manner that is beneficial to another party. Not only has this theoretical stance been utilized to link safety climate to safety-related outcomes such as behaviors (Hofmann & Morgeson, 1999), it has also been used to explain the motivational process of high-performance work systems (Whitener, 2001) and the reciprocal nature of employee behavior and commitment to organizations with established human resource practices (Tsui, Pearce, Porter & Tripoli, 1997).

Kelloway, Mullen and Francis (2006) completed a study using the same framework or model utilized by Barling et al. (2002). This study did differ though in that the study concurrently examined the effect of passive leadership behavior along with the examination of transformational leadership. Kelloway et al. (2006) used the Bass & Avolio (1994) definition of passive leadership to include laissez-faire and management-by-exception (passive) styles. The study by Kelloway et al. conducted with a smaller population of younger workers from varied occupations presented limitations associated with a smaller sample size and diversified organizational samples. Despite some of the weaknesses, the researchers were able to replicate the findings of Barling et al. with regard to transformational leadership. Interestingly and in support of the leadership literature, Kelloway et al. were able to illustrate that passive leadership emerged as a separate construct from safety-specific transformational leadership. In the structural equation modeling study, passive leadership had a negative effect on safety consciousness and safety climate and was associated with an increase in safety-related events or accidents and injury. This reaffirms statements made by Zohar (2003) that laissez-faire leadership scores were negatively related with climate.

While safety climate has been the predominant mediating variable to safety outcomes, recent research also illustrates that safety-specific transformational leadership can positively influence safety voice – citizenship behavior and that this relationship is mediated by affect-based trust beliefs (Conchie, Taylor & Donald, 2011). Although this recent finding provides another link between safety-specific transformational leadership and safety outcomes, more work is needed to discover other mediating factors.

Direct Effects of Transformational Leadership

The effects of safety-specific transformational leadership on occupational safety and health have also been documented through studies that examined the direct effects of transformational leadership on occupational safety and health outcomes. Hofmann and Morgeson (2004) reviewed studies and provided commentary summarizing these studies. In their chapter, Hofmann and Morgeson summarized a presentation by Williams, Turner and Parker, which indicated that transformational leadership was positively related to safety compliance and safety proactivity. Additional details of direct effects are described by Zohar (2003) to include open communication, improved transfer of learning as a result of enhanced development orientation, enhanced safety citizenship behavior and safety participation, and the inclusion of safety as a core value as a result of idealized influence attributes.

Application & Practical Importance

As is evident from the research noted above, safety-specific transformational leadership provides an opportunity to enhance safety climate and to improve worker safety and health through both direct and indirect means. This concept is of theoretical importance for researchers, but is of practical importance to the safety and health professional and particularly upper management within work organizations as it provides information that can be utilized and incorporated into an organization's efforts to manage workplace safety and health. Zohar (2002), as did Barling, Loughlin & Kelloway (2002) and Kelloway, Mullen & Francis (2006) illustrated that safety-specific transformational leadership predicted injury rates with the effect mediated by climate. This implication emphasizes that safety-specific transformational leadership techniques provide an opportunity to enhance worker perceptions of safety climate and provide an opportunity to prevent accidents through enhanced compliance-oriented and contextual behaviors. Barling et al. (2002) and Zacharatos, Barling and Iverson (2005) provide guidance as to how safety can be strategically emphasized through the four influence processes. Their guidance suggests the following:

Idealized Influence

Leaders should convey safety as a core value through personal behaviors and commitment and should be role models by doing what is appropriate, moral and safe. They should not emphasize expediency or productivity over safety.

Inspirational Motivation

Leaders should enthusiastically and optimistically convince followers that they can attain levels of safety not previously considered attainable. These leaders should also challenge workers to go beyond their needs for the good of others.

Intellectual Stimulation

Leaders should help followers confront long held assumptions about safety. They should encourage workers to critically think about safety in new and innovative ways. These leaders should also encourage worker involvement in safety initiatives, and should work to encourage open communication and information sharing about safety and health issues.

Individualized Consideration

Leaders should be empathetic and should be truly concerned about their workers' safety, health and well-being. This should be evident at all times and requires leaders to enact what they propose with regard to safety and health.

Direct effects were also noted in the previously highlighted research. This suggests that the above influence process tactics and strategies may also provide a strategy for practitioners and upper management to improve communication, enhance learning, enhance compliance and contextual safety behaviors and provide a means to incorporate safety as a core value of the organization.

Possibly even more important, from a prevention aspect, is the research by Kelloway et al. that suggested that passive leadership techniques, whereby safety issues would be ignored or leaders would not become actively involved, had a negative effect on safety climate and ultimately on accidents and injuries. In fact, Kelloway and colleagues made a conclusion that being uninvolved in safety leads to adverse safety outcomes.

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