

Leadership's Impact on Followers' Perceptions and Behaviors: Some Surprising Results

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Abstract

Fundamental questions are raised regarding the impact leadership plays in followers' lives. This study addresses the impact of leadership in religious congregations. 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!"

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, 1993).

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, 1995). 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 context of religious organizations, the examination of leadership (mostly in the field of the sociology of religion) has focused usually on career issues of those in the pulpit (e.g., recruitment, development, and retention) or on the personal experiences of those in leadership positions (e.g., morale and job satisfaction; stress and psychosocial strain; and the impact of gender, race, and ethnicity on congregation leadership). On the other hand, the literature on management in other organizations (mostly in the fields of psychology and business) is replete with research on the role and impact of leadership on organizational performance and the engagement of organizational members.

It seems that it would be beneficial to use contemporary theories of leadership (e.g., charisma, transformational/transactional leadership, leader-member exchange, and the like) within the context of religious organizations. Such research could move beyond the traditional questions asked within this context, and move toward addressing fundamental questions concerning the role leadership plays in the growth and development of congregations and their members.

Methodology

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 (April, 2001). For additional information about this study go to **WWW.USCONGREGATIONS.ORG**.

Three types of surveys were completed in each participating congregation: (1) an Attendee Survey completed by all worshipers age 15 or older; (2) a Congregational Profile describing the congregation's facilities, staff, programs and worship services, completed by one person in the congregation; and (3) a Leader Survey completed by the pastor, priest, minister, rabbi, or other leader. 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).

Major Study Scales & Indices

- Meaningful worship ($\alpha=.86$)
- 4-factor transformational leadership, MLQ ($\alpha=.95$)
- 2-factor transactional leadership, MLQ ($\alpha=.85$)
- Congregation exciting place ($\alpha=.82$)
- Support for innovation & creativity ($\alpha=.69$)
- Small group involvement
- Outreach involvement
- Leadership role(s) held

Other Measures

- Leader effectiveness
- Spiritual needs met
- Sense of belonging
- Services help with everyday living
- Encouraged to use gifts and skills
- Time spent in private devotional activities
- How much (%) you give financially
- Denomination

Multiple Regression for Strength 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***	.38***
Leader Effectiveness (Individual-level measure)	.04**	.10***
Adj. R ²	.79	.71
F (10, 855)	368.03***	268.75***

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

Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients

Aggregated Measures

Multiple Regression for Leadership Effectiveness

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

• p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001 Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients

Stepwise method used for regression.

ANOVA Results for Individually-Experienced Measures by Denomination Family (Catholic vs. Protestant)

	Catholic	Protestant	F	
Perceptions/Beliefs	Sense of belonging	3.94	4.16	8.78**
	Exciting place to be	2.79	3.07	35.50***
	Service helps w/daily living	3.21	3.44	24.03***
	Encouraged to use my gifts and skills	3.85	4.19	28.06***
	Time spent for devotional acts	4.74	4.97	6.43**
Behaviors	How much (%) give	3.06	3.81	115.38***
	Leadership role(s)	.39	.84	60.87***
	Small group involvement	.45	1.04	136.04***
	Outreach involvement	.23	.41	29.45***

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***
	Time spent in devotional acts	.05	.05
Behaviors	How much (%) give	-.04	.01
	Leadership role(s)	-.06	-.09*
	Small group involvement	.02	.00
	Outreach involvement	.01	-.01

Partial correlations controlling for denomination family (Protestant vs. Catholic)

Findings

As expected, leadership effectiveness significantly impacts individuals' experiencing a sense of meaningful worship – one of 10 characteristics identified in strong, healthy congregations (Woolever & Bruce, 2004). This characteristic was measured at the congregational-level through an aggregation process. The statistical significance of leadership effectiveness (measured at the individual level) on meaningful worship provides a strong indication of the importance of leadership for congregational success (Roberts, Hulin, & Rousseau, 1978; Klein, 2000).

This naturally led to the question: “What factors lead to leader effectiveness?” Stepwise multiple regression resulted in three variables accounting for 65 percent of the variance in leader effectiveness: (a) perceptions of the congregational leader as a transformational leader, (b) perceptions of the congregational leader as a transactional leader (more commonly referred to as management), and (c) the degree to which one’s spiritual needs were being met in the congregation.

What impact did leadership effectiveness have on the lives of followers? 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.

Discussion

The findings support prior research on the psychometric properties of transformational leadership. Furthermore, the significant mean differences contrasting Catholic and Protestant worshipers is also consistent with previous research (cf. Rigney, Matz, & Abney, 2004). An unexpected finding, however is that while leadership has a significant impact on the beliefs and perceptions of followers, it appears to be unrelated to specific behaviors of those same followers. Thus, once more we return to a modification of the old adage: “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it give, pray, or get involved!”