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Transformational leadership and change related voice behavior

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between transformational leadership and voice during the change-planning process. The authors propose a moderated mediation model to investigate the relationship between voice, other change-related variables, and the boundary conditions of transformational leadership.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors collected survey data from 124 employees and their leaders in a medical technology company in Norway. The organization was planning a major restructuring of its working procedures. The authors analyzed the data using PROCESS and a fixed effect approach.

Findings – The results suggest that transformational leadership has no effect on change-related voice (CRV) by itself. However, there is an indirect effect through affective commitment to change. This effect is conditional on the employees' level of perceived change impact.

Research limitations/implications – The paper is limited by the cross-sectional design of the study. Other potential limitations are discussed.

Originality/value – The paper is the first to explore the relationship between transformational leadership and CRV, and is thus interesting for practitioners who wish to increase the level of CRV from their employees. Furthermore, researchers interested in organizational change and proactivity constructs such as voice will also find the paper valuable.

Keywords Transformational leadership, Organizational change, Affective commitment to change, Change-related voice, Personal change impact

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

An organization's ability to adapt, improve, and renew itself is crucial for it to thrive, grow, or even survive in today's rapidly changing competitive market (Fedor *et al.*, 2006). However, a large number of change initiatives do not lead to the positive consequences that change agents intend (Burnes, 2004). Choi (2011) argues: "Many change efforts fail because change leaders often underestimate the central role individuals play in the change process" (p. 479). One reason why the employees are so important in the change process is because employees who work directly with the matters at hand have knowledge that may not be obvious to the change agents (Morrison, 2011). Therefore, voice behavior, defined as the employee's discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, and concerns at work, with the intent to improve organizational functioning (Morrison, 2011; LePine and Van Dyne, 1998), may be especially important to improve the change process. Despite the substantial amount of research conducted regarding organizational voice behavior for the last two decades, there is little research on how voice behavior interacts with leadership and other change-related variables. However, this knowledge is crucial to understanding how organizations can increase employees' level of change-related voice (CRV). Hence, the main goal of our study is to investigate how leadership and change-related variables affect the individual's propensity to express their voice regarding the change process.

A leadership style that theory and research consider to be positively related to organizational voice is transformational leadership (Detert and Burris, 2007; Liu *et al.*, 2010).



Transformational leadership theory focusses on how the leader should behave charismatically, pay attention to employees' individual needs, and develop employees' problem-solving skills for them to perform "beyond expectations" (Bass, 1985; Bass and Riggio, 2006). Additionally, the leadership style is effective for improving organizational change processes (Herold *et al.*, 2008). Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge, there are no studies investigating how transformational leadership affects CRV. Moreover, there is no research on which moderators and mediators that may affect this relationship.

Correspondingly, in this paper we present and test a moderated mediation model in which we propose that transformational leadership will be positively related to CRV. We further hypothesize that this effect is mediated by affective commitment to change (ACC). We also propose that this mediating effect is conditional on individuals' level of personal change impact (PCI), so that the mediating effect of affective commitment will be stronger and significant when employees perceive that the level of personal impact is high, but smaller and insignificant when the employees perceive that the level of personal impact is low.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Transformational leadership and CRV

The concept of voice was originally introduced by Hirschman (1970), who proposed that speaking up was one of the ways employees could respond with their dissatisfaction regarding the organization. LePine and Van Dyne (1998) further defined voice as "speaking out and challenging the status quo, with the intent to improve the situation" (p. 853). Keeping with this definition, we define CRV as speaking up with ideas and suggestion with the intent to improve the change process.

One key characteristic of voice is how it invokes a personal risk for the employees who speak up. In line with this, Milliken *et al.* (2003) find that many employees choose not to speak up due to fear of negative consequences from supervisors. Therefore, supervisors play a key role regarding the voice process, as they have the resources to punish the employee, but also the potential to reward and react on the employees suggestions (Detert and Burris, 2007; Liu *et al.*, 2010). Correspondingly, leadership is one important variable that affects the employees' willingness to voice their suggestions (cf. Detert and Burris, 2007; Liu *et al.*, 2010; McClean *et al.*, 2013).

Transformational leadership is an important antecedent of voice (Detert and Burris, 2007) and consists of four dimensions: inspirational motivation; idealized influence; individual consideration; and intellectual stimulation (Bass and Riggio, 2006). A transformational leader may signal and encourage CRV behavior by being a good listener and personally interacting with employees during the change process (individual consideration), and giving them the room and safety to express themselves. Furthermore, a transformational leader may stimulate employees to look at things differently and critically during the change process (intellectual stimulation), so they potentially increase the amount of ideas generated by employees. Finally, the transformational leader inspires and empowers employees to work for the goals of the organizational change (inspirational motivation and idealized influence), and may increase employees' motivation to express themselves to reach these goals (Bass, 1985; Detert and Burris, 2007; Liu *et al.*, 2010). Liu *et al.* (2010) empirically confirmed the relationship between transformational leadership and organizational voice. We therefore propose:

H1. Transformational leadership behaviors, as perceived by the employees, are positively related to CRV.

2.2 Affective commitment to change

Our study focusses on ACC, defined as the employees' "desire to provide support for the change, based on a belief in its inherent benefits" (Herscovitch and Meyer, 2002, p. 475) for two main reasons. First, Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) find support for how ACC predicts discretionary behavior such as fighting for, and giving sacrifices for the success of the organizational change. This suggests that affective commitment is especially interesting when investigating discretionary behavior such as CRV. Second, Herold *et al.* (2008) argue that because affective commitment reflects a positive attitude and a buy in of the values underlining the change, it will be the commitment form most likely affected by leadership. Transformational leaders may increase their employees' affective commitment to the change by articulating a compelling vision of how the change will improve the organization (Bass and Riggio, 2006). These theoretical arguments are empirically supported by Herold *et al.* (2008), who find that transformational leadership is positively related to ACC and outperforms more change-specific leadership practices.

We further argue that ACC is positively related to CRV. This proposition is based on two key considerations. First, Hirschman (1970) argues that being committed to the organization increases the individual's propensity to voice, instead of leaving the organization. This proposition was empirically explored by Burriss *et al.* (2008), who found that being psychologically attached to the organization increased the individual's propensity to voice. Accordingly, affective commitment to the organization is theoretically and empirically linked to the employee's expression of organizational voice. We argue that this is also true for ACC. Second, Herscovitch and Meyer's (2002) find evidence that affectively committed employees exert more discretionary behavior to help the organizational change succeed. Based on that, we argue that CRV is a discretionary behavior that the employee can exhibit to improve the organizational change process. To our knowledge, Jiseon (2013) is the only study that investigates the relationship between ACC and CRV. This study consisted of 245 employees and their leaders in an electronics company in South Korea that was undergoing a major reorganization to implement an "autonomously managing team system." Jiseon (2013) finds evidence that ACC is positively and significantly related to CRV. To sum up, we argue that transformational leadership stimulates employee beliefs in positive outcomes of an organizational change. These affectively committed employees we argue are more likely to voice in order to obtain these valued outcomes. Accordingly we propose:

H2. The employees' ACC mediates the relationship between their perceived transformational leadership behaviors and CRV.

2.3 Personal change impact

An organizational change will inevitably affect individual employees differently (Lau and Woodman, 1995). Furthermore, individuals with idiosyncratic attitudes and abilities will also perceive the impact of the organizational change in different ways (Caldwell *et al.*, 2004). This fact is often ignored when investigating the effects of organizational change; so many studies fail to detect the individual-level effects of the change (Herold *et al.*, 2008).

Herold *et al.* (2008) defines PCI as the degree to which the individual perceives themselves to be personally affected by the change.

When the PCI level is high, transformational leadership may be crucial to create and maintain the employee's level of affective commitment, for two main reasons.

First, transformational leadership is effective in creating commitment to common goals in uncertain environments (Bass, 1985). Similarly, Herold *et al.* (2008) argue that individuals who are highly affected by the change will turn to their leaders to get reassurance for a smooth transition during the change process and reassurance that their personal needs will be met after the organizational change. Thus, compared to employees who make minor adjustments, highly affected employees may be more sensitive and responsive toward their leader. Herold *et al.* (2008) find that that transformational leadership creates higher levels of affective commitment toward the change for employees greatly affected by the change. Correspondingly, we argue that in combination with transformational leadership behaviors, a high level of PCI will create higher levels of affective commitment. In other words, the effect of transformational leadership will differ, depending on the level of PCI the employee experiences. Thus, we argue that there is a conditional indirect effect of PCI on CRV (Preacher *et al.*, 2007). Accordingly, we posit a moderated mediation hypothesis:

- H3.* The level of PCI, as perceived by the employee, moderates the relationship between the employee's perceived transformational leadership and ACC. Thus, the mediating effect of ACC is stronger when the personal impact of the change is perceived as high, rather than low.

H1-H3 are presented in one overall model (Figure 1).

3. Methods

3.1 Organizational context

The survey was conducted among white-collar workers from an international medical technology firm based in Norway. The organization was undergoing a major restructuring of how it organized the work, which affected all the employees to a greater or lesser extent. The organizational change's main goal was to create a process-based structuring of the value chains in the organization and structure sales and product development around separate product portfolios. The restructuring meant that the employees were required to cooperate with different members of the organization and many of the employees would have to change the product line with which they worked. A survey questionnaire was sent out two weeks before the major reorganization started.

3.2 Sample and procedure

A link to the survey questionnaire was sent to 261 employees, including their supervisors, via their professional e-mail addresses. The participants received written

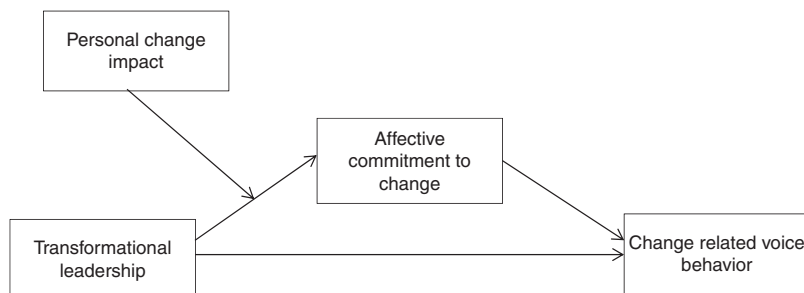


Figure 1.
Hypothesized
moderated mediation
model

assurance that their participation in the study was confidential and that their e-mail addresses would only be used to match them to their supervisors. A total of 124 participants completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 48 percent. A total of 28 supervisors/units were represented by more than one rater. The sample was 38 percent female and 62 percent male. The average organizational tenure was 12 years ($SD = 8.9$), and the mean age of the population was 43 years ($SD = 9.3$).

3.3 Measures

All scales applied in the study were previously validated. Scales originally formulated in English were translated and then back-translated, as Brislin (1986) recommended, ensuring accurate linguistic content. If not otherwise noted, the questions were rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). The models were saturated for CRV, PCI, and ACC. Thus, a CFA model was not applicable, as the overall goodness-of-fit test is not possible. However, the Cronbach's α showed that the scales were reliable.

3.3.1 Transformational leadership. Transformational leadership behavior was measured using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire Form 5x. Idealized influence (attributed and behavioral), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration were measured with four items per sub dimension, resulting in 20 items. A sample item was: "My leader provides a compelling vision for the future." This was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (frequently, if not always). As we had no hypotheses relating to the different sub dimensions, we combined them into one overall composite. A hierarchical CFA showed satisfactory model fit, as we allowed four pairs of item errors to correlate based on a modification index procedure (Byrne, 2012): $\chi^2(161) = 295.05, p = 0.000, RMSEA = 0.08, 90$ percent CI (0.06, 0.09), CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.91, SRMR = 0.06. We did this by using the statistical software Mplus, Version 7.11. We applied a Robust Maximum Likelihood estimation of the model fit, with a scaling correction factor equal to 1.13. Factor loadings of the hypothesized sub factors ranged from 0.88 to 0.95, which supported using an overall composite variable. The Cronbach's α for the total scale was 0.96.

3.3.2 Change-Related Voice. We assessed CRV by three items based on Van Dyne and Le pine's (1998) scale, which is the most widely used voice scale (Morrison, 2011). However, the complete scale was criticized for measuring behaviors that are not included in the definition of voice. Therefore, we applied the three items that Detert and Burris (2007) and McClean *et al.* (2013) validated and recommended, as these three items best captured individuals' pro-social, verbal behavior. Furthermore, we adapted the scale to our context so that it would match the organizational change process. A sample item was: "I have made recommendations regarding certain aspects of the change." The Cronbach's α was 0.94.

3.3.3 Affective Commitment to Change. ACC was measured using three items from Herscovitch and Meyer's (2002) scale. Fedor *et al.* (2006) and Herold *et al.* (2008) also used and validated these three items. The items were: "I believe in the value of this change," "This change is a good strategy for this organization," and "This change serves an important purpose." The scale was rated on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree). The Cronbach's α was 0.96.

3.3.4 Personal Change Impact. PCI was measured using a three-item scale developed by Jønsson (working paper). A sample item is: "The changes do not have large implications for me personally" (reverse scored). The Cronbach's α was 0.83.

3.3.5 Control variables. Based on previous studies, we included tenure in the organization, supervisory responsibilities, education, and job satisfaction as control variables (Liang *et al.*, 2012). Education was measured by five categories (elementary school, high school, undergraduate studies, bachelor-level degree, and master-level or postgraduate studies). Job satisfaction was measured by the item “Altogether, how satisfied are you with your job?” Response categories were measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = very dissatisfied to 5 = very satisfied.

3.4 Analytical approach

Based on research conducted by Schriesheim *et al.* (2006), we were interested in the individual-level effect of transformational leadership. Thus we were concerned with how individuals idiosyncratically perceived their leaders. Nevertheless, because our study consists of employees drawn from 28 units represented by one leader, our sample violates the independence assumption and may result in spuriousness due to data clustering (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002). Due to our fairly low sample size at level 2, we chose a fixed effect approach, which controls for leadership and unit heterogeneity by using dummy variables (Day and Anatonakis, 2013; Hayes, 2012; Hox, 2010; Maas and Hox, 2005). Day and Anatonakis (2013) argue that this may be a preferred approach for leadership research interested in individual level effects. The dummy variables exclude all variance based on level 2 effects, by specifically modeling them as intercepts. We made a fixed effect model by creating 27 dummy variables and one reference group. We included the 27 dummy variables as control variables on both the independent variable and the mediator and controlled for the mean-level differences in our dependent variables.

We applied a computational tool for SPSS named PROCESS to test our moderated mediation hypothesis. PROCESS applies bootstrapping, which is preferable to the Sobel test. The latter test assumes normal distribution of the indirect path product, which is often violated in small samples. Furthermore, PROCESS could test our moderated mediation hypothesis in one overall model (Hayes, 2013). Accordingly, we applied PROCESS with 95 percent bootstrapped confidence intervals and 5,000 bootstrap resamples. All the variables were grand-mean centered prior to the analysis.

4. Results

4.1 Confirmatory factor analyses

We tested a measurement model in which items loaded on their hypothesized latent variables, to test if the applied variables showed discriminant validity and that the items loaded on the correct, expected variables rather than others. The overall model fit confirmed the psychometric structure: (χ^2 (362) = 585.35, p = 0.000, RMSEA = 0.07, 90 percent CI (0.06, 0.08), CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.91, SRMR = 0.07), and scaling correction factor = 1.08.

4.2 Descriptive statistics

Table I shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations for the variables included in the study.

4.3 Test of moderated mediation

Table II presents the results from *H1-H3*. The coefficients we report were after controlling for leader clusters. The result of our analysis did not support *H1*, as we

found no effect of transformational leadership on CRV. Specifically, the regression coefficient showed no significant linear relationship ($B = 0.09, p = \text{ns}$).

$H2$ was supported. We found evidence of an indirect effect of transformational leadership on CRV via ACC. Specifically, we found that transformational leadership was positively and significantly related to ACC ($B = 0.78, p < 0.001$) and that ACC was positively and significantly related to CRV ($B = 0.23, p < 0.05$). The total indirect effect of transformational leadership was significant ($B = 0.18, SE = 0.12, CI (0.01, 0.53)$). Correspondingly, the effect of transformational leadership on CRV was fully mediated by ACC, supporting $H2$.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Education	4.18	0.93	–							
2. Organizational tenure	12.06	8.74	–0.37**	–						
3. Job satisfaction	3.97	0.83	–0.01	0.00	–					
4. Leadership responsibility	0.07	0.26	0.08	–0.04	0.16	–				
5. Transformational leadership	3.60	0.66	0.12	–0.02	0.47**	0.18*	(0.95)			
6. Personal change impact	2.96	0.98	–0.08	0.15	–0.18*	0.09	–0.01	(0.83)		
7. Affective commitment to change	5.22	1.23	0.05	–0.05	0.20*	0.26**	0.44**	0.13	(0.96)	
8. Change-related voice	3.89	0.52	0.10	–0.03	–0.14	0.25**	0.08	0.44**	0.20*	(0.94)

Notes: $n = 124$. Cronbach's α reliabilities appear in brackets along the diagonal. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table I.
Means, standard
deviations,
correlations and
Cronbach's α among
variables

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
<i>Affective commitment</i>				
Transformational leadership (TL)	0.78	0.19	4.17	0.000
Personal change impact (PCI)	0.14	0.12	1.19	0.238
TL \times PCI	0.40	0.16	2.52	0.013
Education	0.08	0.14	0.60	0.546
Organizational tenure	–0.02	0.01	–0.82	0.417
Job satisfaction	–0.02	0.15	–0.10	0.918
Leadership responsibility	0.87	0.44	1.98	0.049
<i>Change-related voice</i>				
Transformational leadership	0.16	0.21	0.77	0.442
Affective commitment to change	0.23	0.11	2.18	0.032
Education	0.13	0.14	0.92	0.359
Organizational tenure	–0.00	0.01	–0.06	0.954
Job satisfaction	–0.36	0.15	–2.34	0.022
Leadership responsibility	1.23	0.47	2.68	0.009
Personal change impact	B	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
<i>Conditional indirect effect of transformational leadership on change-related voice (mediated by affective commitment to change)</i>				
–1 SD	0.087	0.087	–0.023	0.383
M	0.178	0.120	0.013	0.527
+1 SD	0.270	0.178	0.003	0.770

Note: $n = 124$

Table II.
Regression results
for moderation
mediation model

Furthermore, *H3* was supported. We gained support for our moderated mediation model, suggesting that the mediating effect of ACC is conditional on the employee's PCI. First, we found support that the level of PCI moderated the effect of transformational leadership on ACC; ($B = 0.40, p < 0.05$). Second, we applied a procedure Preacher *et al.* (2007) recommended and operationalized high or low levels of PCI as one standard deviation above or below the mean. The results confirmed *H3*, as the effect of transformational leadership through ACC on CRV was stronger and significant for employees high in PCI ($B = 0.27, SE = 0.18, CI (0.01, 0.77)$), but lower and insignificant for individuals with low PCI. Regarding the effect sizes, we found that transformational leadership and personal impact explained 25 percent of the variance in ACC ($R^2 = 0.25, p < 0.001$). Moreover, ACC explained 5 percent of the variance in CRV behavior ($R^2 = 0.05, p < 0.05$).

5. Discussion

Unexpectedly, we did not find support for the effect of transformational leadership on CRV. However, we found evidence suggesting that transformational leadership indirectly affected CRV, through ACC. Furthermore, we found evidence that transformational leadership interacted with the employees' perceived level of change impact. Thus, for individuals who experienced themselves to be greatly affected by the change, there was a stronger relationship between transformational leadership and ACC. In turn, this was positively related to CRV.

5.1 Theoretical implications

The results of our study contribute to the literature in several ways. First, we did not find any direct effect of transformational leadership on CRV. These results are consistent with Detert and Burris' (2007) results, which did not find an effect of transformational leadership on organizational voice behavior in the time-lagged part of their study. Based on research by Kark *et al.* (2003), Detert and Burris (2007) argue this may be because some individuals feel intimidated by a highly charismatic leader. Previous studies find how leaders may show personalized charisma, which is a form of charisma based on personal identification with the leader (Howell and Shamir, 2005). This type of charisma is related to employee dependency on the leader (Kark *et al.*, 2003), so may be more negatively related to assertive actions such as CRV (Howell and Shamir, 2005). In our change-related context, it may be that some employees were intimidated by the charismatic appearance of their leader. Thus, for the leader to encourage the employees to speak up during an organizational change process, employees may need to be more directly invited to do so by more specific participative/open leadership behaviors (Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2012). Moreover, the organizational change in the current study was a top-down controlled process, in which the employees were only included to a limited extent. Accordingly, it may be that this further reduced the employees' perception of their transformational leaders as approachable, which may have decreased the effect of transformational leadership.

Second, we found that transformational leadership had an indirect effect on CRV, through the mediating effect of ACC. Accordingly, the individuals in our sample who can see the inherent benefits in the proposed change were also more willing to express their suggestions to obtain these desirable outcomes. Our results complement Jiseon's (2013) research, which finds ACC to be positively related to CRV behavior.

Finally, our results regarding the experienced impact of the change illustrate the importance of how moderators and mediators operate simultaneously when predicting

voice behavior (Liang *et al.*, 2012; Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2012). This is the first study to our knowledge to investigate how PCI affects individuals' propensity to voice and our results suggests that the mediating effect of ACC becomes insignificant for individuals who feel affected by the change only to a minor extent. Accordingly, PCI proposes an important boundary condition to the effect of transformational leadership. For individuals low in PCI, the transformational leader has no indirect effect on their CRV. On the other hand, for employees with a high degree of PCI, transformational leadership may be essential in order to gain their CRV. This result underlines Caldwell *et al.*'s (2004) and Herold *et al.*'s (2008) points, suggesting that transformational leadership may be essential for creating commitment to change when the degree of uncertainty is high. In our context, this means that those individuals who may be required to change with whom they cooperate and the products, with which they worked, particularly benefitted from having a transformational leader.

5.2 Practical implications

The results of our study leave us with some important implications for practice. First, although our results show that transformational leadership does not seem to have any direct effect on CRV behavior, it may be preferable for organizations undergoing change, based on its effect on ACC, which is positively related to CRV. However, as our results indicate that showing transformational leadership behaviors may not be enough to directly increase CRV; supervisors should also consider directly inviting the employees to speak up through participatory supervisory practices. Additionally, to decrease the potential intimidation created by a highly charismatic leader, the supervisor should pay attention to other, not charismatic aspects of transformational leadership, such as individual consideration and intellectual stimulation. These types of behavior will be more likely to not intimidate the employee. Finally, our finding that the personal impact of the change has a conditional indirect effect on CRV indicates how highly affected employees may be more sensitive toward their leader and seem to gain more from these dyadic interactions. Therefore, it may be more relevant for the supervisors to support and engage the highly affected employees during an organizational change, as our results suggest that the employees who are only affected to a limited extent will not gain as much from these interactions.

5.3 Limitations and future research

The current study has some limitations worth noting. First, our study is cross-sectional, so direct causation cannot be inferred. Second, our study is based on self-reported data, which may hypothetically be subject to common method bias (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012). Common method bias may be overrated in general, particularly with conditional models as the present (Spector, 2006; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, meta-analytical results suggest that other ratings may have an egocentric and observational bias (Tornau and Frese, 2013). However, further research could be strengthened by using such methods as diary study designs. A third consideration is that we investigated the organization during the planning phase that may be especially critical for employees' CRV. However, we are not able to detect how employees will voice after or during an implementation. Furthermore, we cannot rule out how the potential effects of earlier levels of voicing in the organization affect employees' propensity to voice during the change process. Future research should thus look at how employees voice before, during, and after an organizational change.

Finally, our study was conducted on white-collar workers in the private sector, in a Norwegian context. We must be careful not to generalize the results to other cultural contexts and other types of workers (such as blue-collar workers). The Norwegian culture is characterized by a lower power distance between employees and leaders. This may imply that leadership is less important for CRV, which may be the reason we did not find any effect of transformational leadership on CRV. Future research could examine the impact of culture on the relationship between leadership and CRV.

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