

THE IMPACT OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP ON EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF HRM*

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Abstract

Increasing competition among higher education institutions has heightened the importance of effectively managing academic talent, making employee performance central to organizational sustainability. Although prior research has established a positive association between transformational leadership and employee performance, the mechanisms underlying this relationship in highly institutionalized university contexts remain insufficiently understood.

This study investigates the effect of transformational leadership on the performance of academic and administrative staff in higher education institutions and examines the mediating role of human resource management. Survey data were collected from 541 university employees in Kunming, Yunnan Province, using a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire. Regression analysis, mediation analysis, and structural equation modeling (SEM) were employed to

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test the proposed relationships.

The results indicate that transformational leadership positively influences employee performance and human resource management practices, while human resource management partially mediates the leadership–performance relationship. These findings suggest that leadership effects on performance in universities operate not only through direct influence but also through formal human resource management systems, contributing to the literature on leadership and performance in higher education contexts.

Keywords: Transformational leadership, Human resource management, Employee performance, Higher education institutions, Faculty performance

Introduction

In a context where higher education organizations increasingly emphasize performance, accountability, and competitiveness, employee performance has become a core element for universities to achieve teaching quality, research output, and sustainable organizational development. Human resource management in universities faces unique challenges. For example, while tenure guarantees academic stability, it weakens the binding force of traditional performance incentive mechanisms; the coexistence of multiple roles such as teaching, research, and social service makes workload allocation and performance evaluation difficult to standardize; and the academic hierarchy and dual-track administrative-academic governance structure further limit the flexibility of human resource management in assessment, motivation, and promotion. Transformational leadership is considered an important leadership style that can stimulate intrinsic motivation, promote organizational change, and improve performance. However, existing research largely focuses on the direct relationship between transformational leadership and performance, with less exploration of how leadership influence is translated into concrete

performance results in organizations with strong institutional constraints. In university organizations, even with visionary leadership, a lack of effective human resource management can become a bottleneck. Therefore, human resource management may constitute a key mediating mechanism connecting transformational leadership and employee performance, rather than simply a background condition. Based on this, exploring the mediating role of human resource management between employee performance and transformational leadership can provide important insights for universities aiming to implement transformational leadership and improve faculty performance (see Figure 1).

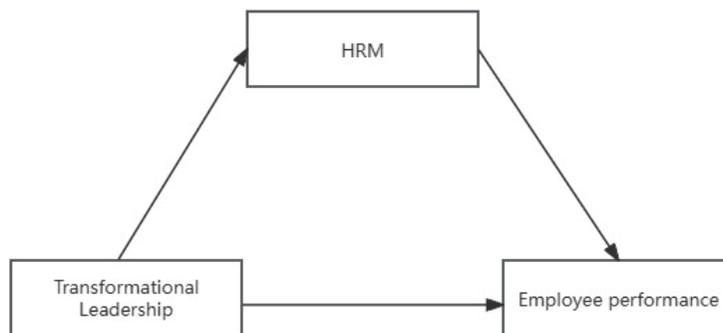


Figure 1 Hypothesized research model

Literature review and hypothese

1. The Relationship between Transformational Leadership and Employee Performance

(Ridwan, Mulyani, and Ali 2020) This paper discusses leadership specifically in relation to the most important leadership competencies of school principals. Leadership factors influencing teacher performance include the ability to mentor, supervise, monitor, evaluate, assess, and set an example. Transformational leadership (TL) has been a central topic in organizational behavior and human resource management since Burns (1978) and Bass (1985, 1990) introduced the concept. Transformational leadership emphasizes inspiring

subordinates' potential and improving performance through vision, intellectual stimulation, personalized care, and motivating actions (Bass 1990). Transformational leadership is defined as a leadership style that brings positive change to followers by focusing on the interests of others and acting for the benefit of the entire team. (Astuti, Fitria, and Rohana, 2020) Encouraging and appreciating teachers' efforts to enhance their professional competence will positively impact their interest and work motivation. (Cao Xiaoli, 2021) Research results indicate that transformational leadership plays a significant role in promoting positive teacher behavior, especially in universities with a strong collectivist culture, where its effects are significant. This suggests that universities should prioritize the development and training of transformational leaders. (Zhang Sen, 2021) Transformational leadership provides intellectual capital for university presidents facing the challenges of organizational modernization, motivating teachers to be more diligent, dedicated, and satisfied. This paper analyzes the potential mechanisms by which major transformational leadership theories affect employee performance. Transformational leadership improves employee performance through multiple pathways, including stimulating motivation, optimizing support, building trust, and satisfying psychological needs. Organizations should prioritize leader development, enabling them to flexibly apply diverse theories and strategies while addressing the diverse needs of employees to maximize human resource effectiveness. In summary, the following hypotheses can be proposed:

H1: Transformational leadership has a positive impact on employee performance

2. Transformational Leadership and Human Resource Management

Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated a significant positive correlation between transformational leadership and human resource management (HRM) practices (Jyoti and Dev 2015); Vera and Crossan 2004). Transformational leaders, characterized by visionary leadership, individualized

care, intellectual stimulation, and role modeling (Bass 1990), foster a supportive, open, and learning-oriented organizational climate. This climate promotes the implementation and optimization of strategic HRM practices, including recruitment and selection, performance management, training and development, compensation incentives, and employee relationship building (Rowold 2004).

In summary, transformational leadership is not only a key driver of organizational strategic change but also a catalyst for effective human resource management. The positive correlation between the two suggests that a leader's Transformational leadership style improves the quality and effectiveness of human resource management practices by influencing organizational climate and employee attitudes. This relationship provides solid theoretical support for constructing a performance research model with transformational leadership as the antecedent variable and HRM as the mediating variable. Given this, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Transformational leadership has a positive impact on human resource management.

3. Human Resource Management and Employee Performance

Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) theory posits that HRM practices enhance organizational performance by optimizing human capital and improving employee motivation and capabilities ((Delery and Doty 1996); (Wright and McMahan 2011)). Most scholars exploring Human Resource from Four Dimensions : recruitment, training and development ,performance management and compensation and benefits .Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated that key HRM practices within high-performance work systems (HPWS), such as scientific recruitment and selection, systematic training, performance appraisals, incentive compensation, and career development support, significantly improve employee task performance, innovation, and organizational citizenship

behavior (Huselid, M. A. 1995) & (Jiang et al. 2012).

In summary, the positive impact of HRM on employee performance has been widely validated by academics both domestically and internationally. In this study's theoretical model, HRM not only serves as a key driver of performance improvement but also as a mediating mechanism through which transformational leadership influences performance, providing a theoretical basis for explaining the Transformational leadership-performance interaction. Given this, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Human resource management has a positive impact on employee performance.

4. The Mediating Role of Human Resource Management in the Relationship Between Transformational Leadership and Employee Performance

Transformational leadership is the core driving force of human resource management, directly impacting organizational effectiveness and employee development. From a theoretical perspective, its influence is primarily reflected in the following aspects: First, Transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985) emphasizes that leaders enhance employees' intrinsic motivation through visioning, personalized care, and intellectual stimulation. In human resource management, this leadership style can enhance employee belonging, reduce turnover, and foster a high-performance culture. Second, Greenleaf's (1977) servant leadership theory posits that leaders focus on employee needs and enhance team cohesion through empowerment and support. In this context, human resource practices (such as training and performance evaluation) are more easily accepted by employees, thereby optimizing talent development. Third, Fiedler's (1967) contingency theory suggests that leadership effectiveness depends on situational fit. Human resource management policies must be dynamically adjusted based on leadership style (e.g., task-oriented or relationship-oriented). In the literature reviewed, (Nurbaeti 2022) found that

maintaining performance during task execution is not easy, as many factors can cause inconsistencies between emotions and work behaviors.

From a psychological perspective, transformational leadership reshapes employees' perceptions through Human Resource Management (HRM). Specifically, when transformational leaders promote more transparent, equitable, and development-oriented human resource management practices (such as performance appraisals, training opportunities, and promotion mechanisms), employees are more likely to develop a stronger sense of organizational support and procedural fairness. Existing research shows that when employees perceive that the organization explicitly recognizes their efforts and contributions through human resource management systems, they are more likely to interpret leadership behavior as a long-term commitment rather than a short-term incentive, thereby enhancing work engagement, sense of responsibility, and intrinsic motivation. This shift in psychological perception ultimately manifests as improved performance levels. From a behavioral perspective, HRM "institutionalizes" leadership influence into sustainable behavioral incentives. The influence of transformational leadership is often situational and individual-dependent; without institutional support, its incentive effect may be difficult to sustain. Human resource management plays a crucial "institutional transformation" role in this process. Based on the above psychological and behavioral mechanisms, human resource management plays a mediating role between transformational leadership and employee performance. However, transformational leaders can still influence employee performance through direct emotional incentives, role modeling, and informal interactions; therefore, human resource management is more likely to act as a partial mediator rather than a complete mediator.

In summary, this paper proposes the following research hypothesis:

H4: Human resource management mediates the relationship between Transformational leadership and employee performance.

Methods

1. Samples and procedure

Kunming provides a theoretically informative context for examining faculty performance in higher education. Universities in Kunming operate under institutional arrangements, performance evaluation systems, and human resource management practices that are broadly comparable to those of many regional universities in China. Moreover, the demographic and professional diversity of faculty members enhances the suitability of the sample for examining leadership and human resource management mechanisms across heterogeneous academic groups.

This study distributed 550 questionnaires to university faculty in Kunming. After eliminating 9 invalid questionnaires, a total of 541 valid questionnaires were obtained. This chapter will conduct empirical research based on these 541 valid questionnaires, examining the impact of Transformational leadership on employee performance and how Transformational leadership influences employee performance through human resource management. Table 1 shows the basic information of the survey respondents. In terms of gender, women accounted for a high proportion, at 72.27%. In terms of age, 36.6% were aged 31-40, 23.29% were aged 26-30, and 20.7% were aged 18-25. In terms of educational background, 50.28% held a master's degree or higher, 28.1% held a bachelor's degree or equivalent, and 20.15% held a college degree or equivalent. In terms of years of work experience, 28.85% held 6 or more but less than 10 years, 25.32% held 3 or more but less than 5 years, 19.04% held 11 or more but less than 15 years, and 17.6% held 16 or more years. The Cronbach's alphas for several indicators in

this questionnaire are shown in Table 4.2. As can be seen, the Cronbach's alphas for each indicator were all greater than 0.8, indicating good reliability.

This study used the KMO coefficient and Bartlett's test of sphericity to test sample validity (Manosuthi et al., 2024). The results are shown in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, the KMO coefficient for all measurement items in this study was 0.955, exceeding 0.8. The Bartlett test was significant at the 1% confidence level, indicating that the scale has good construct validity. In summary, the questionnaire data from the 541 samples used in this study met the reliability and validity requirements.

Table 1 Questionnaire survey sample validity test

KMO Sampling adequacy measure		0.955
Bartlett's test of sphericity	Approximate Chi-Square	15394.216
	degrees of freedom	378
	Significance	0.00

2. Measures

All measures in the present study were translated into Chinese from established English scales. Participants rated each item on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). For the study of transformational leadership, referencing (Nurbaeti 2022), a 9 items measurement scale was constructed based on four dimensions: the influence of idealization, motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual considerations. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient in this study was 0.965. For the study of mediating variables in human resource management, referring to the dimensions and variables involved in the research process of (Zhang and Villanueva 2024) Based on the dimensions and variables that were concerned during the research process, the designed scale was combined with the actual

survey topics and the subsequent data analysis and screening, and finally 12 items were selected. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient in this study was 0.942. The employee performance scale was developed based on the scale of the study by (Yang Jia, 2022) and the author's discussion on the dimensions of employee performance in Chapter 2. In terms of scale, there are 18 items such as "employee education level affects employee performance" and "employee engagement affects employee performance". This study combined the actual survey and the subsequent data analysis and screening, and finally selected 12 items. The scale uses the Likert five-point scale. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient in this study was 0.899.

3. Analytical strategy

This study used factor analysis, regression analysis, and mediation effect analysis, and used structural equation modeling (SEM) to analyze the mediating role of human resource management and social capital between leadership and employee performance. This questionnaire tool can help to deeply understand the implementation effect of leadership in colleges and universities and the key role of human resource management in the transformation of employee performance. A total of 550 respondents participated in this study. In the initial stage, the researchers conducted pre-tests and pilot tests to ensure the reliability and validity of the data. Finally, two analysis tools (SPSS24.0 and AMOS24.0 programs) were used to analyze the obtained data.

Results

1. Benchmark regression results

Table 2 shows the baseline regression results of the impact of Transformational leadership on performance, where columns (1)-(5) are gradually regressed with different control variables. It can be seen that the coefficient of the impact of Transformational leadership (Lead) on employee

performance (Perf) remains between 0.609 and 0.629, and the significance level is below 1%, indicating that the impact of each unit increase in Transformational leadership level on employee performance increases by 0.609-0.629 units; and as the control variables increase, the impact of Transformational leadership level on employee performance remains very stable. In models (2)-(5), the coefficient of the impact of employee education on employee performance remains between 0.0579-0.0637, and the significance level remains at the 10% or 5% level, indicating that employees with higher education generally achieve higher performance. For each unit increase in education level, the employee performance level increases by 0.0579-0.0637 units. This is in line with basic common sense. The reason is that higher education usually has stronger professional ability and knowledge reserves, which can significantly improve performance. In models (3)-(5), the coefficient of the impact of employee rank on employee performance remains between 0.0494 and 0.0539, and the significance level is at the 1% level, indicating that for every unit increase in employee rank, employee performance increases by 0.0494-0.0539 units. The reason is also obvious. In universities, the salary levels set for different salary levels are generally quite different, which means that the differences in employee performance are also quite large. In models (4)-(5), the coefficient of the impact of gender on employee performance is 0.0604, but it is not significant. This may be because universities are state-owned institutions. For the same position, universities set almost no difference in salary for men and women. Instead, they set different salaries based on differences in education, position, and rank. In model (5), the coefficient of influence of worky on employee performance is -0.00292, and it is not significant. The possible reason is that, although colleges and universities will increase wages according to the increase of worky when setting salary increases, the increase is usually small, which has little impact on the psychological feelings of employees. At the same

time, as employees' worky or age increase, their psychological expectations of their own wages will also increase, and their living expenses will also increase accordingly. This results in the increase in worky due to worky being far less than their psychological expectations. The data obtained through the questionnaire survey this time was obtained based on the feelings of employees' supervisors, so the impact of the variable of worky on employee performance is negative and not significant.

Table 2 Benchmark regression results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
variable	Perf	Perf	Perf	Perf	Perf
Lead	0.629*** (0.0211)	0.609*** (0.0235)	0.610*** (0.0234)	0.611*** (0.0234)	0.611*** (0.0234)
Edu		0.0579* (0.0298)	0.0599** (0.0296)	0.0637** (0.0314)	0.0637** (0.0314)
Rank			0.0494*** (0.0174)	0.0539*** (0.0179)	0.0539*** (0.0179)
Gender				0.0604 (0.0512)	0.0604 (0.0512)
Worky				-0.00292 (0.0195)	-0.00292 (0.0195)
Constant	0.555*** (0.0499)	0.409*** (0.0903)	0.299*** (0.0977)	0.179 (0.149)	0.179 (0.149)
Observations	541	541	541	541	541
R-squared	0.622	0.625	0.630	0.631	0.631

Note: *, **, *** Respectively 10%,5%,1% significance level; The values in brackets are standard errors.

2. Mechanism analysis

Mechanism Effects of Human Resource Management. Table 3 shows the three-step method used in (Wen Zhonglin, Zhang Lei, Hou Jietai, and Liu Hongyun, 2004) to study the mechanism effects of human resource management. Table 7 shows that in model (1), the coefficient of Transformational leadership (Lead) on employee performance (Perf) is 0.611, and is significant at the 1% level. In model (2), the coefficient of Transformational leadership (Lead) on human resource management (HRM) is 0.263, and is significant at the 1% level, indicating that Transformational leadership can improve the level of human resource management in schools. Model (3) shows that the coefficient of human resource management (HRM) on employee performance (Perf) is 0.0596, and is significantly positive at the 5% level, indicating that the improvement of human resource management level can directly promote employee performance; after adding the human resource management variable, the coefficient of Transformational leadership on employee performance is 0.596, which is lower than that of model (1), but is still significant at the 1% level, indicating that human resource management plays a partial mediating role between Transformational leadership and performance.

Table 3 Results of the mechanism test of human resource management

	(1)	(2)	(3)
variable	Perf	HRM	Perf
Lead	0.611*** (0.0234)	0.263*** (0.0413)	0.596*** (0.0242)
HRM			0.0596** (0.0244)

Edu	0.0637** (0.0314)	-0.282*** (0.0554)	0.0805** (0.0320)
Rank	0.0539*** (0.0179)	-0.183*** (0.0315)	0.0647*** (0.0183)
Gender	0.0604 (0.0512)	0.113 (0.0901)	0.0537 (0.0510)
WY	-0.00292 (0.0195)	-0.0797** (0.0344)	0.00183 (0.0195)
Constant	0.179 (0.149)	3.446*** (0.262)	-0.0262 (0.170)
Observations	541	541	541
R-squared	0.631	0.157	0.635

3. Hypothesis testing

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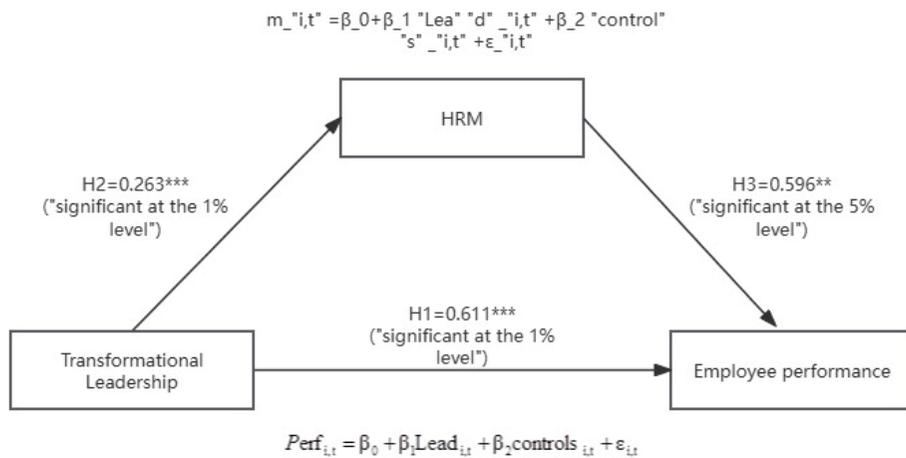


Figure 2 Hypothesized research results

Discussion

This study examines how transformational leadership influences employee performance in higher education institutions and clarifies the mediating role of human resource management within this relationship. By integrating leadership behavior with organizational systems, the findings contribute to the leadership and higher education literature in several important ways.

1. The core role of Transformational leadership in employee performance. Through theoretical analysis, it is concluded that leadership plays a positive role in promoting employee performance. The coefficient of influence of leadership (Lead) on employee performance (Perf) remains between 0.609 and 0.629, and the significance level is below 1%, indicating that the impact of Transformational leadership level on employee performance increases by 0.609-0.629 units for every unit increase in Transformational leadership level. Moreover, as the control variables increase, the impact of Transformational leadership level on employee performance remains very stable. In universities, formal performance incentive mechanisms are often constrained by

standardized evaluation systems and administrative regulations; therefore, leadership behaviors such as vision articulation, personalized care, and intellectual stimulation play a crucial role in enhancing employee engagement and self-motivation.

2. Human resource management (HRM) plays a partial mediating role between Transformational leadership and employee performance. The regression coefficient of the direct impact of HRM on performance is 0.0596 ($p < 0.05$), indicating that optimizing HRM can improve employee performance. Transformational Leadership indirectly affects employee performance through HRM, that is, the regression coefficient of leadership on HRM is 0.263 ($p < 0.01$), indicating that effective Transformational leadership can optimize HRM and thus improve employee performance. This finding indicates that the impact of transformational leadership extends beyond direct interpersonal interactions to shape formal human resource management practices.

In conclusion, the findings underscore the importance of integrating transformational leadership with effective human resource management in higher education institutions. In highly structured organizational environments, leadership effectiveness can be limited without the support of coherent human resource management practices. Therefore, combining leadership development with improvements to human resource management systems is a key pathway to enhancing the performance of university staff.

Recommendation

Based on the above conclusions, this study proposes countermeasures from three dimensions: Transformational leadership optimization, human resource management, and performance management systems, to improve the performance of university faculty.

1. Improving Transformational Leadership Effectiveness

Strengthen the cultivation of transformational leaders and conduct leadership training, focusing on cultivating vision-building and team motivation skills among school-level and department-level managers. Optimize leadership styles, reduce laissez-faire leadership, and require managers to regularly communicate with faculty and provide clear guidance. Encourage servant-oriented leadership, such as principals and deans taking the lead in teaching and research, to strengthen their role as role models.

2. Improving Human Resource Management

Optimize and target recruitment, adopting a dual-track assessment system of "teaching + research" to attract multi-faceted talent. Simultaneously, implement customized training policies. For newly hired faculty, provide training in teaching skills and classroom management; for senior faculty, focus on training in research methods and support participation in domestic and international academic exchanges. Reform the compensation and incentive system, directly linking performance with bonuses and professional title assessments to avoid a "big pot" system. Strengthen career development support, establish faculty growth profiles, and regularly assess career development needs. Establish a mentoring system for young faculty, with senior professors providing guidance in research and teaching. Given that human resource management is a key mediating factor, universities should prioritize improving the "personnel management skills" of deans and department heads.

This paper explores the impact of transformational leadership on employee performance: the mediating role of human resource management. Through empirical research, we found some correlations; however, this study has the following limitations: (1) Limitations of sample scope: Due to limited resources, the survey mainly relied on peers, friends, family and colleagues. The lack of a scientifically based stratified random sampling method for employee performance led to a regionally concentrated distribution of the sample,

affecting the generalizability of the research results. (2) Limitations of data collection: Local context affected the search for questionnaires and the selection of participants. In addition, due to time constraints, this study could not conduct regular follow-up surveys, which complicated the verification of causal relationships between variables. This situation may introduce common variance bias, thereby affecting the accuracy of the research results. Future research should consider these limitations to improve the reliability and validity of research on factors affecting employee performance.

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