

Leadership Practices Across Denominational Families
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Presented at the 66th Annual Meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, August,
2004, San Francisco, CA.

Abstract

Fundamental questions are raised regarding the role leadership plays in followers' lives and its impact on organizational vitality. This study addresses the impact of leadership in religious congregations. Correlational data suggest that while leadership significantly impacts the beliefs and perceptions of followers, it is unrelated to specific behaviors of those same followers. Thus, once more we return to the old adage: "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it give, pray, or get involved!" Or, do we?

Results indicate striking differences across denominational families (Catholic, mainline Protestant, and conservative Protestant) when it comes to the manner in which leadership is demonstrated. Leaders in conservative Protestant congregation leaders are much more likely to be viewed as transformational leaders, while leaders in Catholic parishes are much more likely to be viewed as laissez faire leaders. The impact of this distinction for congregational strengths, attender experiences within the congregation, and other important congregation measures are then examined.

Assessment of the impact of transformational leadership across denominational family leads to an interesting set of findings. Consistent with earlier analyses, leadership has a significant impact on the beliefs and perceptions of attenders. What was unexpected, however, is the significant impact that transformational leadership has not only on attender behaviors (e.g., financial giving and daily devotional acts), but also on the growth and financial viability of the congregation. So perhaps: "You can lead a horse to water, and through transforming it, make it pray and give!"

Theoretical Background

This paper presents results that both support and bring into question some fundamental beliefs regarding the impact leadership plays in the lives of followers. Transformational leadership raises followers' levels of consciousness, gets followers to transcend their own self-interests, and moves followers to address higher-level needs (Bass, 1985). Transformational leadership has also been associated with creating and inspiring a shared vision for a group (e.g., Avolio, 1999; Kouzes & Posner, 2003).

Current literature suggests that leadership plays a crucial role for organizational success. More than 75 previous studies of transformational leadership (using the MLQ) have examined the impact of leadership on organizational success and have generally reported a statistically

significant relationship between leader effectiveness and the transformational scales (Lowe & Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996). Clearly, transformational leadership typically results in followers seeking to achieve a higher collective purpose, mission, or vision. But, what about issues relating to the individual lives of the followers? With so much emphasis on the grand achievement of the collective, is the growth of the individual forgotten?

Within the realm of leadership studies in congregations, previous research has focused mostly in the areas of recruitment (e.g., Chang, 2004), selection (e.g., Lummis, 2003), pay and retention (e.g., McMillan & Price, 2003), gender and leadership (Lehman, 2002; Yoder, 2001), clergy role clarity (e.g., Ingram, 1981), and clergy psychological make-up (e.g., Francis & Robbins, 2002). Rather than focus mainly on issues of career experience of pastoral leaders, Nauss (1994) attempted to address the activities required for effective congregation leaders. Nauss identified ten ministerial activities: evangelist, minister to youth, personal/spiritual model, community-minded minister, preacher/priest, personal enabler, administrator, teacher, equipper, and visitor/counselor. Interestingly, this list of activities parallels quite closely the ten roles of managers in the classic management study by Henry Mintzberg ((1973). This suggests that perhaps much more can be learned by extending research and theories from the broader areas of organizational behavior and management to the context of congregations. Finally, recent research as part of the Pulpit & Pew: Research on Pastoral Leadership Project (Duke Divinity School) is extending this prior research and laying the groundwork for understanding pastoral leadership.

A growing body of literature has emerged focusing on the characteristics and practices of exemplary leaders. Under the paradigm of transformational leadership (see Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Bass, 1990; Kouzes & Posner, 2003, Tichy & DeVanna, 1986), transformational leadership is defined as leaders who inspire followers to transcend their own self-interests for the good of the organization. In contrast to transformational leadership, transactional leadership is defined as leaders who guide or motivate followers toward established goals through the exchange of rewards for performance (see Bass, 1999). While transactional leadership is hypothesized to help the organization achieve minimally-acceptable standards of performance, transformational leadership is hypothesized as a requirement to achieve high performance. A third dimension of leadership (laissez faire leadership) has been defined as a “non-leadership component” where leaders avoid accepting their responsibilities, are absent when needed, fail to follow up on requests for assistance, and resist expressing their views on important issues (Bass, 1990).

While most research into transformational leadership has focused on measurement and psychometric properties, some efforts have been made to study the relationship between leadership and organizational effectiveness. Several studies have supported Bass’ contention on the significance of transformational leadership (e.g., Dvir, T., Eden, D., Avolio, B.J., & Shamir, B. (2002); Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996). However, other studies have found no significant relationship between transformational leadership and organizational effectiveness (e.g., Weese, 1996; Lim and Cromartie, 2001).

Sample

The current study addresses the impact of leadership in a unique context – religious congregations. The U.S. Congregational Life Survey was the largest survey of worshipers ever conducted in the United States (Woolever & Bruce, 2002). Using a national random survey of congregations from over 50 denominations, more than 300,000 worshipers in over 2,000 congregations filled out a survey during religious services during one particular weekend. A portion of those surveyed (N=1,181) answered additional questions providing their perceptions of their congregational leader (modified MLQ Form 6S, Bass & Avolio, 1992).

Findings

Individual-level experiences

Table 1 presents the results of regression analyses assessing the added impact of overall leader effectiveness on two congregation-level strengths: meaningful worship and empowering leadership. As expected, leadership effectiveness significantly impacts individuals' experiencing a sense of meaningful worship and empowering leadership – two of 10 characteristics identified in strong, healthy congregations (Woolever & Bruce, 2004). These strengths were measured at the congregational-level through an aggregation process. The statistical significance of leadership effectiveness (measured at the individual level) on meaningful worship and empowering leadership provides a strong indication of the importance of leadership for congregational success (Roberts, Hulin, & Rousseau, 1978; Klein & Kozlowski, 2000).

This naturally led to the question: “What factors lead to leader effectiveness?” Stepwise multiple regression resulted in three variables accounting for 59 percent of the variance in leader effectiveness: (a) perceptions of the congregational leader as a transformational leader, (b) perceptions of support from the leader for creativity and innovation, and (c) degree to which one's spiritual needs were being met in the congregation (see Table 2).

What impact did leadership effectiveness have on the lives of followers? Table 3 illustrates that leadership effectiveness was significantly related to: (a) perceptions that this congregation is an exciting place, (b) a strong sense of belonging to the congregation, (c) the sense that worship services help in everyday life, and (d) the belief that the leader encourages congregation members to use their unique gifts and talents. Leadership effectiveness was not related to: (a) daily devotional activities, (b) monetary giving to the congregation, (c) individuals taking on leadership roles in their congregation, (d) member involvement in small groups, and (e) member involvement in outreach activities.

Congregation/Denomination-level Outcomes

Prior research has uncovered striking differences across denominational family (see Woolever & Bruce, 2004, and Bruce, 2002 for more on this). In the current study, congregations were grouped into a common typology of Catholic (N=674), mainline Protestant (N=221), or

conservative Protestant (N=236). Those congregations that fell outside of this typology (N=50) were excluded from further analyses.

An assessment of nine leadership measures across denominational family provided some striking results (see Table 4). Significant differences were found for all nine measures of leadership, and the pattern of results suggests that leaders in conservative Protestant congregations and leaders in Catholic parishes differ to a very great extent. Leaders in conservative Protestant congregations are more transformational, transactional, supportive of innovation, encouraging of attenders to use their gifts and skills, and a better match for the congregation. Furthermore, when compared to catholic parishes, conservative Protestant congregations were found to be significantly higher on the congregation strengths Empowering Leadership and Looking to the Future. Leaders of Catholic parishes were found to be significantly higher in one area – laissez faire leadership.

While these differences are interesting on the surface, are they meaningful? Do the data provide us any indication that the more transformational a congregational leader is, the more effective the congregation will be? To explore this question, a series of analyses contrasted leaders who were assessed by their congregation as being high in transformational leadership (the top 25% of the sample on this measure; N=232) with leaders who were assessed by their congregation as being low in transformational leadership (the bottom 25% of the sample on this measure; N=256).

Table 5 presents a cross tabulation of transformational leadership across denominational family. As can be seen, the significant χ^2 reflects the pattern demonstrating a disproportionate number of leaders in conservative Protestant congregations being high transformational and leaders in Catholic parishes being low transformational.

Once again, however, it must be asked: “So what?” Table 6 presents the ANOVA results of all ten congregational strengths across low/high transformational leadership. For all strengths but one (community involvement), congregations with a high transformational leader are significantly higher when compared to congregations with a low transformational leader.

Table 7 presents the ANOVA results of individually-experienced indicators of congregational life. In all but three areas (involvement in small group activities, involvement in outreach, and extent of leadership roles), attenders with a high transformational leader, when compared to attenders with a low transformational leader, are significantly more likely to spend time in devotional acts, report that worship helps with their everyday life, experience the congregation as an exciting place to be, report that their spiritual needs are being met, and report that they give a higher percentage financially to the congregation.

Finally, two other important measures of congregation health are assessed – growth and financial viability. Data on these measures were reported by a congregational leader (likely the head of the congregation) through a congregational profile form. Table 8 illustrates that congregations with a high transformational leader, when compared to congregations with a low transformational leader, are more likely to have higher levels of growth and to report a more favorable financial situation.

TABLE 1

Multiple Regressions for Strength Measures

Aggregated Measures	Predictors	Strength Measures	
		Meaningful Worship	Empowering Leadership
	Meaningful Worship		.34***
	Growing Spiritually	.79***	ns
	Participating in the Congregation	-.48***	ns
	Sense of Belonging	.11**	.30***
	Caring for Children and Youth	-.20***	.20***
	Focus on the Community	.09***	.12***
	Sharing Faith	.11***	-.34***
	Welcoming New People	ns	.06**
	Empowering Leadership	.25***	
	Looking to the Future	.12***	.10***
	Leader Effectiveness (Individual-level)	.04**	.10***
	Adj. R ²	.79	.71
	F (10, 855)	368.03***	268.75***

* p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001

Notes: Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients.

TABLE 2

Multiple Regression for Leadership Effectiveness

Predictors	Leadership Effectiveness
Transformational Leadership	.85***
Transactional Leadership	-.11**
Spiritual Needs are Being Met	.06*
Adj. R ²	.65
F (3, 861)	363.01***

* p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001

Notes: Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients. Stepwise method used.

TABLE 3

Correlations of Leadership Effectiveness with Individually-Experienced Measures

	Pearson Correlations	Partial Correlations	
Perceptions/ Beliefs	Sense of belonging	.25***	.26***
	Exciting place to be	.48***	.48***
	Service helps w/daily living	.29***	.31***
	Encouraged to use my gifts and skills	.27***	.28***
Behaviors	Time spent in devotional acts	.05	.05
	How much (%) you give	-.04	.01
	Leadership role(s)	-.06	-.09*
	Small group involvement	.02	.00
	Outreach involvement	.01	-.01

* p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001

Note: Partial correlations controlling for denominational family (Catholic vs. Protestant)

TABLE 4

ANOVA Results for Leadership Variables by Denominational Family (Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Conservative Protestant)

	Catholic (1)	Mainline Protestant (2)	Conservative Protestant (3)	F	Scheffe Post Hoc
Individual-level					
Leadership Effectiveness	3.49	3.52	3.65	3.50*	
Transformational Leadership	3.12	3.26	3.38	10.85***	3>1
Transactional Leadership	3.00	3.03	3.16	4.07**	3>1
Laissez Faire Leadership	2.63	2.35	2.53	6.91***	1>2
Supports Innovation	3.05	3.21	3.27	7.16***	3>1
Encourages use of gifts/skills	2.85	3.12	3.24	13.90***	2/3>1
Congregation-level					
Leader a good match	80.67	88.44	88.80	81.13***	2/3>1
Empowering Leadership	36.42	47.88	50.75	234.11***	3>2>1
Looking to the Future	32.97	41.04	50.76	496.16***	3>2>1

* p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001

TABLE 5

High/Low Transformational Leadership by Denominational Family

	Catholic	Mainline Protestant	Conservative Protestant
Low Transformational	58.3%	52.4%	36.9%
High Transformational	41.7%	47.6%	63.1%

$\chi^2 = 14.77$ ***

TABLE 6

ANOVA Results for Congregational Strength Measures by Low/High Transformational Leadership

	Low Transformational	High Transformational	F
Growing Spiritually	38.04	42.29	50.28***
Meaningful Worship	56.44	61.86	76.49***
Participating in the Congregation	41.77	46.11	17.06***
Sense of Belonging	26.44	31.51	56.74***
Caring for Children/Youth	49.19	51.56	7.78**
Community Involvement	32.86	32.26	1.19
Sharing Faith	19.63	25.62	48.26***
Welcoming New People	30.57	35.19	14.51***
Empowering Leadership	37.12	44.81	56.46***
Looking to the Future	35.54	41.11	35.63***

* p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001

TABLE 7

ANOVA Results for Attender Experience Measures by Low/High Transformational Leadership

	Low Transformational	High Transformational	F
Worship helps with daily life	2.97	3.68	124.24***
Exciting place to be	2.33	3.50	451.46***
Spiritual needs being met	2.57	3.58	224.35***
Involvement in group activities	.626	.710	1.20
Involvement in outreach	.332	.365	.42
Extent of leadership roles	.637	.532	.21
Time spent in devotional acts	2.72	3.23	16.81***
How much (%) you give	2.30	2.57	6.32**

* p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001

TABLE 8

**ANOVA Results for Congregation Outcome Measures by
Low/High Transformational Leadership**

	Low Transformational	High Transformational	F
Congregation growth	1.84	2.07	10.81***
Congregation financial viability	3.20	3.38	9.39**

* p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001

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