

THE MEDIATOR ROLE OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP BETWEEN ASSERTIVENESS AND JOB PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

Assertive relationships are those in which the underlying attitude is one of "I'm OK: You're OK" – there is mutual respect and regard, a curiosity about differences, and a willingness to work together in overcoming setbacks. In such organizations, people feel that they matter, others matter and that everyone is part of achieving business success through engagement with each other and with what they are doing. Especially in this type of organization leadership style represent an important factor that affects the enhancement of organizational performance and employee's job performance, and what objectives they should pursue. Literature reviews on transformational leadership show its positive association with performance outcomes, particularly in private companies. A great deal of research has examined the significant impact of transformational leadership on work outcomes such as work performance and employee reactions and demonstrated that leaders who adopt the transformational leadership approach are better able to motivate employees to perform beyond expectations. The current research aims at exploring the relationship between assertiveness and employee job performance (task and contextual), additionally examining the mediating effect of transformational leadership. The study is based on a cross-sectional design, data is collected from 138 employees through the following structured questionnaires: MLQ – Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, Job Performance Scale, and Rathus Assertiveness Schedule. The results of the study suggest that assertiveness positively predicts job performance. Particularly, the study also finds that transformational leadership significantly mediated the effect of transformational leadership on job performance. Specifically, the findings revealed a positive and significant relationship between assertiveness and both job performance and transformational leadership, as well as the fact assertiveness through transformational leadership, fosters job performance. Based on these findings, it can be observed that assertiveness, job performance, and transformational leadership are important elements that can improve organizational performance. The practical implications of the recent study are discussed as well as some directions for future research in the area.

Keywords

transformational leadership; assertiveness; job performance; mediation.

Introduction

The present study starts from the observation that effective leadership is a complex social phenomenon, based entirely on context and dependent on the situation (Zeb, Ahmad, & Saeed, 2018, p.103). Among the most influential theories of leadership in the last decades, the theory of transformational leadership highlights the direct impact of leaders on individual followers (Zwingmann, Wegge, Wolf, Rudolf, Schmidt, & Richter, 2014).

In addition to transformational leadership, viewed in an organizational context, assertiveness contributes to the development of a positive and open communication climate, supporting the development of employees' self-esteem and facilitating trust between leaders and followers. Assertiveness is thus a balance between being aggressive and submissive, a balance that in turn encourages self-respect, respect for others, and cooperation (Lange & Jakubowski, 1976). "At work, assertiveness emphasizes so many of the skills we use in our relationships with others, such as communication, negotiation, and leadership" (Garner, 2012, p. 13). Starting from those findings, our first hypothesis is: *Assertiveness is positively related to transformational leadership.*

According to Plafman (2017), assertiveness represents also a body of research that has now studied many disciplines such as health, well-being, sports, and organizational studies. Also, according to Marie and Ferjan (2010), assertiveness can help boost one's power and self-confidence, thus increasing task performance. In a study on student population, Prakash and Devi (2015) stated that assertiveness is an important behavior that every student must have for them to achieve more in their academic performance. Therefore, our second hypothesis is: *Assertiveness is positively related to professional performance.*

Transformational leadership is defined as "generating enthusiasm for a vision," a high level of individualized consideration, creating opportunities for employee development, setting high expectations for performance, and acting as a role model to gain employee respect, admiration, and trust" (Lewis, Yarker, & Donaldson-Feilder, 2012, p.220). Transformational leadership empowers and motivates individuals to improve their potential, develop skills, and improve self-efficacy and self-esteem (Kovjanic et al., 2013). Moreover, transformational leadership shapes the behavior of followers by motivating them to achieve performance beyond expectations by transforming their attitudes, beliefs, and values (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004). Because transformational leaders "provide constructive feedback to their followers, encourage them to think creatively about problems, and show the ability to convince them to exert effort, their subordinates should generally benefit from such influence and more easily achieve higher levels of formal performance" (Cavazotte, Moreno, & Bernardo, 2012, p. 494). Therefore, our third hypothesis is: *Transformational leadership is positively related to professional performance.*

According to one of the first conceptualization (Bass, 1998), transformational leadership covers four major components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1998). Later on, the idealized influence was further divided into idealized influence – attributed and idealized influence – behavior (Bass & Riggio, 2010; Luthans, 2005). Transformational leadership has an essential impact on organizational performance, as well as on the employees' attitude and emotional encouragement (Bass & Riggio, 2010; Northhouse, 2010). In an exploratory approach, the forth hypothesis is: *Transformational leadership mediates the relationship between assertiveness and professional performance.*

Methods

In this study, we aim to determine the effects of assertiveness on work performance and transformational leadership; as well as to investigate the mediating role of the transformational leadership between assertiveness and work performance.



Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical framework proposed for the present study. It can be seen from the diagram that the study aims at firstly examining the relations between assertiveness, transformational leadership, and work performance; and, secondly, at investigating the mediating role of the transformational leadership between the assertiveness and work performance.

The sample consisted of 138 employees (men = 31, women = 107). The age range of the participants was from 18 to 59 years ($M = 23.54$, $SD = 7.46$). For data collection, a purposive convenience sampling technique was used. A self-reported data collection technique was employed. Before completion, the purpose of the study was briefly explained to the participants and informed consent was obtained. All participants were ensured about the confidentiality of the data and that it would be only used for research purposes. They were invited to fill in a set of questionnaires compiling the following measures:

a) Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Form 5X) - Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, is a structured, verbal, omnibus measure of leadership styles. The questionnaire consists of 45 items, covering what is known as the "full-range" leadership model (Bass & Avolio, 1990). The full range model of leadership assumes the existence of differences in the effectiveness of leadership styles, based on the active/passive distinction. Broad categories of leadership and MLQ scales range from Passive / Avoidant Leadership (Laissez-Faire), through the classical model of Transactional Leadership and up to Transformational Leadership. Ratings were completed on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4 (frequently). Dhammika, Fais, & Thi Lip (2014) reported good internal consistency coefficients for all transformational leadership components: 0.70 for idealized influence (attributed), 0.80 for intellectual stimulation, 0.86 for individual appreciation, 0.87 for inspirational motivation, and 0.89 for idealized influence (behaviors) (Dhammika et al., 2014).

b) Job Performance Scale, developed by S.A. Goodman and D.J. Svyantek (1999), consists of sixteen items, covering two dimensions of performance in the workplace. The odd items are related to Contextual Performance, while the remaining even items are related to Performance tasks. The answers are distributed on a four-options Likert scale from 1

(Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree). In a study by Yusoff, Ali, and Khan (2014), the internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach’s Alpha) of this test was 0.82 (Yusoff et al., 2014).

c) The RAS – Rathus Assertiveness Schedule, was developed in 1973 by Spencer Rathus as a scale designed to measure a person’s level of assertiveness (Rathus, 1973). The scale contains 30 items in total, with items scored from *very characteristic of me* to *very uncharacteristic*. A total score is obtained by adding numerical responses for each item, after changing the signs of reversed items. Gustafson (1992) found that the original scale was reliable (Cronbach’s alpha = .82).

Results

After collection, the data were analyzed using SPSS 22.0 version software, including the PROCESS macro for SPSS version 3.2.02 developed by Andrew Hayes. Finally, we carried out a Sobel test (quantpsy.org/sobel/sobel.htm) to probe the mediation effect (Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

Hypothesis 1. Assertiveness is positively related to transformational leadership.

To test this hypothesis, the Pearson intercorrelation coefficients were calculated, both between the assertiveness and the composite transformational leadership score, and between assertiveness and the five sub-scales of transformational leadership. The results presented in Table1 and Table 2 highlight the existence of significant positive relationships, both at the composite score ($r = 0.259, p < 0.01$) and for all five dimensions of transformational leadership, according to the Full Range Leadership Model.

Table 1. Transformational Leadership and Assertiveness intercorrelations (N=138)

		Transformational Leadership
Assertiveness	Pearson Correl.	.259**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002

The in-depth analysis highlights the strongest correlation between assertiveness and the individualized consideration scale of transformational leadership ($r = 0.241, p < 0.01$). In other words, the higher the level of assertiveness, the higher the individual appreciation. People with high scores on the Individual Appreciation scale pay attention to the achievement and development needs of each individual, acting as a mentor or a coach, allocating time, effort, and individual resources to help those around them to grow, to develop (Avolio & Bass, 2004, p.6).

Although the correlations between assertiveness and intellectual stimulation ($r = 0.216, p < 0.05$) and between assertiveness and idealized influence (behavior) ($r = 0.189, p < 0.05$) are smaller, they highlight significant intercorrelations, of lower intensity. Therefore, leaders with high scores on the intellectual stimulation scale identify the people who stimulate and cultivate the innovation and creativity of those around them. This type of leader avoids mocking or publicly criticizing the mistakes of team members,

thus encouraging them to experiment and be creative. These leaders constantly ask their subordinates to find new ideas and creative solutions to common problems, being continuously involved in the resolution process (Avolio & Bass, 2004, p. 6). Moreover, Ames (2009), found that a certain level of assertiveness seems essential for interpersonal and organizational effectiveness.

Table 2. Transformational Leadership scales and Assertiveness intercorrelations (N=138)

		Idealized Influence (Attributed)	Idealized Influence (Behavior)
Assertiveness	Pearson Correl.	.225**	.189*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.008	.026

		Inspirational Motivation	Intellectual Stimulation	Individualized Consideration
Assertiveness	Pearson Correl.	.222**	.216*	.241**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.009	.011	.004

Significant positive correlations were also observed between assertiveness and idealized influence (attributed) ($r = 0.225$, $p < 0.01$), respectively between assertiveness and inspirational motivation ($r = 0.222$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, the higher the level of assertiveness, the higher the level of influence (attributed). The scale of idealized influence (attributed) detects through its high scores a person's ability to exert influence, inspiring power, arousing pride among his "followers", ensuring and offering trust, overcoming individual "interests" in favor of the group, and serving as a reference model for those who follow them (Avolio & Bass, 2004, p. 5).

We also note that the higher the level of assertiveness, the higher the level of inspirational motivation. According to Avolio & Bass (2004) leaders with high scores on this scale behave innovatively, stimulating both the individual and the team spirit, increasing the enthusiasm and optimism among the team members. These leaders speak optimistically about the future, have a confident vision of the future, express confidence in the fact that the goals will be achieved, emphasizing the importance of each individual in achieving them (Avolio & Bass, 2004, p.6).

Hypothesis 2. Assertiveness is positively related to professional performance.

The distinction between task performance and contextual performance is accepted by an increasing number of authors (Conway, 1999; McManus & Kelly, 1999; Van Scotter & Motowidlo, 1996). The term "task performance" refers to the main technical behaviors and activities involved in the work. "Contextual performance" refers to behaviors and activities that contribute to the social and psychological core of the organization, thus

contributing to the task (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997). Common examples of contextual performance behaviors include peer support, task volunteering, and advocacy (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). These behaviors are important for achieving organizational results and especially for sustaining their long-term success (Allen & Rush, 1998; Ostroff, 1992).

The results showed in Table 3 highlight the existence of a significant positive correlation between assertiveness and the total performance score ($r = 0.245$, $p < 0.01$), which leads to the confirmation of the previously stated hypothesis. In other words, the higher the level of assertiveness, the higher the professional performance.

Table 3. Assertiveness and Performance intercorrelations

		Total perform.	Contextual perform.	Task perform.
Assertiveness	Pearson Correl.	.245**	.191*	.240**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.025	.005

Moving further with the analysis, we have observed also significant positive correlations with both task performance ($r = 0.240$, $p < 0.01$), and with contextual performance ($r = 0.191$, $p < 0.05$). In previous studies that highlighted correlations between assertiveness and professional performance, the authors observed that both attitude-based training and competency-based training improved attitudes toward team members' assertiveness which in turn was essential in creating behavioral changes (Smith-Jentsch, Salas, & Baker, 1996).

Hypothesis 3. Transformational leadership is positively related to professional performance.

Table 4 shows the transformational leadership style to be positively correlated with the composite score of work performance ($r = .320$, $p < .01$), thus confirming the hypothesis. The same significant results were also identified for the correlations between the transformational leadership and all the job performance scales (table 6), thus providing additional evidence for the expected relation. Hence, all correlations ended up to be positive and significant at a .01 level, starting with Contextual performance ($r = .286$, $p < .01$) and Task performance ($r = .282$, $p < .01$).

Table 4. Transformational Leadership and Performance intercorrelations

		Total perform.	Contextual perform.	Task perform.
Transformational Leadership	Pearson Correl.	.320**	.286**	.282**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.001	.001

In previous studies that have highlighted correlations between transformational leadership and professional performance, the results indicate that leadership

satisfaction mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and professional performance (Jyoti & Bahu, 2015). Also, in a recent study (2019), the authors stated that transformational leadership positively and completely predicts professional performance. In particular, the study finds that CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) significantly mediated the effect of transformational leadership on professional performance (Manzoor et al., 2019). Also, in another recent study, the results showed that engagement mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB), while engagement partially mediates the link between transformational leadership and professional performance (Buil, Martinez, & Matute, 2019).

In an exploratory approach, we have also analyzed the correlations between the five dimensions of transformational leadership and professional performance. Table 5 shows significant positive correlations between all five dimensions of transformational leadership and professional performance ($p < 0.01$ for all five dimensions of transformational leadership), as well as between the five dimensions of transformational leadership and contextual performance, respectively task performance.

Table 5. Transformational Leadership scales and Performance intercorrelations (N=138)

		Total perform.	Contextual perform.	Task perform.
Idealized Influence (Attributed)	Pearson Correl.	.275**	.244**	.244**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.004	.004
Idealized Influence (Behavior)	Pearson Correl.	.299**	.258**	.271**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.002	.001
Inspirational Motivation	Pearson Correl.	.288**	.257**	.253**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.002	.003
Intellectual Stimulation	Pearson Correl.	.263**	.251**	.217*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.003	.011
Individualized Consideration	Pearson Correl.	.240**	.207*	.218*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005	.015	.010

Hypothesis 4. Transformational leadership mediates the relationship between assertiveness and professional performance.

To test the proposed mediation model, the PROCESS (Hayes, 2012) macro for SPSS was used (version 3.2.02). In this regression analysis, assertiveness was used as a predictor, transformational leadership as a mediator, and job performance as an outcome variable.

In Step 1 of the mediation model, the regression of the assertiveness on the work performance, ignoring the mediator, was significant, $F(1,138) = 8,67$, $p < 0,01$, $R^2 = 0,06$, $b = 0,08$, $t(138) = 2,94$, $p < 0,01$.

Step 2 showed that the regression of the assertiveness on the mediator, transformational leadership, was also significant, $F(1,138) = 9,74$, $p < 0,01$, $R^2 = 0,06$, $b = 0,19$, $t(138) = 3,13$, $p < 0,01$.

Step 3 of the mediation process showed that the mediator (transformational leadership), controlling for assertiveness, was significant, $F(2,137) = 10,15$, $p < 0,01$, $R^2 = 0,13$, $b = 0,13$, $t(137) = 3,31$, $p < 0,01$.

Step 4 of the analyses revealed that controlling for the mediator - transformational leadership, assertiveness was a less significant predictor of work performance, $b = 0,06$, $t(137) = 2,09$, $p < 0,05$.

As suggested in Baron and Kenny (1986), the Aroian version of the Sobel test was conducted and it was found that transformational leadership mediated the relationship between assertiveness and the work performance ($z = 2,27$, $p = 0,023$).

Conclusions

Data analysis showed a strong positive relationship between *assertiveness* and *transformational leadership*, and the in-depth analysis highlights the strongest correlation between *assertiveness* and the *individualized consideration* dimension of transformational leadership. Another important conclusion that emerges from the data analysis is that the higher the level of assertiveness, the higher the professional performance. Moreover, the mediation analysis revealed that transformational leadership mediated the relation between assertiveness and work performance.

One of the main weaknesses of this study was the use of a cross-sectional design, which does not allow for an assessment of the cause-effect relation. Also, another limitation, common to many studies, is related to the fact the questionnaires were self-reported, and the tendency is to investigate and report attitudes, rather than behaviors (Hughes, Lee, Tian, Newman, & Legood, 2018). Another issue to be considered when evaluating the results is the small sample, which makes the results difficult to generalize.

Future research directions offer the opportunity to expand the topics addressed in this study by adding new subjects of discussion that represent current concern in the field of organizational sciences in general and leadership sciences in particular. Thus, topics of interest in the sense of future research directions may be represented by variables such as psychological empowerment, organizational communication climate, psychological empowerment, organizational trust, or innovative work behavior.

In recent decades, as evidenced by research (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Spreitzer, 1995), the concept of psychological empowerment has received increasing attention in the field of organizational studies. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) defined empowerment as encompassing the delegation of authority and sharing of the resources, together with enabling means of motivation through enhancing self-efficiency (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Arnold, Arad, Rhoades, and Dragsow (2000) and Conger and Kanungo (1988) highlight a direct link between leadership behaviors and psychological empowerment.

Scott and Bruce (1994) stated that, for the long-term survival of organizations in today's economic and social environment, one of the most important concepts is represented by the innovative work behavior (Scott & Bruce, 1994). Innovative work behavior was defined by De Jong and Den Hartog (2008) as that specific behavior of a person aimed at the initiation and intentional introduction of new and useful ideas, processes, products or procedures, as well as the implementation of these ideas (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2008).

Another perspective on innovative work behavior is provided by Faraz, Yanxia, Ahmed, Estifo, and Raza (2018), who stated that innovative work behavior (IWB) is a process that contains four dimensions "exploring ideas, generating ideas, promoting ideas and implementing ideas" (Faraz et al., 2018, p. 54). In the present ever more complex globalized context, organizations are required to show increasing flexibility to adapt to this context, being conditioned by the need to be more innovative than ever (Agarwal, 2014). Therefore, the identification of factors that can predict and increase the innovative work behavior of employees has become an increasingly important concern of many organizations (Agarwal, 2014; Scott & Bruce, 1994).

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