

# Followers Learning Style Influence on Transformational Leadership Behavior Expectations: The Gender Effect

Hector Rene Diaz-Saenz, Barbara I. Mojarro-Duran  
Tecnológico de Monterrey, EGADE Business School  
[hdiaz@itesm.mx](mailto:hdiaz@itesm.mx)

## Abstract

Organizations wishing to succeed in today's changing world require employees who can learn from the experiences they live every day. Individual experiences become the source of adaptation by creating the knowledge needed to maintain organizational competitive performance. Thus, based on their learning preference, employees approach their job and relate with others. Specifically, followers use their own experience, perceptions and beliefs to decide who will exert influence over them. As indicated by implicit leadership theory [1], individuals will follow those who exhibit their own leadership prototype. Thus, the purpose of this study is to find the relationship between the learning styles of followers and their preference for specific transformational leadership behaviors in their leaders. It also looks at gender influence. The findings of this study confirm that gender influence learning style preferences. This in turn affects followers' expectations regarding specific transformational leadership behaviors.

## Introduction

Organizations wishing to succeed in today's changing world require employees who can learn from the experiences they live every day. Individual experience becomes the source of adaptation by creating the knowledge needed to maintain organizational competitive performance. Individual experience also shapes perceptions and beliefs that impact the leadership process. Specifically, followers use their own experience, perceptions and beliefs to decide who will exert influence over them. However, when leaders are not aware of the ways in which their followers comprehend their reality, even the best leaders might blindly guide their followers in a reckless way. Considering the followers' learning abilities it is plausible they favor specific characteristics with respect to their leader's behavior. Indeed, how followers behave affects the way in which they engage with their leaders [2]. Consequently, as indicated by implicit leadership theory [1], individuals will follow those who exhibit their own leadership prototype.

From the leadership perspective, a good number of studies provide support for the positive impact that transformational leaders have in organizations [3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8]. Indeed, transformational leadership behaviors are effective to guide subordinates towards accomplishing goals and objectives. Furthermore, mainstream leadership research acknowledges that one of transformational leadership's strengths is the unique and effective relationship with each follower, nurtured by consideration of their individual needs. However, in spite of the growing interest to understand leadership from the point of view of followers, there is still an unbalanced number of

studies that take that approach [2].

Considering that followers take into account their own perception of an ideal leader to follow, as considered by the implicit leadership theory [1], the learning styles research is relevant to understand what makes followers shape their leader prototype. For instance, the learning style of an individual is key when it comes to interpreting information for the decision making process [9], that includes who to follow. Thus, trying to understand what allows for a better adaptation to today's world, theorists such as Kolb [10, 11], and Honey and Mumford [12] developed learning models that have shown to be useful to improve individual performance in organizational settings. There are several studies that have gathered evidence supporting the effectiveness of the learning styles methods within organizations [9, 13, 14]. Some other studies have confirmed that learning styles preferences vary among individuals [15]. Among the factors that influence this preference are levels of education [15], culture [16, 17, 15], and gender [16].

Unfortunately, even though research has highlighted the importance of looking at the learning style to understand the thinking and behavior of individuals, there is a paucity of studies that look at the influence of follower's learning styles on the preferred transformational leadership behaviors. Due to the increased number of women in organizations, studies should also consider gender as an important shaper of follower perception and preference. Thus, the purpose of this study is to find the relationship between the learning styles of followers and their preference for specific transformational leadership behaviors. It also looks at gender influence. In order to achieve our purpose, first we will review the transformational leadership theory, as well as the learning styles theory. Second, we will discuss the methodology employed to gather and analyze the information collected. Fourth, we will present the results of the study, followed by the discussion and implications for international managers, study limitations and future research.

### **Transformational Leadership**

The wide attraction in studying the process by which leaders foster organizational performance beyond expectations continues to grow. The process of transformational leadership accomplishes this level of performance by promoting an emotional attachment with followers and a collective commitment to a higher moral cause [18]. Several reviews have found such accomplishment in a wide range of contexts [19, 18, 7]. Central to this leadership approach is the focus on the followers' unique needs. Consequently, leaders help them develop their strengths and spend time guiding and coaching them. Nevertheless, most empirical research has a tendency to give too much credit to leaders while ignoring the point of view of followers [18]. To understand better the leader-follower relationship, we need to turn to followers to understand what their expectations with respect to leader behaviors are. This study does this by making an assessment of the behaviors that followers ideally will like his or her leader to have by adapting the Transformational Leadership Inventory (TLI) developed by Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Moorman, and Fetter [7], instead of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) developed by Bass [20].

We consider the TLI more suitable because its development "was based on the construct definitions found in a comprehensive review of all the works that examined behaviors related to transformational leaders, including Bass's work" [18, p.301]. Thus, six different behaviors recognized by transformational leadership, along with one transactional leadership behavior compose the full range of factors that are considered. The first factor is called identifying and articulating a vision that refers to those behaviors performed by the leader directed at identifying new opportunities for the team/unit/division/company and communicating them in an inspiring

manner to lead followers into his or her vision of the future. The second factor is providing an appropriate model which denotes all behavior that contributes to set an example consistent with the values and beliefs of the leader. Next behavior is fostering the acceptance of group goals which are those intended by the leader to bring his team to accept and work cooperatively on common goals. High performance expectations are behaviors with the purpose of setting expectations for excellence that the leader has for his or her followers. Such expectations could be about quality and/ or high performance. With respect to providing individualized support, transformational behaviors stress the importance of showing respect to followers and concern for personal feelings and needs. The next and final transformational dimension is intellectual stimulation which includes all behaviors oriented to challenge followers into revising the assumptions about their work used to solve past problems, as well as to find new and creative approaches. The transactional dimension is contingent reward, and includes behaviors concerned with the delivery of rewards in exchange for efforts provided by followers. To better understand follower expectations with respect to leadership behaviors we need to look at the learning styles theory.

### **Learning Styles**

The way individuals approach a new task or solve a problem is influenced by their personal learning preferences. Past successes and failures are important in shaping this individual preference to acquire information and exercise decision making [21]. Accordingly, each person develops a preferred approach based on the different events lived throughout all the stages of his or her life (i.e. education, work position, or career). This is why people with different background vary in their way of doing the same things. Learning styles then would be experienced by leaders and followers as well. Nevertheless, leaders have responsibility to understand followers in the workplace because it is more common for leaders to recruit followers than otherwise. Thus, understanding this area of knowledge will help leaders anticipate possible incompatibility with their followers.

Kolb's learning model considers two dimensions that describe how adults process their learning from the experiences they face [22]. Both dimensions are established in a continuum with contrasting positions on either end (learning styles). The first one describes how information is acquired; either through a concrete experience (CE) (such as having a discussion) or by an abstract conceptualization (AC) (developing a mental model to integrate the experience and make sense of it) [15]. The second dimension indicates the way information is managed; presenting on one side an active experimentation approach (AE) (the way in which mental models are used to make decisions or solve problems) and on the other side a reflective observation (RO) (how to respond to concrete experiences). These two dimensions lead to four learning styles that reveal how employees approach their work and relate with others. Accordingly, the four learning styles are diverging, assimilating, converging, and accommodating.

People, who are classified as diverging, show high levels of CE and RO. These individuals are quite imaginative since they have the ability to reflect on their own experiences from different points of view. Divergent people are very good at developing relationships with other people, as they are very appreciative of cultural and artistic differences. People who are assimilating also express high levels of RO; however, they are more skilled in AC. In other words, these individuals are highly reflexive, patient, and prefer to work with ideas and theories than with other people. Assimilating people are not too interested in the practical aspect of theories, as it is more important for them that such theories are logical and robust. Converging people are

characterized with high levels of AC and AE. It is more important to bring theories into practice as converging individuals are highly technical people. Additionally, these people prefer to work in a more abstract and practical context than in a sociological way, where they would have to deal with interpersonal issues. Finally, accommodating people are individuals who show high levels AE and CE. Within this classification, it is very important to look for the practical side of each situation. Accommodating people are more focused on specific tasks and objectives, without spending too much time analyzing or developing new ideas or theories.

Some studies have found that culture as well as gender determines preferences for an emotional or cognitive orientation [16, 17, 15]. For instance, French and Quebecois showed a higher preference for personal involvement and intuitive approach to problems and situations (emotional orientation) than Germans, whose preference was stronger for theoretical stimuli and logical orientation (cognitive orientation) [16]. Consistently, Holtbrügge and Mohr [15] found a relationship between individualism and masculinity with the preference for cognitive orientation. With respect to gender, female students display a higher emotional orientation than male students [16]. On the other hand, male students present a higher predilection for a cognitive orientation. This result is consistent with a meta-analytical analysis, which indicates that men more than women prefer an abstract conceptualization learning style [23]. In addition, in his study of emotional intelligence, [24] finds women score higher than men in those dimensions that related to interpersonal aspects ('relating well' and emotional mentoring') which are consistent with the emotional orientation of Charlesworth [17] and Barmeyer [16] studies. Considering the strong support that meta-analytical studies give to gender studies, among the factors this study will consider gender as it relates to learning preferences.

### **How Transformational Leaders should look at Learning Preferences**

By knowing that individuals think, interact with others, and face reality in a way consistent with their respective learning style, it is fair to assume that followers would follow more readily those leaders that satisfy their need for cognitive or affective needs accordingly to their respective learning style preference. Indeed, transformational leadership theory claims that individuals that fall under this type of leadership display individual consideration or support to followers' needs for affective display as well as for intellectual stimulation among other behaviors [18]. They must know their followers expectations and act accordingly, otherwise they risk losing esteem and referent power in the eyes of the followers [19]. Thus, transformational leaders should take into account the learning style of their followers to ensure an effective relationship with their followers. Then, it would be reasonable to assume that depending on the learning style of the follower some transformational leadership behaviors would be more expected by followers than others. This leads to the following research question:

RQ1: Which learning preferences of followers motivate a predilection for particular transformational behaviors in leaders?

Transformational leadership studies continue to bring support to the notion that this leadership approach stimulates great organizational performance. One recent study does it by linking learning styles with high and low level of transformational leadership to organizational effectiveness [25]. However, that study does not address the point of view of followers as it assessed leader behaviors and learning styles. Stream research identifies as central to transformational leadership the support leaders provide to followers based on their individual

needs. In addition, it is known that transformational leaders inspire followers by provoking emotions that motivate them to perform well [19]. Thus, if transformational leaders provide individualized support, it is relevant to test the assumption that followers value leaders who show respect for their personal feelings and needs. Individuals whose preference for acquiring information or experience by being in touch with people (and be sensitive to feelings) more than a theoretical stimuli and a logical orientation (more impersonal) would score higher on the concrete experience (CE) learning skill than on abstract conceptualization. Barmeyer [16] found female students scored higher on CE than male students whom scored higher on AC. Hence, female students displayed higher emotional orientation. Thus, it would be expected to find Female followers score higher on CE and providing individual support on behalf of leaders. Thus, the following hypothesis:

*H1: Female followers will display a higher preference for CE which in turn will predict a preference for individual support on behalf of the ideal leader.*

If studies have found that males tend to score higher on AC, it would be expected that a logical orientation is related to leadership behaviors that are less affective and more cognitive in content such as identifying and articulating a vision as well as fostering the acceptance of group goals. Therefore the following hypothesis:

*H2: Male followers will display a higher preference for AC which in turn will predict articulating a vision, providing an appropriate model, fostering the acceptance of group goals, promoting high performance expectations, providing intellectual stimulation and providing contingent rewards on behalf of the ideal leader.*

## **Method**

### **Sample**

The sample was composed of experienced professionals from several industries. It was a convenience sample that included participants from graduate MBA courses and management training seminars where learning styles and leadership were part of the subject. Before attending the training, participants responded to self-report questionnaires, which included both learning styles and transformational leadership preferences. Total final sample consisted of 485 participants.

### **Measures**

**Learning styles inventory.** In the case of the learning styles inventory, responses were captured following Kolb's Spanish version 3 of the questionnaire, which was acquired from the HayGroup. The survey is composed of twelve questions where respondents have four different possible answers which they select according to their learning preference. Cronbach's alpha was higher than 0.70 for CA, OR and AE, and 0.65 for CE.

**Transformational leadership.** In the case of the transformational leadership preferences, the survey was based on Podsakoff et al's [7] 28 item questionnaire. Participants were asked to assess the behaviors of their ideal leader assuming they had the opportunity to choose who they wanted to work for. In this way, participants were responding by thinking about their preferences for leadership behavior. Responses considered a 5-point Likert scale with the anchors "Not

important” to “Very important”. The original survey was double translated from English to Spanish and then from Spanish to English to assess the reliability of the meaning for each question. Cronbach’s alpha was above .70 for all dimensions, except in the case of high performance expectations which was .53.

**Gender.** Gender was another variable considered for this study. Previous research points at this variable as relevant to determine both learning styles and transformational leadership behaviors [16, 26, 24, 23].

## Results

### Factor Analysis

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was done with SPSS v.21 using varimax rotation, to assess the behavior of the learning and transformational leadership dimensions within our sample. In the case of the learning dimensions, following Platsidou and Metallidou [27], we obtained two factors that make up for an 82.17% of the total variance. Factor 1 groups the dimensions abstract conceptualization and concrete experience, and factor 2 loads active experimentation and reflective observation. In the case of transformational leadership, our results identify six factors, which conform 54.91% of total variance. The first factor loaded two dimensions, namely, fostering the acceptance of group goals and intellectual stimulation. The remaining items loaded within their corresponding dimensions according to Podsakoff et al. [7].

### Research Question

Simple linear regression in SPSS v.21 was performed in order to find an answer to our research question. We sought to find which learning preferences of followers activate a predilection for particular transformational behaviors in leaders. Since our purpose was to find the direct relationship between each learning dimension and each transformational leadership dimension, we decided to use the original seven dimensions [7]. Table 1 displays our final model, which shows that only three transformational leadership dimensions are predicted by the four learning dimensions, namely providing an appropriate model, individualized support, and promoting high performance expectations.

Table 1. Linear Regression

	SUPPORT	EXPECT	MODEL
AC	0.12	0.12	0.11
AE	0.13	0.13	0.11
CE	0.13	0.12	0.11
RO	0.14	0.12	0.11
Adj R2	0.03***	0.00	0.00

n = 485; \* p > .05, \*\* p > .01; \*\*\* p > .001

### Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis 1 and 2 were tested with one-way ANOVA analyses between learning styles and gender, and transformational leadership dimensions and gender. Table 2 displays the results. As it can be seen, female followers significantly scored higher on CE than male followers (p < .03). At the same time, male followers scored higher than female followers on AC (p < .08).

These results are consistent with the ones obtained by Barmeyer [16] who found that women tend to favor an emotional approach to learning which allows them to have better social skills. On the other hand, men are more prone to favor a logical or cognitive approach which is a more impersonal way to learn.

Table 2. ANOVA Learning Dimensions and Gender

	<b>n</b>	<b>AC</b>	<b>AE</b>	<b>CE</b>	<b>RO</b>
Female	268	31.26	31.73	25.84	31.13
Male	217	32.29	32.78	24.68	30.15
Sig.		.08	.06	.03	.07

To test whether female preference for CE predicted individual support on behalf of the leader, we ran a regression considering only the female portion of the sample (n = 268). Table 3 displays the results. Model 1 tests H1 and shows that when considering only women, all four learning dimensions only predict a preference for providing individualized support on behalf of the leader. Thus, hypothesis 1 is supported. To test H2, considering only men, we ran regressions to test whether the four learning dimensions predicted the six transformational leadership dimensions. However, results show significant predictions for only two of them, which we include in table 3. Non-significant regression results are not included due to space limitations. Model 2 indicates that when including all four learning preferences, men favor leaders that promote high performance. By the same token, when including all four learning preferences men favor leaders that provide an appropriate model as indicated by Model 3. Therefore, H2 is only partially supported.

Table 3. Linear Regression Controlling for Gender

<b>Model</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
AC	0.21*	0.16*	0.14*
AE	0.22*	0.18**	0.14*
CE	0.22*	0.17*	0.14*
RO	0.23*	0.17**	0.13*
Adj R2	0.01	0.01	0.01

\* p > .10, \*\* p > .05; \*\*\* p > .01

## Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to find the relationship between the learning styles of followers and their preference for their specific transformational leadership behaviors. Our analysis indicates that all four learning preferences (CE, RO, AC and AE) predict only three leadership behaviors. Ideally all these learning preferences need to be exercised to appropriately solve problems or make good decisions. Thus, providing an appropriate model, individualized support, and promoting high performance expectations stand out as the only transformational leadership behaviors expected by followers that have a preference for all four learning approaches. It is interesting to see that individuals with a cognitive or logical preference (AC) would expect emotional support from his/her leader, however, with the least intensity. This

interesting fact points to the understanding that reason and affection do not exclude one another in the learning process. Furthermore, consistently with Barmeyer [16] our analysis points to women tending to be more emotionally oriented than men. This finding allowed us to look at what transformational leadership profile would be expected by gender. Our analysis suggests that effective leaders should display individualized support when interacting with women. On the other hand, effective leaders should provide an appropriate model and promote high performance when interacting with men. A further observation of Table 2 points at an interesting reflection considering that women scored higher on CE and RO suggesting a Diverging orientation. While men scored higher on AC and AE suggesting a Converging orientation. These two orientations are opposite of one another according to the learning style theory, they complement each other and may enrich the working experience. However, if the relationship is not handled appropriately these orientations could also be the source of conflicts.

### **International and Managerial Implications**

The findings of this study provide insights that could allow managers to lead more effectively if gender is taken into account; thus, overall, providing more emotional support to women and leading men more by example and emphasizing high expectations. A practical implication for managers of companies immersed in an international context, is the possibility to capitalize on the strengths of these groups of women and men, helping them work together to find new ways to solve complex challenges for their organization. As suggested by this study, women are high on CE and RO. This means that they have the imagination to see things from different points of view. They are also good at developing relationships with other people which would include individuals from different nationalities, as they are prone to appreciate cultural and artistic differences. The contributions that this group could bring are very relevant in our current global world. Another strength that this group offers is the capacity to understand the problem from its origins. Furthermore, they are also capable of developing several solution alternatives. On the opposite corner, men high on AC and AE understand abstract knowledge and are able to find practical solutions to problems. They tend to be more highly technical people, what allows them to be able to develop new technologies. Effective managers would apply transformational leadership behaviors expected from them, specifically by these two groups. Nevertheless, managers need to consider that not all women and men would be identical. This study's methodology has limitations that did not allow us to further find if a subgroup of women has a more cognitive orientation than another subgroup, which has been the case in training sessions. The same goes for men and subgroup comparison. Another important consideration is the influence of culture, which has been found to promote a more emotional orientation among Latin Americans, compared to a more cognitive orientation among Germans or other cultures with high individualism [16, 17, 15].

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