Personality and transformational leadership: The moderating effect of organizational context

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the antecedents of transformational leadership is an important issue, given the potential benefits of this leadership style. Based on the trait activation model (Tett & Burnett, 2003), this study aimed at testing the moderating role of the organizational context on the relationship between personality and transformational leadership. Results from regression analyses on a sample of 89 leaders and their 643 followers show that leaders who have relationship-oriented personalities emerge as transformational leaders only when they evolve in a supportive organizational context. These results support the relevance of considering the effect of individual factors and contextual factors together to better understand the conditions that are conducive to the adoption of transformational leadership.

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1. Introduction

Transformational leadership (TL) has been the object of an impressive number of studies (see the literature review of Dinh et al. (2014)). This style of leadership is associated with important organizational benefits (Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011). Although the effects of TL are well documented, its antecedents are less so.

Existing research has shown that the personality traits most strongly associated with TL (Bono & Judge, 2004; Deinert, Homan, Boer, Voelpel, & Gutermann, 2015) overlap with those strongly associated with the emergence of other forms of leadership (e.g.: extroversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness to experience; Ensari, Riggio, Christian, & Carslaw, 2011; Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). Despite these tendencies, variations in the strength and direction of the relationships suggest moderator variables (Judge et al., 2002). In this respect, many authors recommend studying the interactions between contextual factors and personality to better understand the emergence of leadership (Bommer, Rubin, & Baldwin, 2004; Zaccaro, 2012).

Two theoretical models are used in this study to develop a contextualized comprehension of antecedents of TL behaviours. First, we rely on trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003), which proposes that some situations may enhance the effect of certain personality traits on leadership or enable the expression of personality traits favourable to leadership that emerges only when the context allows it. Second, we rely on

Bartram's personality model (Bartram, 2005) proposing personality variables that could be matched with TL dimensions, providing a specific framework helping the prediction of TL behaviours and facilitating the identification of relevant contextual moderators. Relying on these two models, the objective of this study is to examine how personality and context interact to foster the adoption of TL.

1.1. Transformational leadership

TL is a style of leadership geared towards change and towards improving individual and collective performance (Bass & Bass, 2008). This style of leadership is manifested through four leadership behaviours. *Individualized consideration* implies that leaders pay attention to, respect and care about their employees and their development. *Intellectual stimulation* underlies leaders' tendencies to innovate, to challenge the status quo, as well as to be open to change and new ideas. *Inspirational motivation* refers to leaders' ability to motivate their employees to perform by raising their expectations using an attractive vision of the future. *Idealized influence* corresponds to leaders' charisma and attitudes that make them role models who motivate and influence their employees.

Although TL was conceptualized in four dimensions, the empirical results highlight that the inspirational motivation dimension is not a factor that is independent from the idealized influence dimension (Bass & Bass, 2008; Judge & Bono, 2000). Following some authors (Bono & Judge, 2004), we chose to combine these two dimensions under the designation "charisma."

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1.2. Personality and trait activation theory

According to trait activation theory, for behavioural predictions to be optimized, traits should be considered as a latent potential that is contextually activated. It is thus important to understand the triggers and the contextual characteristics associated with traits being expressed as sought-after behaviours.

Past research indicates that when personality is modeled with the five-factor model, it allows us to predict TL in a mitigated manner (Bono & Judge, 2004; Deinert et al., 2015). This is why authors recommend using models that differ from the ones that have been used thus far (Bartram, 2005; Bono & Judge, 2004; Zaccaro, 2007). Relying on a criterion-oriented approach using compound variables to evaluate personality would help to better predict target behaviours than broad personality factors (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Dilchert, 2005).

The present study therefore uses Bartram's (2005) model, which provides personality compounds created to predict performance and the leadership behaviours in use. Four of the compound variables proposed by Bartram (2005) are conceptually aligned with the TL behavioural dimensions (Table 1). Consequently, these were selected in this study as potential personality predictors of TL.

Trait activation theory emphasizes that personality traits guide the emission of behaviours, but situations enhance or reduce the impact of traits on the behaviour by sending relevant or restrictive indicators or signals (Tett & Burnett, 2003). A situation may thus send signals that are either favourable or unfavourable to the expression of certain personality traits. It is therefore expected that leaders who perceive contextual indicators that are consistent with their natural tendencies will find their well-being and feelings of satisfaction enhanced (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997), which will enable them to evolve within their comfort zone and to exhibit all their leadership potential (Phaneuf et al., 2005). Moreover, it is known that the link between personality traits and relevant situations that allow them to be activated increases the explanatory contribution of traits to the behaviours studied (Haaland & Christiansen, 2002). This link based on content similarity between personality compounds and situations thus guided the moderation hypotheses described below.

1.2.1. Relational tendency of leaders and organizational consideration

The relational tendency, represented by the "supporting and cooperating" compound, should be related to the individualized consideration dimension of TL. This tendency can be associated with such traits as agreeability, emotional intelligence or concern for others (Harms & Credé, 2010). Caring, altruism, agreeableness and warmth traits, as well as emotional intelligence, are specifically associated with TL (Deinert et al., 2015; Hetland & Sandal, 2003; Ross & Offermann, 1997; Singh & Krishnan, 2008). That said, the correlations found are generally of limited range, and previous studies showed different forms of relationship between agreeability factor and TL, namely positive (Deinert et al., 2015; Rubin, Munz, & Bommer, 2005), negative (Lim & Ployhart, 2004) or non-significant (De Hoogh, Den Hartog, & Koopman, 2005). The variability observed in the results suggests that

the traits associated with the relational tendency could be influenced by the characteristics of the work context. According to trait activation theory, an organizational context oriented towards consideration for the employees could activate leaders' relational tendencies and foster the expression of individualized consideration by sending a relevant signal to individuals who have this tendency. Judge and Cable (1997) found agreeability to be associated with a preference for supportive organizational cultures in comparison with performance-oriented cultures. Therefore, if leaders perceive that their organization values this tendency, they will feel that they can continue in the same manner, openly listening to their employees and being more proactive in supporting them.

Hypothesis 1. *The relationship between the "supporting and cooperating" compound and individualized consideration behaviours is enhanced by the perception of organizational consideration.*

1.2.2. Innovative tendency of leaders and innovative climate

Leaders' innovative tendencies, represented by the "creating and conceptualizing" compound, are closely related conceptually to intellectual stimulation (Sarros, Cooper, & Santora, 2008). However, the correlations between TL and similar personal tendencies towards creativity, openness to change and critical thinking vary by study, from positive (Deinert et al., 2015; de vries, 2008; Hetland & Sandal, 2003), to negative (Ross & Offermann, 1997), to non-significant (Piel, 2008). These results suggest that the way leaders' orientation towards creativity and innovation relates to TL depends on the organizational context and on the signals perceived with regards to intellectual stimulation. Following the trait activation theory, an improvement-oriented work environment could enhance the relationship between the innovative tendency of leaders and intellectual stimulation. Since a leader's openness to experience is associated with a preference for an innovation-oriented culture (Judge & Cable, 1997), the presence of such a context should activate this trait and increase intellectual stimulation behaviours. Indeed, De Hoogh et al. (2005) study suggests that openness to experience becomes a positive predictor of TL only when the organizational context is perceived as dynamic and change-oriented.

Hypothesis 2. *The relationship between the "creating and conceptualizing" compound and intellectual stimulation behaviours is enhanced by the perception of an innovative climate.*

1.2.3. Expressive capacity of leaders and clarity of organizational objectives

Conveying a vision is central to TL. The "interacting and presenting" compound is likely to foster TL through the charisma dimension, which operates through a personification and development of the organizational vision (Bass & Bass, 2008). This enhancement of the organizational vision requires leaders to have the ability to communicate messages effectively for them to be perceived as transformational leaders. Leaders who are extroverted, who gravitate naturally towards people and who communicate confidently would be more likely to be perceived as charismatic or transformational by their collaborators (Deinert et al., 2015; Ensari et al., 2011). That said, once again, the environment can influence leaders' traits and behaviours involved in the attribution of charisma. In this regard, the credibility of leaders and of their communications depends on the broader organizational context in which the leaders evolve (Dickson, Resick, & Hanges, 2006). Therefore, a context marked by clear objectives could constitute an organizational signal favourable to the organizational vision being personified by the leader and to charisma being attributed by the employees. Additionally, leaders' perceptions of the clarity and coherence of the organizational vision could enable them to activate or enhance their propensity to interact confidently and to present a compelling vision of the future (Berson, Shamir, Avolio, & Popper, 2001).

Table 1
Traits constituting Bartram's (2005) compound variables.

Compound variable	Traits included in the compound variable	TL dimension associated with the compound variable
Supporting & Cooperating	Caring; Democratic; Affiliative	Individualized consideration
Creating & Conceptualizing	Innovative; Independent; Conventional (reverse)	Intellectual stimulation
Interacting & Presenting	Socially confident; Outgoing; Modest (reverse)	Charisma
Leading & Deciding	Need for power; Persuasive; Decisive	TL–Global Score

Hypothesis 3. *The relationship between the "interacting and presenting" compound and charisma is enhanced by the perception of clarity of organizational objectives.*

1.2.4. Tendency of leaders to lead and decision-making latitude

To emerge and assert oneself as a leader, it is important to have a certain interest in taking on responsibilities and being in a position of authority. The "leading and deciding" compound, which refers to the leader's tendency to lead, would be conducive to taking charge of situations and to adopting leadership behaviours. The tendency to lead predicts the emergence of leadership and is also related to TL (Do & Minbashian, 2014). However, this natural propensity to lead may be encouraged or reduced by signals from the individual's work context and may thus affect the person's leadership. Notably, the degree of decision-making latitude offered to leaders and the possibility to show initiative may have a major impact on their capacity to exercise their leadership (Conger, 1999). Therefore, a work environment offering decision-making latitude to leaders may activate and enhance the effect of their propensity to lead by giving them the support and legitimacy to take actions and make decisions necessary to their work.

Hypothesis 4. *The relationship between the "leading and deciding" compound and the emission of TL behaviours is enhanced by the perception of decision-making latitude.*

2. Methodology

2.1. Procedure and sample

The data were collected in a public safety organization in Canada. The participants were informed of the confidential nature of their answers and they provided their consent to participate in the study.

A two-phase design was used to gather data. During the first phase, all employees were asked to evaluate their immediate supervisor's leadership style as well as various aspects of the work environment. Approximately 40% of the employees participated in this phase (i.e. 2105 out of 5369 employees). In total, 643 employees were retained in the sample further to their immediate supervisor's participation in the second phase of the study. A minimum of three employees per leader were surveyed to ensure a valid evaluation of their leadership style. The leadership data were grouped by leader once the intergroup agreement criteria had been verified (Global TL: $r_{wg} = 0.88$; ICC1 = 0.19; ICC2 = 0.68; Individualized consideration: $r_{wg} = 0.71$; ICC1 = 0.17; ICC2 = 0.69; Intellectual stimulation: $r_{wg} = 0.77$; ICC1 = 0.13; ICC2 = 0.65; Charisma: $r_{wg} = 0.79$; ICC1 = 0.19; ICC2 = 0.71).

In the second phase, which took place six months after the first one due to organizational constraints (e.g., heavy operational demands), all 296 previously evaluated leaders were invited to complete a personality inventory. The final sample of leaders consisted of 89 leaders who had participated in both phases of the study (which corresponds to a 30% participation rate). The participating leaders were mostly men (78%) and fell into two broad hierarchical categories: first-level manager (51%) and intermediate or senior manager (49%).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Transformational leadership

TL was measured using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire form 5× (MLQ; Avolio & Bass, 2004). This measure consists of 20 items for which employees report the perceived frequency of the transformational behaviours mentioned, based on a five-point scale (1 = Never; 5 = Frequently, if not always).

2.2.2. Personality

The leaders' personalities were evaluated using the Occupational Personality Questionnaire (OPQ-32r), which measures the personality at work based on 32 traits (Brown & Bartram, 2009). The OPQ-32r consists of 112 items and uses the forced-choice method, where individuals choose which of the three statements corresponds the best to them and which corresponds the least. Each of the four compounds used in this study was created by the addition of standard scores pertaining to three traits (see Table 1). The traits were weighted by attributing two units for the first trait and one unit for each of the two other traits (Bartram, 2005).

2.2.3. Contextual factors

The measures of the four contextual factors were derived from two measurement instruments. Organizational consideration and clarity of organizational objectives were measured using four items each from Patterson et al.'s (2005) scales. Innovative climate and decision-making latitude were measured using eight items and three items developed by van der Post, de Coning, and Smit (1997). In all cases, the participants had to evaluate their perception of how much the contextual elements described represented their organizational reality, based on a five-point scale (1 = Not at all true; 5 = Very true).

2.3. Analyses

Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to test the interaction hypotheses. Because of the statistical power provided by the sample size, the analyses were performed separately for each of the hypotheses. The personality compounds and contextual variables that were relevant to the hypotheses were entered in a first block. A second block corresponding to the interaction term was then added. The interaction terms were created following a multiplication of one personality compound and one contextual variable, which had been previously centered to reduce the multicollinearity between the predictors.

3. Results

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and the correlations between variables, while Table 3 presents the results of the regression analyses conducted to test hypotheses.

Results of regression analysis support Hypothesis 1 (see Table 3). Indeed, leaders' supporting and cooperating compound and their perception of organizational consideration were found to interact significantly to predict the emission of individualized consideration behaviours. The interaction explains an additional 6% of variance compared with the 9% explained by the main effects (see Block 1 in Table 3). The analysis of simple slopes, presented in Fig. 1, indicates the presence of a positive relationship between the tendency towards support and cooperation of leaders and the manifestation of individualized consideration when leaders perceive a high level (one SD above the mean) of organizational consideration ($b = 0.03$, $t = 2.11$, $p = 0.038$). When leaders perceive a low level of organizational consideration (one SD below the mean), the relationship between the supporting and cooperating compound and the individualized consideration manifested by leaders is not significant ($b = -0.02$, $t = -1.21$, $p = 0.228$). Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4 were not supported by the results (see Table 3).

For comparison purposes, the interaction analyses were also conducted using the global TL score as a dependent variable. The results are similar (see Table 3). Overall, the results partially support the hypothesized effect that a link based on content similarity between a personality compound and relevant situational indicators may help predict the TL dimensions.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics and correlations.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Sex (0 = Male, 1 = Female)	0.22	0.42	–													
2. Hierarchical level (0 = First level 1 = Higher levels)	0.49	0.50	0.33**	–												
3. Supporting & Cooperating	22.70	5.92	0.20	0.04	–											
4. Creating & Conceptualizing	22.49	6.02	−0.13	0.09	0.05	–										
5. Interacting & Presenting	20.81	5.48	−0.10	0.10	0.18	0.71**	–									
6. Leading & Deciding	24.89	4.40	−0.26*	−0.07	−0.08	0.47**	0.54**	–								
7. Organizational consideration	3.14	0.92	0.18	0.27*	0.16	−0.17	−0.11	−0.13	(0.90)							
8. Innovative climate	3.56	0.85	0.15	0.32**	0.23*	−0.13	0.05	−0.04	0.43**	(0.91)						
9. Clarity of organizational objectives	3.29	0.83	0.04	0.23*	0.18	−0.12	−0.02	−0.25*	0.56**	0.37**	(0.89)					
10. Decision-making latitude	3.15	0.79	0.00	0.18	0.11	−0.16	0.02	−0.04	0.50**	0.53**	0.37**	(0.63)				
11. Individualized consideration	3.82	0.61	0.03	−0.08	0.11	−0.04	−0.01	0.00	0.29**	0.00	0.01	0.06	(0.87)			
12. Intellectual stimulation	3.72	0.52	−0.06	−0.10	0.04	0.01	0.05	0.07	0.23*	0.05	0.01	0.11	0.85**	(0.86)		
13. Charisma	3.91	0.53	−0.02	−0.05	0.10	0.04	0.14	0.09	0.20	0.14	−0.01	0.12	0.83**	0.87**	(0.94)	
14. Transformational leadership	3.85	0.52	−0.02	−0.07	0.09	0.02	0.09	0.07	0.24*	0.10	0.00	0.11	0.91**	0.93**	0.98**	(0.97)

* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.

3.1. Additional analyses

Tett and Burnett (2003) raised the possibility that trait activation could occur based on other rationales than the content similarity of personality traits and contextual variables. Exploratory analyses were therefore performed to see whether other interactions than those hypothesized based on this rationale significantly predict the emission of TL behaviours.

These analyses reveal that the supporting and cooperating compound interacts with a range of situational indicators that are more generalized than expected. The supporting and cooperating compound was found to interact significantly with decision-making latitude ($\Delta R^2 = 0.06, R^2 = 0.08, b' = 0.25, t = 2.33, p = 0.022$) and marginally with clarity of organizational objectives ($\Delta R^2 = 0.04, R^2 = 0.05, b' = 0.22, t = 1.97, p = 0.053$) and innovative climate ($\Delta R^2 = 0.04, R^2 = 0.06, b' =$

0.22, $t = 1.97, p = 0.053$) to predict the global TL score. The analysis of simple slope effects indicates the presence of a positive relationship between the supporting and cooperating compound and TL when leaders perceive a high level (one SD above the mean) of clarity of organizational objectives ($b = 0.03, t = 2.13, p = 0.036$), of decision-making latitude ($b = 0.03, t = 2.28, p = 0.025$) and of innovative climate ($b = 0.03, t = 2.00, p = 0.048$). The relationships are not significant when the contextual variable levels are low.

4. Discussion

Following the recommendation to consider both personality and context to understand the emergence of leadership, the objective of the study was to evaluate the moderating role of contextual variables in the relationship between personality compounds and TL behaviours. Three out of four hypotheses are not corroborated by the results. In fact, the only hypothesis to be supported is the one positing that the perception of organizational consideration helps to enhance the relationship between the tendency towards supporting and cooperating of leaders and the emission of individualized consideration behaviours.

Additional analyses suggest also that the contribution of the supporting and cooperating compound to the emergence of TL is influenced by the perception of all the contextual factors measured in this study. These results suggest that leaders with a strong orientation towards supporting and cooperating are likely to engage in TL behaviours when the context is generally perceived as favourable (clear organizational objectives, high decision-making latitude, high organizational consideration, and high innovation support).

4.1. Theoretical implications

Results of this study are in line with the leadership literature indicating that personality characteristics pertaining to affiliative orientation (e.g., agreeableness, affiliation, warmth and support) are not consistent predictors of leadership behaviours (Bono & Judge, 2004; Do & Minbashian, 2014). Therefore, our study contributes to the leadership literature suggesting that contextual signals might be critical for these personality characteristics to be related to TL (De Hoogh et al., 2005). Because support and cooperating was the only compound personality variable that interacts with the organizational context, it could suggest that affiliative traits are especially sensitive to signals in the organizational context to result or not in leadership behaviours.

Affiliative traits, such as support and cooperation, can represent both a strength and an hindrance for leadership. Showing consideration and emotional responsiveness to subordinates is indeed a positive feature of affiliative leaders to sustain TL (Deinert et al., 2015; Harms & Credé,

Table 3
Regressions of personality and context variables to predict transformational leadership.

|	Hypotheses			Comparison with the global TL		
	b'	t	R²	b'	t	R²
	1 - DV: Individualized consideration			DV: Global TL		
Block 1			0.09			0.06
Supporting & Cooperating (SC)	0.06	0.61		0.06	0.52	
Organizational consideration	0.28**	2.69		0.23*	2.15	
Block 2			0.15			0.14
SC*Organizational consideration	0.26*	2.50		0.29**	2.81	
	2 - DV: Intellectual stimulation			DV: Global TL		
Block 1			0.00			0.01
Creating & Conceptualizing (CC)	0.02	0.17		0.03	0.29	
Innovative climate	0.05	0.47		0.10	0.94	
Block 2			0.01			0.01
CC*Innovative climate	0.06	0.47		0.06	0.52	
	3 - DV: Charisma			DV: Global TL		
Block 1			0.02			0.01
Interacting & Presenting (IP)	0.14	1.29		0.09	0.87	
Clarity of organizational objectives	0.00	−0.02		0.00	0.02	
Block 2			0.03			0.02
IP*Clarity of objectives	0.08	0.71		0.11	1.00	
	4 - DV: Global TL					
Block 1			0.02			
Leading & Deciding (LD)	0.07	0.67				
Decision-making latitude	0.11	1.06				
Block 2			0.02			
LD*Decision-making latitude	0.05	0.47				

* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.
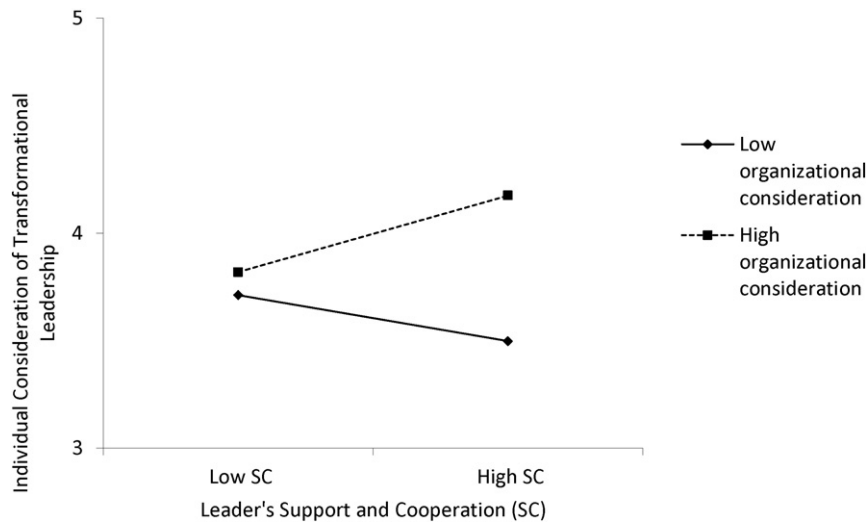
Fig. 1. Relationship between support and cooperation of leaders and individualized consideration according to the perceived level of organizational consideration.

2010). On the other hand, because they prefer harmony and dislike conflict, highly affiliative leaders would be more accommodating to existing features of their work environment and less inclined to challenge the status quo (Deinert et al., 2015). As such, affiliative people might be more attuned to their environment to seek if there is support for their leadership behaviours. Interestingly, our study concurs with other studies showing that a positive relationship between affiliative traits and TL can be observed when the situation is more favourable to relationship-oriented leaders, for instance in a stable environment (De Hoogh et al., 2005) and in academic contexts (de Vries, 2008; Judge et al., 2002). Otherwise, the affiliative traits would not predict TL in environments that do not emphasize caring values (Lim & Ployhart, 2004). In the long run, affiliative leaders might also be more inclined to quit these contexts (Schneider, 1987).

Hypotheses 2, 3 and 4 aiming to predict dimensions of TL with compounds other than support and cooperating were not supported in this study. One possible explanation for these results could be that certain personality potentials need to be complemented by other technical skills or cognitive aptitudes to result in intellectual stimulation and in effective presenting behaviours associated to charisma. In this regard, Bartram (2005) offer results showing that two personality composites involved in the non-supported hypotheses (i.e., creating & conceptualizing and interacting & presenting) benefit from an addition of cognitive aptitudes to optimally predict corresponding behaviours. In this line of reasoning, it is also known that intelligence and a variety of skills and knowledge (e.g., technical, managerial, problem-solving) are likely to determine if leaders will perform effective leadership behaviours (Van Iddekinge, Ferris, & Heffner, 2009). Therefore, personality traits other than affiliative ones might be less affected by the general organizational atmosphere but more by the skills set of an individual to be transposed in effective leadership behaviours. Interestingly, the supporting and cooperating compound was not significantly correlated with the three other personality compounds, which again indicate its distinctiveness.

Finally, on a theoretical level, this study provides only moderate support for the trait activation model. However, only a portion of Tett and Burnett's (2003) model was explored in this research, with a limited number of variables. Future research may be useful to investigate an extended set of contextual variables (e.g., cues from tasks, colleagues and rewards).

4.2. Limitations of the study

This research is not without limitations. A first limitation is the sample size, which is relatively small. This reduces the statistical power of the analyses, and thus lessens the probability of finding smaller effects. Moreover, the specificity (public safety) of the sample could limit the generalization of the results.

5. Practical implications and conclusion

From a practical point of view, two main intervention levers stand out. First, the selection of relationship-oriented individuals for leadership positions would be advisable when the organizational context is favourable. It would be especially important for these individuals to make more salient the signals indicating that their organization promotes high consideration, innovation support, clarity of objectives or decision-making latitude for employees. Second, since organizational consideration is also directly associated with the TL behaviours, it would be advisable to develop organizational practices that promote respect, support and fair treatment. Implementing such practices would be beneficial for enhancing TL behaviours in leaders regardless of their personality traits.

Acknowledgements

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