

PERCEPTIONS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL AND TRANSACTIONAL LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS WITHIN MILITARY HIERARCHIES

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Abstract: Leadership styles play a critical role in maximizing military effectiveness. This article delves into the connection between leadership styles and commander performance evaluations. Utilizing the well-established internationally validated instrument MLQ-5X, we aim to highlight the value of transformational leaders within the Army.

Keywords: performance, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, passive-avoidant leadership

1. Introduction

Modern military leadership emphasizes clear communication of intent from commanders to subordinates. However, the past decade has seen a shift towards decentralization. This empowers commanders in the field with adaptability and creativity, crucial for today's geographically dispersed, small-scale engagements [1]. High unit morale and strong leadership are essential for success in these scenarios [2]. Studies [3] show a positive correlation between unit trust in leadership and soldier performance. Furthermore, the rise of an all-volunteer force with high education levels necessitates a leadership style that fosters innovation and job satisfaction [1]. This shift is reflected in the evolution of military academies, which now prioritize creative problem-solving, multicultural exposure, and mentoring, alongside traditional military training. Recognizing the need for both transformational and transactional leadership in this dynamic environment,

researchers are increasingly exploring the full-range leadership model within the military context.

2. Systematic Search and Review of Empirical Literature

In a study designed to elucidate the influence of leadership styles on unit performance, Bass along with Avolio, Jung and Berson [2] investigated the effects of transformational and transactional leadership. Focusing on the positive correlations between leadership styles and unit effectiveness, the research team tested four hypotheses centered on the leadership behaviors exhibited by both platoon leaders and sergeants [4, 5]. The study utilized a sample of 72 platoons, each subsequently evaluated through a two-week combat simulation. Leadership assessment was facilitated through the administration of the MLQ-Form 5X survey. Data collection for the leadership survey transpired 4-6 weeks prior to the simulated combat exercises. Performance evaluations were subsequently

obtained from highly trained observers who monitored the platoons during eleven tactical missions. The research design is centered on analyzing the relationships between three leadership constructs (transformational, transactional contingent reward, and passive-avoidant) and unit performance [2]. The findings revealed that both transformational and transactional leadership styles exerted a positive influence on unit performance, while passive-avoidant leadership exhibited a negative correlation. Notably, transformational leadership demonstrated a statistically significant and positive association with performance, highlighting the critical role of active leadership behaviors in challenging environments. Conversely, a passive leadership approach proved counterproductive to unit effectiveness. In conclusion, the study by Bass et al. (2003) underscores the paramount importance of active leadership styles, specifically transformational and transactional leadership, in achieving successful unit performance. Conversely, the research demonstrates that a passive leadership approach hinders unit effectiveness.

Lew Hardy, Graham Jones, Calum Arthur, et. al. [6] conducted two studies to explore transformational leadership's impact on elite military recruits in the UK.

- Study 1 examined the relationship between transformational leadership behaviors and training outcomes (completion vs. withdrawal). The researchers found all except two leadership behaviors (high performance expectations and intellectual stimulation) significantly predicted training completion. Contingent reward emerged as the strongest predictor [6,7].

- Study 2 tested a transformational leadership intervention designed to enhance leadership behaviors. Results showed the intervention significantly increased three out of five leadership behaviors identified in Study 1, along with positive changes in recruits' attitudes.

These studies support the concept that transformational leadership behaviors are crucial for military training success. The findings also suggest that targeted interventions can improve these behaviors in leaders. Overall, these studies contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting the value of transformational and transactional leadership styles in military settings.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 492 male military personnel of the Romanian Land Forces, coming from seven land component combat units. Their specializations were infantry, paratroopers, grenadiers and rangers. Out of the 492 participants, 54 were platoon commanders. Among them 44 could finally be included in the study (participation rate: 81.48%). Their age ranged from 21 to 36 (mean = 26.12, $SD = 3.35$). Each platoon commander had a military experience of at least six years at the beginning of the study (mean = 9.42; $SD = 3.07$). Out of the 492 participants, 448 subordinates (about 10 per platoon commander) also took part in the study. Their mean age was 26.12 years-old ($SD = 4.18$; range = 18-42) and they had an average 5.38 years of service ($SD = 3.90$; range = 1-25) and 1.27 operations abroad ($SD = 1.27$; range = 0-20). Finally there were the company commanders of the 44 platoon commanders. However their characteristics were not investigated and were not available to report here.

3.2. Leadership Styles

This study employed the widely used "Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire 5X" (MLQ-5X) developed by Bass & Avolio (1995) to assess leadership styles. The MLQ-5X is a prominent tool for evaluating transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant leadership styles [8]. Its extensive use in thousands of military and civilian studies underscores its versatility [2, 5]. Ozaralli (2003) even considers it "the best validated measure of transformational and

transactional leadership” [10]. The MLQ has undergone refinements over time to enhance its ability to capture leadership components and address psychometric concerns [11]. The current MLQ-5X version utilized in this study was built upon previous MLQ research, expert judgment from leadership scholars recommending item additions or deletions, and confirmatory factor analyses [11].

The MLQ-5X comprises 45 items. Among these, 36 items assess the nine leadership factors. Subordinates of platoon commanders completed the questionnaire, rating each item on a five-point scale ranging from “not at all” (0) to “frequently, if not always” (4). Scores for the nine dimensions were calculated as the average of items pertaining to each dimension (range 0-4). Similarly, leadership style scores were obtained as the average of dimension scores relevant to each style (range 0-4). Finally, these scores were aggregated at the platoon commander level (mean of subordinate scores), resulting in a single score for each dimension and each leadership style for every platoon

commander. In our sample, Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.74 (transactional leadership) to 0.95 (transformational leadership), indicating good to excellent reliability [12].

3.3. Evaluating Platoon Commander Performance

This study utilized a leader performance card familiar to the company commanders. This card mirrored their standard annual professional evaluation process. It comprised 24 competencies assessed on a 9-point Likert scale (0 = insufficient, 8 = excellent). The straightforward design and existing experience using this tool for subordinate evaluations made it a suitable choice.

Each of the 24 criteria (detailed in Table 1) was assigned an average score. Additionally, an overall evaluation score was calculated by averaging the scores across all 24 criteria. The internal consistency of this comprehensive measure was excellent, with Cronbach's alpha reaching 0.95, exceeding the benchmarks established by Nunally and Bernstein [12].

Table 1 Competencies and abbreviations

Competencies	Abbreviations
autonomy and initiative	P1
professional knowledge	P2
Availability	P3
physical hardiness	P4
cooperation spirit	P5
loyalty and integrity	P6
Presentation	P7
quality of work	P8
Productivity	P9
resistance to stress	P10
sense of discipline	P11
written expression	P12
oral expression	P13
Flexibility	P14
Leadership	P15
public relation	P16

<i>Competencies</i>	<i>Abbreviations</i>
sense of improvement	P17
sense of organization	P18
care for material	P19
care for personnel	P20
transfer of knowledge and experience	P21
will for self-improvement	P22
big-picture awareness	P23
Vision	P24

The study involved participants from various military bases across Romania. Data collection occurred in diverse locations within these bases, including classrooms and barracks. Participants were tested within their assigned garrisons during their regular daily routines.

Before commencing the study, we thoroughly briefed participants on the research goals and emphasized the voluntary nature of their involvement. We assured them that participation was not mandatory and they could withdraw at any time. Additionally, we guaranteed the complete confidentiality of their responses. All participants signed informed consent forms, signifying their agreement to participate.

The platoon commanders' subordinates provided information on demographics (age, gender, service duration, military branch, completed missions, language spoken) and completed the MLQ-5X questionnaire, focusing on their respective platoon commander. Company commanders, through observation of their platoon commanders' behavior in diverse situations, evaluated their subordinates using a standardized 24-competency card. This ensured objectivity in the evaluation process.

3.4. Results

Leadership Styles:

Scores ranged from 0 to 4. Both transformational and transactional leadership styles received moderate average scores, ranging from 2.12 to 2.76. Notably, the averages for transformational leadership were very similar to those for transactional leadership. For instance, transformational inspirational motivation had a mean of 2.76, while transactional contingent reward had a mean of 2.70. In contrast, passive-avoidant leadership received significantly lower scores with an average of 0.91. Looking closer at the data, it appears subordinates primarily selected response options 2, 3, and 4 for transformational and transactional leadership questions, whereas they predominantly chose 0 and 1 for passive-avoidant leadership questions.

Performance Evaluations:

Table 2 presents the average scores and standard deviations for the 24 competencies company commanders evaluated using the standardized card. The average total score was 5.79 (SD = 0.93, range = 0-8). These relatively high average scores suggest that company commanders were generally satisfied with the performance of their platoon commanders across the entire range of competencies.

Table 2 Factors, Means and Standard deviations

Factors	M	SD
TF-Idealized influence-Attributed (Ii-A)	2,34	0.73
TF-Idealized influence-Behavior (Ii-B)	2,44	0.47

TF-Inspirational motivation (IM)	2,76	0.54
TF-Intellectual stimulation (IS)	2,39	0.43
TF-Individualized consideration (IC)	2,35	0.54
TR-Contingent reward (CR)	2,70	0.46
TR-Management-by-exception-active (MbE-A)	2,13	0.30
PA-Management-by-exception-passive (MbE-P)	1,46	0.34
PA-Laissez-faire (LF)	0,91	0.57

Note: TF- transformational leadership; TR- transactional leadership; PA- passive avoidant leadership

Leadership Styles and Performance:

Table 3 details the statistically significant correlations ($p < .05$) between leadership styles and performance criteria. Following Field (2005), correlations were categorized as weak (below 0.20), moderate (between 0.20 and 0.49), and strong (above 0.49). Transformational leadership factors exhibited significant correlations with 16 out of the 24 competencies, with varying strengths across different factors. For example, idealized influence-attributed and individualized consideration displayed

moderate positive correlations with several competencies, including autonomy and initiative ($r = .42$), professional knowledge ($r = .39$), and resistance to stress ($r = .35$). Conversely, transactional leadership produced relatively few significant correlations. The only notable associations were between contingent reward and flexibility ($r = .37$) and public relations ($r = .30$). Management by exception-active did not exhibit any significant correlations with other variables.

Table 3 Competencies, Means and Standard deviations

Competencies	M	SD
Autonomy and initiative (P1)	5.60	1.41
Professional knowledge (P2)	5.69	1.33
Availability (P3)	6.16	0.99
Physical hardiness (P4)	6.51	1
Cooperation spirit (P5)	6.02	1.01
Loyalty and integrity (P6)	6	0.97
Presentation (P7)	5.76	1.04
Quality of work (P8)	5.67	1.24
Productivity (P9)	5.74	1.32
Resistance to stress (P10)	5,65	1.15
Sense of discipline (P11)	5.93	1
Written expression (P12)	5.90	1.08
Oral expression (P13)	5.67	0.89
Flexibility (P14)	5.65	0.89

Competencies	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Leadership (P15)	6.02	0.98
Public relation (P16)	5.79	1.59
Sense of improvement(P17)	5.41	1.13
Sense of organization (P18)	5.79	1.12
Care for material (P19)	5.62	1.29
Care for personnel (P20)	5.62	1.02
Transfer of knowledge and experience (P21)	5.81	1.13
Will for self-improvement(P22)	5.62	1.38
Big-picture awareness(P23)	5.97	1.16
Vision (P24)	5.39	1.41
Performance Total	5.79	0.93

As predicted, passive-avoidant leadership styles (management by exception-passive and laissez-faire leadership) were associated with negative correlations. All correlations were negative, with nine reaching statistical significance. For instance, autonomy and initiative ($r = -.38$), physical hardiness ($r = -.33$), and public relations ($r = -.45$) demonstrated moderately negative relationships with these leadership styles. Similarly, big picture awareness displayed a negative correlation ($r = -.31$) with laissez-faire leadership. Overall, the findings suggest that passive-avoidant leadership styles are linked to poorer performance evaluations.

4. Conclusions

Our findings align with prior research [2, 6] by demonstrating positive links between transformational leadership and platoon commander performance evaluations. Individualized consideration emerged as the most impactful transformational factor, echoing the importance of positive superior-subordinate relationships highlighted by Wang et al. [13]. While all transformational behaviors contribute, inspirational motivation may have a less prominent role. Interestingly, transactional leadership correlations were weaker than

anticipated based on previous studies [2, 6, 13]. This may suggest that company commanders prioritize transformational leadership for inspiring and motivating subordinates, potentially delegating reward and punishment aspects (contingent reward) to NCOs. However, a “certain measure” of transactional leadership, particularly contingent reward, remains valuable for clarifying expectations and providing feedback. Future research could explore the influence of context on leadership effectiveness and delegation dynamics between platoon commanders and NCOs.

Our study revealed positive, albeit weaker than anticipated, correlations between transactional leadership and performance evaluations. This difference compared to past research [2, 6] might be attributed to the less stressful environment in our study. In such an environment, contingent reward (providing clear expectations and recognition) may be less critical compared to combat simulations where clear structures and immediate feedback are paramount. Additionally, our results align with previous research [2, 5] as both passive-avoidant leadership styles (management-by-exception passive and laissez-faire) yielded negative correlations. This reinforces the notion that uninvolved

leaders who wait for problems to arise are ineffective, particularly within military contexts where subordinates rely heavily on their superiors' guidance.

5. Future Research Opportunities

Pinpointing the ideal leadership style for the military, especially for frontline leaders balancing the demands of superiors and subordinates, can be difficult. Our study offers valuable insights into what company commanders value most, demonstrating that transformational leadership significantly

contributes to positive evaluations, even in less stressful settings. Although the factors influencing transformational leadership development remain unclear, research suggests it can be cultivated through training programs, showing positive performance impacts six months after training. Future research should investigate the effectiveness of these programs in high-stress military situations to gain a deeper understanding of how leadership training influences both leader and subordinate performance under pressure.

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