

# TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP, HR PRACTICES AND AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT TO CHANGE: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract** *It is common knowledge that leadership guides human resource practices which influence employees' behaviour and outcomes. Understanding this relationship becomes germane to comprehend the dynamics of organisational change. Human resource practices are crucial for a sustainable change since employees operationalise and institutionalise it. However, limited research has discussed the combination of leadership, human resource practices, and employee behaviour in the context of change. Considering the extensive change management literature on the importance of transformational leadership, we explore the role of the related human resource practices in bringing about affective commitment to change in employees. Additionally, we investigate the intervening role of perceived organisational support. Taking a theoretical perspective, we present the dimensions of the three constructs and the relationship between them. Through the conceptual model, we attempt to understand the practical mechanisms through which transformational leadership can enable organisational change. Research implications and future directions are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Transformation Leadership, HR Practices, Affective Commitment to Change, Perceived Organisational Support, Organisational Change*

## INTRODUCTION

Organisations undertake various change initiatives like mergers and acquisitions, business process reengineering, software implementation and total quality management (Hughes, 2007). In all such initiatives, employees are responsible for planning, executing and managing change. Their participation and involvement is high if they own and internalise the change (Higgs & Rowland, 2010) and are comfortable with it (Cady & Neubert, 2001). This occurs when they are committed to change i.e. they are willing to invest the required effort to make the change effective (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). Change is likely to be more sustainable if employees' willingness comes from an intrinsic desire to adopt new processes or technology, implying the need for an affective commitment to change. The present paper examines one of the significant ways in which an organisation can bring about affective commitment to change of employees.

According to Somerville and Whelan-Berry (2010), the primary organisational factors that support change are leadership and human resource (HR) practices. The role

of transformational leadership in influencing employees to bring about change has been well researched and documented (Choi, 2011; Parry & Proctor-Thomson, 2003). One of the critical factors instrumental to this influence is HR practices. Transformational leadership encourages introduction of human capital enhancing HR practices that can enable change (Baer, Hu, Jiang, & Lepak, 2012; Zhu, Chew, & Spangler, 2005). Surprisingly, there is no evidence in literature that examines how HR practices in the realm of transformational leadership can promote affective commitment to change. This paper investigates this relationship.

The paper also explores the mediating role played by perceived organisational support in this relationship. Perceived organisational support is the employees' belief that their organisation accords significance to their contribution, shows concern about their welfare and satisfies their social and emotional needs (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). Ideals espoused by transformational leaders can lead to HR practices that emotionally bind employees to their organisation and create positive opinion about the intentions and implications of change, thus leading to an intrinsic desire for change.

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Based on the existing literature, the paper identifies the dimensions of transformational leader HR practices and perceived organisational support that can influence key aspects of affective commitment to change. It contributes to the literature by highlighting the attributes of transformational leadership that can facilitate organisational change in this manner. This paper thus prepares a detailed foundation for conducting empirical research in this domain.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Transformational Leaders and Organisational Change

Leadership has been extensively studied in the context of organisational change (Bean & Hamilton, 2006; Carmeli & Sheaffer, 2008; Hill *et al.*, 2012). A leader is central to change when it is about taking the organisation forward in the desired direction. A survey done by American Management Association in 1994, as cited by Gill (2003), indicates that a leader is considered most critical to change by 92% of the respondents from Fortune 500 companies. Leaders initiate and manage change by utilising legitimacy of position and status. Besides, their sensitivity and responsiveness to employee emotions (Huy & Sanchez-Burks, 2009) and their own commitment to change (Levay, 2010) impact employee commitment to change.

Amongst leadership styles, transformational leadership is most commonly associated with organisational change (Eisenbach, Pillai, & Watson, 1999). Transformational leadership inspires positive response of employees to change (Caldwell, Fedor, Herold, & Liu, 2008) and can help deal with uncertain and unsettled environment resulting from it (Parry & Proctor-Thomson, 2003). It enables development of relationship with employees beyond the functional and transactional level. It gives employees individual attention, encourages them to be original, and earns their trust and loyalty (Burns, 1978).

According to Bass (1998), transformational leaders have four main characteristics. First, they demonstrate charismatic leadership. Employees venerate them, view them as role models and identify with them. Employees perceive them as extraordinary, perseverant, trustworthy, resolute and virtuous. Second, transformational leaders provide inspirational motivation. Employees feel that the goals and vision of the leaders belong to them as well. This makes them more determined, hopeful and zealous about attaining the goals. Employees also recognise their jobs as valuable and challenging. Third, transformational leaders encourage intellectual stimulation. Employees feel the freedom to discover their creativity. They are more innovative about their method of carrying out their job and solving work related problems. Fourth, transformational leaders display

individualised consideration. They make effort to fulfill the personal needs of employees. This helps employees realise their potential and achieve professional success. During the course of organisational change, these characteristics of transformation leaders lead to active and constructive involvement of employees.

Conway and Monks (2007) and Jaros (2010) identify transformational leadership as the primary organisational antecedent for affective commitment to change. Transformational leadership promotes affective commitment to change of employees by influencing their perception of change benefits and fulfillment of expectations (Hill *et al.*, 2012) and building their trust (Caldwell *et al.*, 2008). Besides, it affects the attitude of the top management towards goals (Barrick, Bradley, Colbert, & Kristof-Brown, 2008). The top management is committed to change resulting in participation, support and management of change (Gill, 2003). A weak transformational leadership can also cause cynicism towards change (Neubert, Wu, & Yi, 2007).

### Transformational Leader Human Resource Practices and Organisational Change

HR practices bring about positive organisational outcomes under direction of transformational leaders (Zhu *et al.*, 2005). In the form of high performance work systems related to training, performance appraisal and compensation, they enhance competency, knowledge and motivation of employees, thus improving performance and operational results (Baer *et al.*, 2012). HR practices facilitate disbursement of information on new initiatives, mechanisms for resolving grievances and frameworks for rewards and recognition (Conway & Monks, 2007). Increased motivation, commitment, and trust of employees due to such practices lower their absenteeism (Zhu *et al.*, 2005) and turnover (Baer *et al.*, 2012).

Due to their direct impact on the employees, HR practices are integral to the organisational change process. HR practices aid employees in adopting change and adapting to it in many ways. They generate awareness and trust about change and determine availing of change policies like teleworking (De-Luis-Carnicer, Martínez-Sánchez, Pérez-Pérez, Vela-Jiménez, 2008). If high performance work activities are introduced as part of a change, HR practices help assess them on the dimensions of successful execution and benefits for individuals, thus ensuring long term organisational benefits. HR practices help explore new ways of performing jobs and tasks and institutionalise them (Delaney & Godard, 2001). Employee training, task autonomy, pay based on performance and flexible working hours encourage innovativeness (Beugelsdijk, 2008) and consequently change. Employees adjust to change better if they are provided skills training, as in the case of technology (Cooke, 2002) or information

system (Hempel, 2004) implementation, or retraining as in the case of organisation restructuring (Cascio & Wynn, 2004). When the change involves downsizing, HR practices comprise sensitive measures to provide complete information to employees to positively impact their sense-making (Bean & Hamilton, 2006; Cascio & Wynn, 2004). Based on the existing literature, the main aspects of transformational leader HR practices associated with change are rewards, training, performance management, task autonomy, and job enrichment.

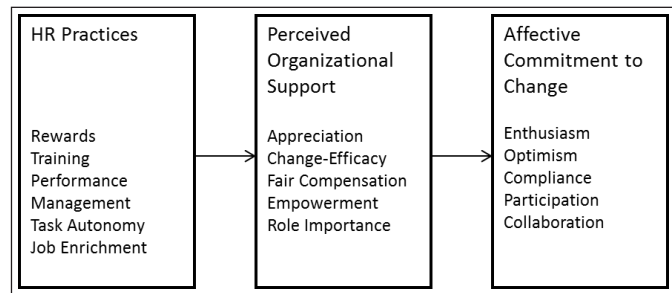
### Affective Commitment and Organisational Change

Affective commitment is a component of organisational commitment that is associated with emotional attachment to the organisation and identification with its goals (Allen & Meyer, 1991, 1990). Affective commitment to change is the desire to facilitate change with the conviction of obtaining inherent benefits (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002), and is one of the principal conditions for sustainable change. It enhances performance, allows learning, and creates positivity, excitement and enthusiasm about the change (Busch, Cadwallader, & Parish, 2008). Employees high in affective commitment to change have a clear understanding about the post change environment. They are secure about their power and position and have high self-efficacy. This makes them happy and content with the change process and hopeful about the favourability of the change outcome (Gill, 2003). Employees perceive the top management to be concerned about their comfort with the change and any emergent issues that may arise. They have trust and deference for the change leaders. Therefore, they are willing to submit to the change and accept the new processes, policies and procedures as a part of the change. To bring about change, they are inclined towards cooperating with their colleagues across departments and hierarchical levels. Based on the existing literature, the key characteristics of employees associated with affective commitment to change are enthusiasm, optimism, compliance, participation and collaboration.

### CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE MODEL

Previous literature supports the importance of leaders and specifically transformational leaders for organisational change and the role of HR practices in influencing employees. It also suggests the primary aspects of transformational leader HR practices and characteristics of employees having affective commitment to change. Thus, we conceptualise how transformational leaders can help design and implement HR practices that lead to affective commitment to change. We also theorise on the influence

of perceived organisational support in the relationship. The conceptual model representing the relationship is given in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1: Conceptual Model for HR Practices under Transformational Leadership and Affective Commitment to Change of Employees**

### Transformational Leader HR Practices and Affective Commitment to Change

HR practices largely depend on transformational leadership. Leaders at the top management level conduct the strategic planning activities of the organisation. They establish the broad framework and goals of the HR functions (Zhu *et al.*, 2005). They design policies and procedures. They also decide upon the level of decentralisation in decision making and control over information (Bass, 1998). All these factors affect the nature, direction and strength of HR practices. Transformational leaders at different hierarchical levels influence the process and outcome of varied HR practices like employee recruitment, selection and promotion, personal and professional development, training and job design and allocation.

HR practices build organisational commitment by creating opportunities for employees and instilling motivation in them (Conway & Monks, 2007; Dikkers, Jansen, Kooij, & Lange, 2010). Due to their influence over the professional life of employees, they can facilitate change in several ways. Rewards can stimulate a positive attitude towards learning (Jaw & Liu, 2004) and consequently enthusiasm about adopting change. Knowledge and skills delivered through training programmes can create optimism about dealing with and obtaining benefits from change. An appropriately designed performance management system can ensure better compliance to the change. Task autonomy (Hornung & Rousseau, 2007) can make employees engage in proactive behaviour to support the change, thus leading to active participation in the change process. Job enrichment can increase the level of involvement of the employees in organisational goals (Menezes & Woods, 1998) and consequently lead to better collaboration to execute change. Literature shows that social capital in the form of strong bonds between employees, supervisors and subordinates

increases affective commitment (Kuppelwieser & Parzefall, 2012).

Therefore, it is expected that transformational leader HR practices in the form of rewards, training, performance management, task autonomy and job enrichment would promote affective commitment to change of employees by increasing their enthusiasm, optimism, compliance, participation and collaboration for the change. Therefore, we propose the following:

**Proposition 1:** Transformational leader human resource practices are associated with affective commitment to change of employees.

### Mediating Role of Perceived Organisational Support

Perceived organisational support is the belief of the employees that the organisation values their contribution and is concerned about their welfare (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986). When employees attribute favourability of work conditions and positive elements of their job to the initiative, benevolence and good intentions of the organisation, they feel valued and thus perceive organisational support (Armeli, Eisenberger, & Rhoades, 2001; Eisenberger & Rhoades, 2002). HR practices under transformational leadership can increase perceived organisational support through agreeable compensation, recognition and approval (Baer *et al.*, 2012). Besides, career mentoring (Bravo, Kraimer, Liden, Seibert, & Wayne, 2011), satisfactory career growth (Allen, Griffeth, & Shore, 2003), job security, role autonomy, task variety (Eisenberger & Rhoades, 2002) along with participation in decision making (Allen *et al.*, 2003; Erdogan, Gavino, & Wayne, 2012; Jia & Zhang, 2010) can enhance perceived organisational support.

HR practices in a change environment are especially pertinent to perceived organisational support of employees. Organisational rewards in the form of promotion or salary (Armeli *et al.*, 2001; Erdogan *et al.*, 2012) and perceived inducements (Conway & Coyle-Shapiro, 2005; Seo, Shin, & Taylor, 2012) can make them feel appreciated and recognised for their efforts. Professional and skill development through training (Bravo *et al.*, 2011; Eisenberger & Rhoades, 2002; Jia & Zhang, 2010) can increase their competency and change-efficacy. Performance management (Erdogan *et al.*, 2012) through a well-designed and appropriate appraisal and performance pay system can promote their perception of just evaluation and compensation. Such a system would be aligned to the new job requirements and tasks (Lengnick-Hall, Lengnick-Hall, McIver, & Ramachandran, 2012) and be appropriate to the nature of change (Azzone & Palermo, 2011). Task autonomy (Beugelsdijk, 2008; Eisenberger & Rhoades, 2002) can provide them a sense of

ownership and empowerment to take informed decisions. Job enrichment in the post change scenario can generate feelings of pride and importance about the job in hand (Muntslag & Schimmel, 2009). Therefore, the primary dimensions of perceived organisational support that would be associated with transformational leader HR practices in a change environment are appreciation, change-efficacy, fair compensation, empowerment and role importance.

Perceived organisational support makes the employees expect positive individual outcome (in the form of material and social rewards) of efforts invested in achieving organisational goals (Davis-LaMastro, Eisenberger, & Fasolo, 1990). In presence of recognition and approval, it helps develop emotional attachment with the organisation. Besides, perceived organisational support leads to job involvement (O'Driscoll & Randall, 1999), job satisfaction and performance (Eisenberger & Rhoades, 2002). It also brings about retention (Allen *et al.*, 2003; Eisenberger, Rhoades, Stinglhamber, Sucharski, & Vandenberghe, 2002) when career growth potential is high (Bravo *et al.*, 2011). Perceived organisational support propels employees towards attaining high levels of performance (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986). It gives them motivation to be sincere and hardworking and to engage in innovation (Davis-LaMastro *et al.*, 1990; Woodman & Yuan, 2010). Literature shows that perceived organisational support increases affective commitment both directly (Armeli *et al.*, 2001; Eisenberger & Rhoades, 2002), and indirectly by increasing self-esteem (Lee & Peccei, 2007).

Owing to the effect of perceived organisational support on employee behaviour, it can play a significant part in enabling change. Positive attitude and attachment of employees towards their organisation can make them eager and willing to support organisational change in several ways. Appreciation by way of rewards and inducements can increase their affective involvement in the organisation (Davis-LaMastro *et al.*, 1990), thus making them enthusiastic about change. Change-efficacy due to developmental programmes like skills training can allow employees to envision their future position in the organisation (Banks & Zaccaro, 2004), thus bringing about optimism towards it. Fair compensation can create faith in the goals and actions of the organisation (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986) and thus willing compliance with the change process. Empowerment can bring about active voluntary participation in decision making (Allen *et al.*, 2003) and freedom to handle change related activities. Role importance can promote the sentiment of loyalty and responsibility contributing to organisation citizenship behaviour (Erdogan *et al.*, 2012). Actions like helping out colleagues (Moorman, Blakely, & Niehoff, 1998) can generate a healthy collaborative environment for change.

Therefore, it is expected that perceived organisational support would enable the transformational leader human resource

practices to influence affective commitment to change due to employees' perception of appreciation, change-efficacy, fair compensation, empowerment and role importance. We propose the following:

**Proposition 2:** Perceived organisational support mediates the relation between transformational leader human resource practices and affective commitment to change of employees.

The model also makes certain assumptions. First, organisational change impacts all business functions and permeates all levels of the hierarchy. Second, change initiative is in the initial phase when its implications are yet to be comprehended. Third, HR practices are consistent over the period of the change. This implies that there is no change in the organisational leadership. Fourth, transformational leaders comprise the chief executive officer, head of businesses or functions, middle managers and direct supervisors. This is because leaders across hierarchical levels like top management (Barrick *et al.*, 2008; Gill, 2003), middle management (Buchanan, Ferlie, Fitzgerald, & McGivern, 2013; Dass, Dyck, Mauws, Sharma, & Starke, 2010) and lower management (Holt, Lo, Self, & Thal, 2003) influence employees.

## DISCUSSION

Transformational leaders support organisational change on account of their unique characteristics. Their inspirational motivation and individual consideration lead to HR practices beneficial for change. The impact may be directly on the design of HR practices and also indirectly, on the HR personnel who are responsible to execute these practices.

HR personnel implement and manage HR practices. Hence, their contribution is crucial for change. Inspirational motivation of HR personnel, due to transformational leadership, promotes their empowerment (Bass, 1998; Zhu *et al.*, 2005) and self-efficacy. It aids them in managing change in several ways. First, HR personnel champion the cause of change and create a favourable environment for it (Caldwell, 2001; De-Luis-Carnicer *et al.*, 2008; Edgley-Pyshorn & Huisman, 2011). Second, they provide adequate and timely change information, reason for change implementation and awareness about change implications (Bean & Hamilton, 2006; Cascio & Wynn, 2004; Dikkers *et al.*, 2010; Edgley-Pyshorn & Huisman, 2011). Third, they assess the evolving needs/requirements as the change progresses (Delaney & Godard, 2001; Edgley-Pyshorn & Huisman, 2011). Fourth, they co-ordinate the change processes in different structural and functional units of the organisation (Caldwell, 2001). Fifth, they identify individuals resistant or passive towards change (Dikkers *et al.*, 2010) and take subsequent actions. Thus, inspirational motivation of HR personnel impacts organisational change.

Besides, transformational leaders provide individual consideration that eventually becomes a facet of the HR practices too (Zhu *et al.*, 2005). HR personnel implement such HR practices in several ways. First, they invite suggestions on the change initiative from employees and encourage mutual sharing of change information amongst them (Duxbury & Szamosi, 2002). Second, they provide constant, clear and constructive feedback on employees' management of change (Muntslag & Schimmel, 2009). Third, they control the pace of change for successful assimilation. Fourth, they align perception (about change) of employees to the change realities (Vickers, 2007). Fifth, they give a sense of consistency to employees during the change process (Chreim, 2002). Thus, individual consideration embedded in HR practices impacts organisational change.

Individual consideration in HR practices also instills a sense of being valued in the employees, thus stimulating perceived organisational support. Along with inspirational motivation, perceived organisational support can make employees adopt change better. It also has spillover effects. A supervisor with perceived organisational support is supportive of subordinates contributing further to their perceived organisational support (Eisenberger & Shanock, 2006). Besides, it leads to better organisation citizenship behaviour of contracted employees (Coyle-Shapiro, Kessler, & Morrow, 2006), even if they are not directly affected by HR practices. Such positive effects of perceived organisational support can favourably impact employee response to change.

Considering the influence that inspirational motivation and individual consideration can have on employees through HR practices during organisational change, it is likely that transformational leadership can bring about an affective commitment to change.

## Practical Implications and Research Directions

Change is inevitable in the dynamic business scenario of today (Hirsch & Roberts, 2005). This study is relevant for organisations that implement large scale change having long term implications. Organisations can take certain measures at different points of time to safeguard change effectiveness. Before the change is initiated, they can design appropriate HR practices related to rewards, training, performance management, task autonomy and job enrichment. They would need to execute the practices with checks and balances to ensure their alignment with the change goals. Once the change is initiated, organisations can perform a systematic assessment of employee perception of appreciation, change-efficacy, fair compensation, empowerment and role importance to ensure adequate perceived organisational support. They would also need to evaluate affective

commitment to change, in terms of employee enthusiasm, optimism, compliance, participation and collaboration, on a regular basis. If employees do not have reasonable perceived organisational support and affective commitment to change, organisations would need to reexamine the HR practices. Besides, they can take pro-active measures to deal with any impending obstacles to change.

The paper prepares the foundation for conducting research in organisations that are in the process of implementing change initiatives like business process reengineering or software implementation. The conceptual relationships can be explored in such organisations to authenticate the validity of the model. Besides, the model can be tested across diverse industries to identify any possible variance in the relationships. Moreover, action research can be undertaken to test the relevance of the dimensions of the constructs.

The model opens up avenues to investigate leader characteristics that may be related to change. Some styles of leadership, which have been associated with organisational change in the past, are democratic (Raelin, 2012), stakeholder (Ford, 2005), sustainable (Ferdig, 2007) and distributed leadership (Buchanan *et al.*, 2013). All of them lay emphasis on taking interests of all stakeholders into consideration through open participation and active involvement. These styles of leadership can be explored in the model.

Also, the role of organisational structure and culture can be examined. Both these factors may be important determinants for perceived organisational support and resultant affective commitment to change. Though some research exists for mechanistic and organic organisations (Ambrose & Schminke, 2003) and culture (Conway & Coyle-Shapiro, 2005; Griffiths, Jimmieson, & Jones, 2005), there is limited work on them in the realm of organisational change.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the theoretical literature, the paper discusses how transformational leadership can be instrumental in making change successful. Discourse on HR practices with regard to employee attitude towards change has been limited even though failure of change is a big concern in organisations (Griffiths *et al.*, 2005). HR practices that are based on a strong value system can bring about favourable employee response to change and consequently affective commitment to change. Affective commitment to change is a vital ingredient for the effectiveness of a change initiative. It also increases efficacy for a future change initiative (Carmeli & Sheaffer, 2008). It is hoped that this paper is able to throw light on some measures that transformational leadership can take through their HR practices to support change.

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