The Transformational leadership Incubator and emotional intelligence: a potential pathway for an increased understanding of interpersonal influence

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Summary Non-cognitive emotional intelligence could potentially contribute to a more holistic understanding of interpersonal influence and leadership; however, significant issues of definition, psychometric independence, and measurement must be conclusively resolved. Possible relationships between emotional intelligence, transformational leadership, and individual/organizational outcomes are described and further investigation is encouraged. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

Of all the issues integral to organizational behavior, few, if any, concepts have been the object of as much conjecture, study, and consideration as have leadership and social influence. An understanding of the capacity to influence others has captured the attention of practitioners, academics, and social commentators throughout history.

During the 20th century, progress toward a more complete understanding of influence and leadership was characterized by alternating cycles of excitement and despair. As the mid-20th century approached, the notion that innate qualities shaped personality and behavior continued to be well accepted and supported. Despite this, there was a desire for more complete descriptions of the complexity of leadership, for a less deterministic theory, and for explanation of an elusive ‘X’ factor in leadership that better matched an experience of the world. The logic and intuitive satisfaction that behavioral and contingency theory brought to our understanding of leadership was enormous. But as enduring as those ideas have been, the satisfaction was temporary, and dissatisfaction with the
degree of explanation, particularly with the ‘X’ factor, eventually sent the whole field of leadership into a period of despair and disillusionment.

Hunt (1999) opines that the field of leadership was reinvigorated and renewed beginning in the 1970s by the emergence of the charismatic and transformational leadership approaches originally articulated by Burns (1978) and further developed by Bass and his colleagues. The case for a relationship between transformational leadership and desired outcomes across a wide variety of settings and cultures has been particularly well established in the academic literature (Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996). For the first time, scientific-based explanations of leadership seemed to account for not just the operation of leadership, but also the heretofore elusive ‘X’ factor.

Transformational and charismatic leadership theories have dominated leadership theory and research for almost two decades. Like most scientific concepts, our understanding of transformational leadership has transitioned through various periods of introduction, explanation, and elaboration (Hunt, 1999). As the exploration of the explanatory power of transformational and charismatic leadership approaches its limits, the search for precursors, mediators, moderators and yet more ‘X’ factor explanations inevitably becomes more intense.

Guided by theory, the understanding of transformational leadership has been, like almost all leadership research, focused on leader–follower interactions. In order for leadership theory to continue to progress and to avoid a reversion to the despair that accompanied the maturation of previous approaches, new, better, and different ways of considering leadership capacity need to be embraced. One possibility is to look at leadership not just as interaction, but more holistically, as a function of capabilities possessed and deployed by the individual leader. If we frame our understanding of leadership by concentrating not just on what leaders do, but rather by a consideration as to what capabilities an individual must have in order to perform effectively in a leadership role, perhaps leader understanding, selection, and development can be enhanced as well.

**Emotional Intelligence: A Possible ‘X’ Factor?**

A personal capability that might have the potential to significantly inform leadership capacity may arise from the emerging understanding of emotional intelligence (EI). Although the existence and importance of intelligences beyond memory and problem-solving have long been recognized, it was not until recently that serious efforts were made to define this non-cognitive form of intelligence. Goleman’s (1995) enormously popular general circulation book directed considerable attention to the concept and in particular to some ambitious claims for its efficacy. Previous academic approaches to EI, most notably by Salovey and Mayer (1990), initially attracted less attention, but eventually began to stimulate scientific investigation as to exactly what it is that we are referring to when we speak of EI.

Researchers who advocate that EI is indeed a capability (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) suggest that individuals who have high levels of emotional intelligence are able to perceive emotion, to integrate it in thought, to understand it, and to manage it. Other researchers have recently begun to build on these dimensions and to suggest theoretical (Sosik & Mergerian, 1999) or empirical (Barling, Slater, & Kelloway, 2003) positive relationships between EI and transformational leadership. For instance, Sosik and Mergerian (1999) suggest that emotionally intelligent people feel more secure in their ability to control and influence life events and, as a result, provide individual focus on others as well as intellectually stimulate and motivate followers. These behavioral outcomes are consistent with three major facets of transformational leadership: individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation.
Is it possible that EI might be the new ‘X’ factor which advances and reinvigorates a more complete understanding of social influence and leadership? While significant cautions and objections have been raised in regard to epistemological and EI theory developmental issues (Antonakis, 2003), the possibility of a relationship remains a provocative question worthy of the attention of scientifically oriented researchers. Three distinct possibilities occur to us:

• EI may be an antecedent of transformational leadership. Perhaps the presence of EI, in particular those elements related to awareness of the emotional states of others, might make an individual more likely to engage in effective leadership behaviors. In this view, an individual higher in EI would understand social contexts and emotional states better than an individual lower in EI, and would therefore be more likely to choose behaviors that are consistent with the dimensions of transformational leadership.

• EI may moderate the relationship between transformational leadership and various individual, group, and organizational outcomes. Perhaps self-awareness and acumen in deploying emotions create some sort of interactive relationship between EI and transformational leadership behaviors. In this view, transformational leadership effectiveness is enhanced by higher levels of EI.

• EI may be independent of transformational leadership. In this view, EI is directly (and independent of transformational leadership) associated with various desired outcomes.

As intriguing as these possibilities might be, their investigation must be undertaken with prudence regarding unresolved definitional, psychometric and measurement issues associated with emotional intelligence.

The first of these issues is definitional. To date, three fairly distinct approaches to the definition of EI have evolved:

1. EI as a trait: the notion that EI is an innate personal quality that enables emotional well-being (Bar-On, 1996).
2. EI as an acquired competency: that EI is the set of acquired skills and competencies that underlie effective leadership and performance (Goleman, 1995).
3. EI as an intellectual capability: EI as the capacity to reason with emotion in four areas: to perceive emotion, to integrate it in thought, to understand it, and to manage it (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2003).

A spirited and sometimes acrimonious debate has attended the advocacy for each of these approaches and their combinations, with definitions and various forms of measurement proposed and tested. Of the three, the trait approach seems the least likely to prevail for essentially the same reasons that other ‘great man’ theories have proven unsatisfactory. Efforts to operationalize and measure both the acquired competency and intelligence/capability approaches both seem promising and occasionally complementary; however, we find the intelligence/capability approach most convincing, largely because advocates have scrupulously followed traditional theory-building techniques. Thus, for us, emotional intelligence is comprised of personal awareness, integration, insight, and regulatory capability of emotion.

On the suspicion that there indeed may not be anything new under the sun, if EI is to be helpful in increasing our understanding of leadership, it must in fact be a concept which is distinguishable from current measures of leadership, personality, and cognitive intelligence. There has been considerable progress on this second hurdle (Law, Wong, & Song, 2004), and if the final resolution has not been achieved it does seem within reach. When definition and independence are more conclusively realized, the final hurdle of measurement, critical to concept development, may seem more easily resolved as well. If one recalls the development of current leadership theory, it would be difficult to overestimate the contribution of the Multifactorial Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ; Bass & Avolio, 1990) to that process.

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Whichever definition or measurement technique eventually prevails, our sense is that at this point leadership researchers can further their own field and contribute to the EI discussion by testing moderating, mediating, and other relationships involving EI and transformational leadership, such as those we have suggested, using extant definitions and measures of EI and the well-established measures of transformational leadership. An understanding of leader capabilities, especially those integral to EI, which might influence transformational leadership behaviors or interact with those behaviors, would constitute a considerable advancement of the overall understanding of the influence process.

Of the various EI measurement schemes which have been proposed or reported as being underway, it seems likely that ability-based scales that measure how well people perform tasks and solve emotional problems will be more likely to stand the test of academic scrutiny than scales which rely exclusively on self-assessment of emotional skills. Our sense is that, as researchers utilize the venerable MLQ and the new ability-based scales measuring EI in appropriately designed studies, the questions about the independence, viability, and value of EI will start to become a little more clear. Of the transformational leadership–EI relationships previously identified, both our intuition and our sense of the work done to date leads us to particularly commend the possibility of an interactive or additive effect between EI and transformational leadership to leadership researchers.

The field of EI seems to be in approximately the developmental stage which charisma research was during the breakthrough years of the 1970s—very exciting and promising, but with major issues yet to be conclusively settled. Whether EI will emerge as the new ‘X’ factor in our understanding of social influence remains an open question. The possibility that there is ‘no there, there’ remains, but the prospect of a relationship between EI, leadership and individual, group and organizational outcomes is sufficiently compelling to attract the attention of researchers who will resolve the question and move leadership theory and understanding of social influence to its next stage.

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**References**


