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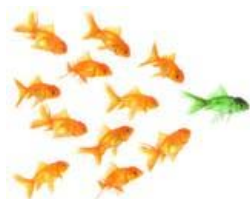
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Stop researching transformational leadership! Now!

*Researchers all over the world, stop with your research on transformational leadership! Now! This could be the provocative conclusion after reading the recent article of Profs. Daan van Knippenberg and Sim Sitkin in *The Academy of Management Annals**

(2013). These leadership professors write about the problems surrounding transformational leadership.

Stop researching transformational leadership!

Researchers all over the world, stop with your research on [transformational leadership!](#) Now! This could be the provocative conclusion after reading the [recent article of Profs. Daan van Knippenberg and Sim Sitkin](#) in *The Academy of Management Annals* (2013). These leadership professors write about the problems surrounding transformational leadership.

The challenge Van Knippenberg and Sitkin take on is huge. Transformational leadership is an established concept. Indeed, it is one of the most-often studied leadership concepts (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Also in public management and leadership studies, there is an abundance of studies (Riggio et al., 2004). Next to this, transformation leadership is often seen as highly effective. So why challenge it?

According to Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, various problems surround transformational leadership. As a result, studying transformational leadership is preventing us from fully understanding leadership and giving sound advice to managers and professionals. Based on their analysis, I will shortly discuss two of these problems.



Theoretical problem - Unclear conceptualization and definition of transformational leadership

The first problem is theoretical. A proper conceptualization and definition of transformational leadership is lacking. Transformational leadership is sometimes defined based on its effectiveness. However, this means that claiming that transformational leadership is effective is strange. Another way to understand transformational leadership is by looking at the dimensions of transformational leadership. But why are some dimensions included and others not? Why is intellectual stimulation a core dimension of transformational leadership, while a good relationship with your supervisor (LMX, see Tummers & Knies, 2013) is not? When the conceptualization and definition of transformational leadership is unclear, this question is hard to answer. Concluding, we do not exactly know what transformational leadership is, and what it is not.

Empirical problem - Transformational leadership indistinguishable from other leadership concepts

Maybe the theoretical problems can be solved. When the dimensions of transformational

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leadership are empirically distinct from other leadership constructs, this provides a basis for treating it as a distinct concept. However, this does not seem to be the case. It is very difficult to differentiate between transformational leadership and other concepts, such as transactional leadership. Transformational leadership is extremely related to contingent reward, one of the prime dimensions of transactional leadership. Contingent reward is as strongly related to the elements of transformational leadership as the elements are related to each other. So why is contingent reward not a dimension of transformational leadership?

What is transformational leadership?

Moving beyond transformational leadership? Yes!

Van Knippenberg and Sitkin conclude that leadership scholars should stop using the transformational leadership concept. This is quite a bold conclusion. I must stress that the transformational leadership concept has been very valuable. For instance, the importance of encouraging creativity and developing people to think independently (related to the transformational leadership dimension intellectual stimulation) is an important aspect when managing people. Many leaders now recognize this. Furthermore, every conceptualization can be criticized. There are no perfect concepts. Discussions on measuring culture show this (Hofstede, 2006; Smith, 2006; Javidan et al., 2006). However, I agree that the leadership field benefits from freeing itself from the dominance of transformational leadership. Study number 19,568 on transformational leadership will not add much. Or are we already at number 123.154?

Three new roads

For public management scholars, getting rid of the transformational leadership concept has severe implications. Where should we go from here? There are several roads we could take. I will discuss three of them.

1. The first road ahead is to *reanalyze the elements of transformational leadership*. Van Knippenberg & Sitkin give the example of visionary leadership (Stam et al., 2010). By not confounding vision with other elements (such as intellectual stimulation) and its effects (such as leadership effectiveness) we can learn more about what makes a vision compelling for followers. Other possible elements of transformational leadership include: stimulating creativity, acting as a role model and inspiring followers.
2. The second road ahead is to *use well-established concepts from related disciplines* such as organizational psychology, business administration or political science. Examples of such clearly defined leadership concepts are ethical leadership (Van Kalshoven et al., 2011) and leader political support (Ellen et al., 2013).
3. The third road is to *develop new leadership concepts ourselves*. Most importantly, these new concepts should be able to answer important public management questions, such as managing in times of budget austerity or dealing with accountability problems. Next to this, they should be conceptualized and measured clearly. I follow Pandey & Scott (2002), who note that sound measurement can be highly beneficial for public management practice.

Concluding, it seems that researching transformational leadership is becoming something of the past. Hopefully the coming years scholars continue to analyze leadership in new ways, and new interesting discoveries will be made.

For more information on leadership, see www.larstummers.com/leadership

Blog, also published on <http://larstummers.com/stop-researching-transformational-leadership/>

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Keywords: Leadership, Transformational leadership, Public management, Management Service Organizations,

Posted by: Lars G. Tummers

Posted on: 30 Nov 2013

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