Does the supervisor-subordinate relationship affect the effectiveness of transformational leadership on organizational commitment?

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Abstract

Purpose – By suggesting relational distance between supervisor and subordinate, this study examines the boundary condition of the impact of transformational leadership and organizational commitment in Korea.

Research design, data, and methodology – We collected survey data from employees in various industries in Korea. A total of 241 employees participated in this study. We conducted the hierarchical linear regression and confirmed moderating effects of relational distances (democratic, structural and affective distance) on the relationship between transformational leadership and organizational commitment.

Result – The results from 241 Korean employees show that transformational leadership is positively related to organizational commitment. Further, this relationship was moderated by structural distance and affective distance between supervisor and subordinate.

Conclusion – This study shed new light on how exercising transformational leadership can help raise employees' organizational commitment. Organizations should be concerned about the various relational distance between supervisor and subordinate.

Keywords: Transformational leadership, Relational distance, Organizational commitment

JEL Classification Code: M16, M31.

1. Introduction

Transformational leadership has been both conceptually and empirically well linked to organizational commitment across cultures for several decades (Avolio et al., 2004; Bono and Judge, 2003; Dumdum, Lowe, and Avolio, 2002; Walumbwa and Lawler, 2003). However, few studies have investigated the boundary conditions of the effectiveness of transformational leadership, which may strengthen or weaken the effect of transformational leadership on organizational commitment across cultures (Avolio et al., 2004; Jung, Yammarino, and Lee, 2009). To address this issue, we propose that the various types of the distance between supervisor and subordinate can be situational factors that may stronger or weaken the impact of transformational leadership on organizational commitment.

Understanding the distance between supervisor and subordinate is an important factor affecting leadership effectiveness because leadership itself is inherently relationship-based (Antonakis and Atwater, 2002). As the relationship between supervisor and subordinate is a fundamental aspect of organization dynamics (Jablin, 1979), much of this research has been examined from various perspectives, such as similarity, affect, power, LMX (Leader-member exchange) (e.g., Graen, 1976; Turban and Jones, 1988; Tsui and O'Reilly, 1989). However, prior research has examined two or three separately, resulting in limited implications (Napier and Ferris, 1993). Furthermore, previous studies have rarely examined empirically how various types of the distance between supervisor and subordinate moderate the link between leadership style and its effectiveness (Antonakis and Atwater, 2002; Napier and Ferris, 1993). Based on the above literature review, we consider three types of supervisor and subordinate distance; demographic, structural, and affective distance, simultaneously and call these relational distances of supervisor and subordinate. Also, we suggest that these can be boundary conditions of the transformational leadership effectiveness on organizational commitment.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Transformational Leadership and Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment refers to a 'psychological relationship between an employee and their organization which makes it less likely that employees voluntarily leave their organization' (Allen and Meyer, 1996). Among the various concepts of organizational commitment, Meyer and Allen's (1991) organizational commitment received the most attention (Cohen, 2003). Meyer and Allen's (1991) three-component organizational commitment model comprises affective, continuance, and normative commitment. The definition of affective commitment is that employees' emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization. Continuance commitment is defined as employees' awareness of the costs associated with leaving the organization. Normative commitment refers to a feeling of obligation that an employee ought to remain with the organization. Past studies have empirically found that working experiences, personal and organizational factors affect organizational commitment (Allen and Meyer, 1996; Meyer and Allen, 1997). In particular, transformational leadership has been extensively studied as one of the critical determinants of organizational commitment in various cultural and organizational environments (Bono and Judge, 2003; Dumdum et al., 2002; Walumbwa and Lawler, 2003).

Bass (1985) defined transformational leadership with four key dimensions. First, individualized consideration is the extent to which a leader cares for followers' needs, serves as a mentor, and listens carefully to subordinates' worries. Inspirational motivation is the extent to which a leader clearly shows the visions for the future, which may appeal to subordinates. Idealized influence is the extent to which a leader behaves charismatically in order to make followers identify with him or her. Lastly, intellectual stimulation is the extent to which a leader challenges job risks and assumptions and asks for subordinates' ideas. Several researchers suggest that transformational leaders are positively related to the organizational commitment of subordinates by encouraging subordinates to think more critically by adopting new approaches involving the decision-making process (Avolio, 1999). Also, the transformational leader inspires loyalty to the organization while appreciating and recognizing the various needs of every subordinate, which can further help to develop their potential. (Bass and Avolio, 2000). By encouraging subordinates to seek out new ways to solve problems and identifying with subordinates' needs, transformational leaders can motivate and encourage their subordinates to get more involved in their work, leading to increased organizational commitment (Walumbwa and Lawler, 2003). This perspective has been supported by prior studies that subordinates' organizational commitment was higher when leaders were encouraged to participate in the decision-making process (Rhodes and Steers, 1981), showed more consideration (Bycio, Hackett, and Allen, 1995), and cared for subordinates' career development (Allen and Meyer, 1996). Based on these arguments, we argue that:

Hypothesis 1: Transformational leadership is positively associated with organizational commitment.

2.2. Three Types of Relational Distance

2.2.1. Demographic Distance

One of the fundamental distances between supervisor and subordinate is called 'demographic dissimilarity and similarity (Thui and O'Reilly, 1989). It has been extensively showing that the similarities and dissimilarities of a subordinates' demographic attributes (e.g., age, gender, and organizational tenure) to those of supervisor can affect decisive employees' outcomes, for example, satisfaction with supervisor (Vecchio and Bullis, 2001), job satisfaction (Wesolowski and Mossholder, 1997). Although Antonakis and Atwater (2002) argued that distance between supervisor and subordinate, including demographic distance, may moderate the relationship between leadership and its effectiveness, but less attention has been devoted. Moreover, demography research has mostly examined the negative effect of differences in the supervisor and subordinate dyad (e.g., Liden et al., 1996; Tsui and O'Reilly, 1989). Tsui et al. (2002) had shown that vertical dyads could generate favorable outcomes, specifically, when supervisors were relatively older, better-educated, or longer-tenured, subordinates are more committed, satisfied with their organization, as it is a general normative expectation that employees may have (Tsui et al., 2002).

Compared to Western countries, Korea has far more power distance in its culture (Hofstede, 1991). Also, Korea has long been affected by Confucian values, and it emphasizes strong respect for older people. Accordingly, seniority is highly stressed in Korean organizations as it represents respect for experience and heritage (Yang, 2006). Therefore, a general normative expectation toward a supervisor may be more potent than other Western cultural settings. Consequently, Korean subordinates may prefer a larger demographic distance between supervisors and subordinates due to the effect of Confucian values. Moreover, we argue that the impact of transformational leadership on organizational commitment will depend on the demographic distance between supervisor and subordinate. Compared to a supervisor whose demographic distance is shorter, a leader with a larger demographic distance shows individualized consideration and sensitivity to followers' needs; support for the development may impact the subordinates' commitment toward the organization. Based on the above argument, we suggest that:

Hypothesis 2: Within the supervisor-subordinate dyad, demographic distance moderates the relationship between transformational leadership and organizational commitment, such that the positive relationship between transformational leadership and organizational commitment will be stronger when the demographic distance is larger.

2.2.2. Structural Distance

Structural distance has been broadly referred to as a physical distance between leader and follower, organizational structure (e.g., hierarchical level, a span of management control, and management centralization), and supervisory structure (e.g., frequency of leader-follower interaction) in the existing literature (Antonakis and Atwater, 2002). This study adopts a narrower view of the structural distance between supervisor and subordinate as the hierarchical distance between supervisor and subordinate in terms of rank dissimilarities.

As we discussed earlier, Korean society is characterized as high power distance culture (Hofstede, 1991), where people are highly likely to take inequalities for granted. Thus, people in a high power distance culture are more likely to make resources available to a few people, limit information, and regard power as a means of offering social order and harmony in the relationship (Elele and Fields, 2010; Hofstede, 1991). Consequently, Korean subordinates are highly likely to accept inequality between supervisors and themselves, and they may feel more loyalty to the supervisor when structurally more distant leaders show more consideration and appreciation and recognize their individual needs in the organization. It will lead to the increased commitment to the organization of subordinates because the supervisor generally represents the organization (Eisenberger et al., 2010). Based on the above rationale, we argue that:

Hypothesis 3: Within the supervisor-subordinate dyad, structural distance moderates the l between transformational leadership and organizational commitment, such that the positive relationship between transformational leadership and organizational commitment will be stronger when the structural distance is larger.

2.2.3. Affective Distance

The effect aspect has been extensively examined in the supervisor and subordinate literature, including liking, support, and trust (Napier and Ferris, 1993; Erskine, 2012). Although somewhat different from each other, all of these represent subordinates good emotional feelings toward their supervisor. It is conceptually distinct from demographic and structural distance in that it describes psychological and affective distance toward the supervisor that the focal subordinate has.

It is possible to argue that subordinates who are psychologically and affectively close to their supervisor may have more favorable attitudes (Antonakis and Atwater, 2002). However, subordinates who feel affectively distant from their supervisor may have negative attitudes toward their leader. Consequently, the impact of transformational leadership and commitment toward the organization depends mainly on how subordinates perceive affective distance toward their supervisor. Based on the above rationale, we argue that:

Hypothesis 4: Within the supervisor-subordinate dyad, affective distance moderates the relationship between transformational leadership and organizational commitment, such that the positive relationship between transformational leadership and organizational commitment will be stronger when the affective distance is closer.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample

To confirm the hypotheses, this study collected survey data from employees in various industries in Korea. A total of 241 employees participated in this study. Table 1 shows the sample characteristics of subordinates and supervisors. Among subordinates, 66.4% were male, and 65.6% were from 30 to 39 years old. 80.9% were subordinates who had received an undergraduate degree, and 26.7% were first-level managers. Among supervisors, 86.7% were male, and 77.2% were over 40 years old. 70% were employees who had received an undergraduate degree, and 60.5% were senior-level managers. Compared with subordinates, supervisors were more educated, older, and higher in the hierarchical level.

3.2. Measures

For measuring a construct of organizational commitment, this study adapted 24 items from Allen and Meyer (1990)'s organizational commitment model. The measure contained three types of organizational commitment. Eight items consisted of affective commitment, and eight items conveyed normative commitment, and eight items presented continuance commitment. The scale was measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from '1 = strongly disagree' to '5 = strongly agree.'

This study adapted 20 items from Bass and Avolio (2000)'s study to measure a construct of transformational leadership. Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) is a widely used measure of leadership behaviors and characteristics (Yukl, 1999), and this study conducted MLQ Form 5X short. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which statements described their immediate supervisors accurately. The scale was measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from '1 = almost never' to '5 = almost always.' Transformational leadership, which is conceptualized from MLQ, contains four aspects; idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

To measure the construct of demographic and structural distance between subordinates and supervisors, this study utilized Tsui and O'Reilly (1989)'s and Tsui (1992)'s demographic dissimilarity measure. For the demographic distance, we utilized age dissimilarity, and for the structural distance, we utilized rank dissimilarity. The demographic dissimilarity for rank and age and were calculated based on the formula:

$$D = \left[\frac{1}{n} \sum_{j=1}^{n} \left(S_i - S_j \right)^2 \right]^{\frac{1}{2}}$$

S_i represents a score of a subordinate for a given demographic characteristic (rank and age). Where n is 2, S_j represents the corresponding demographic characteristic of the supervisor. As the D score approaches zero, the focal subordinate is more alike to the supervisor in the given demographic characteristic (Wagner et al., 1984).

Among various affective facets of distance (Napier & Ferris, 1993; Erskine, 2012), we utilized Podsakoff et al. (1990)'s trust indicator to measure the affective distance toward supervisors. The scale was measured using a five-point Likert scale which ranged from '1 = strongly disagree' to '5 = strongly agree.'

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

	Subordinate		Supervisor	
	No.	%	No.	%
Gender				
Male	160	66.4	209	86.7
Female	81	33.6	32	13.3
Age				
Below 29 years old	27	11.2	·	·
30 - 39 years old	158	65.6	55	22.8
Over 40years old	56	23.2	186	77.2
Education				
High school or less	3	1.3	3	0.4
Undergraduate	194	80.9	167	70.2
Graduate	43	17.5	71	29.4
Rank				
Entry-level manager	40	16.7	3	1.2
First level manager	61	26.7	9	3.8
Manager/Deputy general manager	105	43.8	83	35
Senior Manager	31	12.8	146	60.5
Tenure in the current company				
Under 3 years	88	36.5	·	·
3-5 years	77	19.1	·	·
6-7 years	27	10.8	·	·
Over 8 years	49	33.6	·	·

The simple demographics of subordinates (i.e., subordinate age, marital status, gender, rank, educational level, and tenure) were controlled. Also, the simple demographics of supervisors (i.e., supervisor gender, rank, educational level) were controlled because we were interested in the effect of relational distances between supervisor and subordinate. Gender was measured as a dichotomous variable; male = 0 and female = 1. Age was measured in years. Education was measured as an achieved education in the highest level from '1 = high school or less' to '5 = graduate degree.' Rank was measured as the highest hierarchical level from 1 = entry level to 5 = senior level. The tenure of the current organization was measured by the number of months in which respondents have worked in the current organization. Marital status was measured by a dummy variable. Coded 0 if the respondent was not married.

Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5
1. Transformational leadership	3.55	0.75	1.00				
2. Demographic distance	6.08	3.84	-.01	1.00			
3. Structural distance	0.86	0.59	.05	.47**	1.00		
4. Affective distance	3.59	0.80	.60**	-.02	.05	1.00	
5. Organizational commitment	3.25	0.54	.23**	-.22**	-.06	.12	1.00

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

4. Results

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations among vital variables. Basically, transformational leadership was correlated with organizational commitment positively ($r = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$). The results of correlations between the three types of relational distance and organizational commitment indicated that demographic distance and structural distance were negatively correlated with organizational commitment ($r = -0.22$, $p < 0.01$; $r = -0.06$, $p < 0.01$). On the other hand, the affective distance was correlated with organizational commitment positively ($r = 0.12$).

This study conducted reliability tests. For transformational leadership, the Cronbach's alphas were 0.88, organizational commitment (0.79), and affective distance (0.76). From these results, we confirmed that multi-item scales used in this study were reliable measures.

For testing hypotheses, this was conducted a hierarchical linear regression. Hypothesis 1 suggests that transformational leadership has a positive impact on organizational commitment. As shown in Table 3, it was supported as transformational leadership was positively related to organizational commitment significantly ($\beta = .21$, $p < 0.01$) in Model 2. To test Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4, The regression contained interaction terms in Model 4. These three interaction terms accounted for 6 percent of additional variance in organizational commitment. Hypothesis 2 and 3 predict that demographic and structural distance positively moderate the link between transformational leadership and organizational commitment. Model 4 shows that demographic distance was not significantly moderate the link between transformational leadership and organizational commitment; thus, Hypothesis 2 was not supported. However, the positive link between transformational leadership and organizational commitment was stronger when the structural distance was larger ($\beta = .20$, $p < 0.01$), thus Hypothesis 3 was supported. Hypothesis 4 predicts that the positive link between transformational leadership and organizational commitment when the affective distance was closer. Model 4 shows that affective distance was positively and significantly moderate the positive relationship of transformational leadership and organizational commitment ($\beta = .17$, $p < 0.01$), supporting Hypothesis 4.

Table 3: Results of the Hierarchical Regression

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Subordinate's age	.27	.26	.21	.17
Subordinate's gender	-.10	-.07	-.06	-.07
Subordinate's marital status	.19*	.17*	.18*	.19*
Subordinate's education level	-.15*	-.13	-.13	-.13*
Subordinate's rank	-.32**	-.30**	-.52*	-.48*
Subordinate's total tenure	.14	.15	.15	.18
Subordinate's current tenure	-.01	.02	.01	.03
Supervisor's gender	.02	.02	.01	.02
Supervisor's rank	.07	.07	.30	.24
Supervisor's education level	-.01	-.03	-.02	-.01
Transformational leadership (TL)		.21**	.20**	.25**
Demographic distance (DD)			-.12	-.11
Structural distance (SD)			-.19	-.15
Affective distance (AD)			.02	.03
TL x DD				-.14
TL x SD				.20**
TL x AD				.17**
Adjusted R^2	.14	.18	.19	.24
F-statistic	5.08	5.97	4.99	5.51
ΔR^2	.18	.04	.01	.06
Δ F-statistic	5.08	12.32	1.31	6.27

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

5. Discussion

Prior research has called for studies that examine a boundary condition of the effect of transformational leadership on organizational commitment. Accordingly, by suggesting the three relational distances as the contextual factors, our finding partially confirmed the moderating roles of relational distances in the relationship between transformational leadership and organizational commitment. Specifically, when structural distance is larger and affective distance is closer, the positive impacts of transformational leadership on organizational commitment become stronger in Korea.

The findings of this study show some critical theoretical and managerial implications. First, by suggesting the relational distance, which has not been empirically examined as a boundary condition, this study shed new light on how exercising transformational leadership can help raise employees' organizational commitment, especially in Korea. Second, by examining various types of the relationship-based distance between supervisor and subordinate in one single study, we confirm that which relational distance might have more influential effects on the impact of transformational leadership. Third, given that most of the relational distance studies were conducted in Western settings (Loi & Ngo, 2009), we could demonstrate that relational distances are a valid and important phenomenon in the Korean context as well. Therefore, HR managers in Korea should not overlook the various relational distance between supervisor and subordinate.

The limitations of this study point to a need for future research. First, we only utilize age distance among other demographic distances due to the sample characteristics and survey design. Therefore, we recommend future studies carefully design the survey, and it would be more reliable to examine other types of demographic distance in the future study. Second, There has been a growing trend in cross-cultural research is to examine individual-level cultural values (Chen & Aryee, 2007); however, this study did not include cultural values at the individual level to compare the effectiveness of transformational leadership on affective commitment. Thus, future research should examine individual-level cultural values as potential moderators to show more accurate effects of cultural values on the effectiveness of transformational leadership on organizational commitment.

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