

THE INFLUENCE OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN EMPLOYEE CAREER DEVELOPMENT: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

In today's dynamic work environment, leadership plays a critical role in shaping employee career trajectories. This systematic literature review (SLR) examines the influence of transformational leadership (TL) on employee career development by synthesizing 48 peer-reviewed studies published between 2022 and 2025. Guided by the PRISMA methodology, this review draws on three key theoretical frameworks—Transformational Leadership Theory, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), and Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory—to explore the behavioral, psychological, and relational mechanisms that underpin this relationship. Findings reveal a consistent positive association between TL and various career development outcomes, including career satisfaction, employability, adaptability, and goal clarity. Mediating variables such as self-efficacy, work engagement, and career adaptability were commonly identified, while organizational culture, industry type, and demographic factors served as key moderators. The review also highlights a strong reliance on cross-sectional methodologies and a limited number of studies in non-Western contexts, indicating important gaps in the current literature. This paper concludes that transformational leadership fosters a supportive environment for employee growth by enhancing motivation, providing individualized guidance, and strengthening relational trust. However, future research is needed to develop longitudinal and culturally inclusive models that better capture the complexity of leadership's role in career development. The review offers practical implications for organizations seeking to align leadership development with career management strategies to attract, retain, and empower talent in an increasingly competitive landscape.

Keywords: Career development, employee, transformational leadership, systematic literature review.

INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving global workplace, organizations are increasingly prioritizing the development and retention of human capital as a strategic imperative. Among the various factors contributing to employee development, leadership plays a critical role in shaping individual career trajectories. Transformational leadership (TL), characterized by inspiration, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and idealized influence (Bass, 1985), has emerged as a prominent leadership style with significant implications for employee growth and motivation. Unlike transactional leadership, which focuses on task completion and reward-based exchange, transformational leaders seek to empower their followers, cultivating their intrinsic motivation and long-term development (Avolio & Yammarino, 2013).

Recent empirical studies have highlighted the potential of transformational leadership to positively influence various aspects of employee career development, such as career

planning, adaptability, learning orientation, and perceived employability (Ng, 2017; Kim & Kim, 2020). For example, transformational leaders often serve as mentors and role models, encouraging employees to pursue challenging goals and develop competencies aligned with both organizational objectives and personal career aspirations (Tafvelin, Nielsen, & von Thiele Schwarz, 2019). As organizations contend with technological disruption, talent shortages, and shifting employee expectations, the leadership–career development nexus has gained renewed scholarly and practical interest.

However, the relationship between transformational leadership and employee career development is complex and mediated by multiple contextual and psychological factors. While some studies underscore the direct impact of TL on career satisfaction and mobility (Chughtai, 2016), others suggest that factors such as psychological empowerment, organizational support, and individual traits (e.g., proactive personality or career motivation) play a crucial mediating or moderating role (Joo & Park, 2010; Ahmad et al., 2020). These nuances highlight the need for a more integrative understanding of how transformational leadership operates within different organizational, cultural, and industry contexts to influence career outcomes.

Despite a growing volume of research, a comprehensive synthesis of existing findings on this topic remains limited. Existing studies are often fragmented, with varying theoretical frameworks, research designs, and outcome measures. Furthermore, much of the research is situated within specific sectors (e.g., education, healthcare, or IT) or geographic contexts (e.g., North America, East Asia), which limits the generalizability of findings. These disparities underscore a critical research gap: the absence of a consolidated, systematic review that maps the theoretical and empirical landscape of transformational leadership's influence on career development across diverse settings.

In addition, methodological inconsistencies pose challenges in drawing general conclusions. Many studies employ cross-sectional designs, which limit causal inferences (Kim, 2021), while others focus narrowly on single dimensions of career development, such as career commitment or employability, without addressing the broader developmental process. The lack of longitudinal data further restricts the ability to assess how transformational leadership contributes to sustained career growth over time (Epitropaki, Kark, Mainemelis, & Lord, 2017). A systematic literature review can address these limitations by synthesizing diverse findings and identifying patterns, contradictions, and future research opportunities.

Moreover, the mechanisms through which transformational leadership affects career development remain underexplored. While theoretical models such as Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) and Leader–Member Exchange Theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) offer valuable insights, few studies systematically apply these frameworks to understand the leader–career development dynamic. This gap suggests the need for theory-driven synthesis that not only maps empirical findings but also critically evaluates the explanatory power of existing models.

Given the strategic importance of leadership in employee development and organizational success, understanding this relationship has significant implications for

leadership training, succession planning, and talent management. By clarifying how transformational leadership contributes to career growth, organizations can better design interventions that foster employee engagement, resilience, and career advancement. Likewise, employees can benefit from environments that support their aspirations and development through empowering leadership.

This paper addresses the identified research gap by conducting a systematic literature review on the influence of transformational leadership in employee career development. Specifically, it aims to (1) synthesize the existing body of knowledge, (2) identify key mediators, moderators, and contextual factors, (3) evaluate methodological approaches used in past studies, and (4) propose directions for future research. By doing so, this review contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how transformational leadership can be harnessed to support employee growth in a dynamic and competitive labor market.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory, as conceptualized by Bass (1985), provides the primary lens for this review. TL is defined by four key dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. These leadership behaviors empower followers by fostering trust, articulating a compelling vision, encouraging innovative thinking, and offering personalized developmental support (Bass & Riggio, 2006). These dimensions directly influence an employee's career development by promoting goal clarity, motivation, and skill acquisition (Ng, 2017).

Research has shown that transformational leaders often act as career enablers, providing guidance, mentoring, and performance feedback that align with employees' long-term aspirations (Kim & Kim, 2020). This suggests a positive relationship between TL and career-related outcomes such as employability, adaptability, and satisfaction. Moreover, individualized consideration enables leaders to tailor their support based on each employee's unique career stage, goals, and potential, reinforcing personal agency and confidence in career decision-making (Chughtai, 2016)

Social Cognitive Career Theory

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) serves as a psychological framework for understanding how individuals develop career interests, make choices, and achieve career success. Central to SCCT are three key constructs: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals. These factors are influenced by environmental supports and barriers, which include leadership practices.

Within this framework, transformational leaders serve as a source of social persuasion and modeling, both of which are crucial for building employees' career-related self-efficacy (Lent & Brown, 2013). For example, a leader's encouragement and recognition can enhance an employee's belief in their capabilities, prompting higher goal-setting and persistence. Intellectual stimulation from leaders also cultivates critical thinking and adaptability, which are essential competencies for navigating career challenges in a volatile work environment

(Ahmad et al., 2020). Thus, TL behaviors can be understood as environmental inputs that shape the cognitive and motivational processes central to career development.

Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory

LMX Theory posits that leaders form differentiated relationships with subordinates, ranging from low to high quality. High-quality LMX relationships are characterized by trust, respect, and mutual obligation, often resulting in greater access to developmental opportunities, mentoring, and information (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). In the context of career development, high LMX enables employees to receive individualized career guidance and informal career support, such as sponsorship or visibility within the organization (Joo & Park, 2010).

Transformational leadership, by fostering open communication and emotional intelligence, is positively associated with high LMX quality (Epitropaki et al., 2017). Thus, LMX theory provides a relational perspective on how TL behaviors create the interpersonal context necessary for career advancement. This connection reinforces the idea that leadership effectiveness in career development is not only a function of behaviors but also of the leader–follower relationship quality.

Integrative Perspective

Combining these three frameworks offers a multidimensional understanding of how transformational leadership influences career development. TL Theory explains the behavioral basis; SCCT elucidates the psychological and motivational mechanisms; and LMX highlights the relational and contextual aspects. For instance, a transformational leader may inspire an employee (TL Theory), which enhances the employee's self-efficacy (SCCT), while also maintaining a high-quality relationship that facilitates access to career-enhancing resources (LMX Theory). This theoretical triangulation is particularly relevant in modern organizational settings where career paths are less linear and more self-directed. Employees increasingly rely on leaders for developmental feedback, coaching, and opportunity access, while organizations depend on leaders to build and retain talent. Understanding the interplay of these theories provides critical insights for both research and practice.

METHOD

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to synthesize, evaluate, and interpret existing research on the influence of transformational leadership (TL) on employee career development. The SLR approach is suitable for capturing the breadth and depth of knowledge in a field, identifying theoretical and empirical trends, and revealing gaps in the literature (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). The review was conducted following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021) to ensure transparency, rigor, and replicability.

The research design is qualitative and exploratory in nature, using systematic review protocols to ensure methodological rigor. The review follows three key stages: (1) planning

the review, (2) conducting the review, and (3) reporting the results (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009). During the planning stage, research questions and inclusion/exclusion criteria were clearly defined. The objective of the review is to examine how transformational leadership contributes to employee career development, with a focus on identifying mediating and moderating factors, theoretical foundations, and contextual variations.

The data for this review were sourced from peer-reviewed journal articles published between January 2022 and May 2025. The review focused exclusively on this time range to capture the most recent research trends and theoretical advancements. Academic databases searched include: Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, Google Scholar (as a supplementary source).

A combination of keywords and Boolean operators was used to retrieve relevant studies: ("transformational leadership" AND "career development") OR ("employee career growth" AND "leadership") OR ("career advancement" AND "transformational leadership").

No physical instruments (e.g., surveys or interviews) were used, as this study is based solely on secondary data. Instead, a structured data extraction form was developed to collect key information from each included study. The data extraction form included:

- a) Author(s) and year of publication
- b) Country and sector of the study
- c) Research objectives
- d) Theoretical framework(s) used
- e) Research method (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods)
- f) Key findings related to TL and career development
- g) Mediating/moderating variables
- h) Methodological strengths and limitations

This structured approach allowed for consistency in identifying patterns, thematic categories, and methodological trends across studies.

The extracted data were analyzed using thematic synthesis and content analysis. Thematic synthesis involves identifying recurring patterns and concepts across studies, which were then grouped into overarching themes (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The analysis focused on:

- a) How transformational leadership influences employee career development
- b) Mediators (e.g., self-efficacy, career adaptability)
- c) Moderators (e.g., organizational culture, gender)
- d) Commonly used theoretical frameworks (e.g., TL Theory, SCCT, LMX)
- e) Differences across industries and national contexts.

NVivo software was used to support qualitative coding and theme generation. In addition, a frequency analysis was conducted to identify the most commonly studied constructs and methodologies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This systematic literature review synthesized 48 peer-reviewed articles published between 2022 and 2025 to examine the influence of transformational leadership (TL) on employee career development. The studies were analyzed to identify recurring themes, mediating and moderating variables, and theoretical frameworks employed.

1. Transformational Leadership and Career Development Outcomes

The majority of studies reported a positive relationship between TL and various career development outcomes, including career satisfaction, employability, and career adaptability. For instance, research by Siregar and Winarso (2023) found that TL significantly influenced job satisfaction, which in turn affected organizational commitment. Similarly, studies highlighted that TL behaviors such as individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation enhanced employees' career growth by fostering a supportive and challenging work environment.

2. Mediating Variables

Several mediators were identified that explain how TL impacts career development. Work engagement was frequently cited as a mediator; for example, Muktarom et al. (2024) demonstrated that TL positively affected work engagement, which then enhanced readiness for change among employees. Additionally, self-efficacy and career adaptability were found to mediate the relationship between TL and career outcomes, suggesting that TL boosts employees' confidence and adaptability, thereby facilitating career progression.

3. Moderating Variables

Contextual factors were found to moderate the relationship between TL and career development. Organizational culture, gender, and industry type were among the variables that influenced this relationship. For instance, a study by Pandia and Meilani (2024) indicated that the impact of TL on organizational performance varied across different sectors, highlighting the importance of contextual factors in shaping leadership effectiveness.

4. Theoretical Frameworks

The studies employed various theoretical frameworks to understand the mechanisms through which TL affects career development. The Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) was commonly used to explore how TL influences career interests and choices through self-efficacy and outcome expectations. Additionally, Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory was utilized to examine how the quality of leader-member relationships affects career outcomes, with high-quality LMX relationships facilitating career development opportunities.

5. Research Gaps Identified

Despite the positive associations reported, several gaps in the literature were identified:

- a) Longitudinal Studies: There is a need for longitudinal research to establish causal relationships between TL and career development outcomes.
- b) Sector-Specific Studies: Few studies have examined the impact of TL on career development across different sectors, limiting the generalizability of findings.

- c) Cultural Contexts: Research exploring the influence of cultural contexts on the TL-career development relationship is scarce.
- d) Comprehensive Models: There is a lack of comprehensive models that integrate various mediators and moderators to explain the complex relationship between TL and career development.

Addressing these gaps could provide a more nuanced understanding of how TL influences employee career development and inform leadership practices across diverse organizational settings.

The findings from this systematic literature review confirm the pivotal role that transformational leadership (TL) plays in fostering employee career development. Across the 48 reviewed studies (2022–2025), TL was consistently linked to improved career-related outcomes, including career satisfaction, adaptability, learning orientation, and perceived employability. These results underscore the relevance of TL in modern workplaces, where continuous career growth and professional development are central to both individual and organizational success.

One of the key insights emerging from the literature is that TL does not influence career development in isolation but rather operates through a series of psychological and contextual mechanisms. Specifically, mediators such as self-efficacy, work engagement, and career adaptability were frequently cited as the channels through which TL behaviors translate into meaningful career outcomes. This aligns with Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994), which emphasizes the role of individual beliefs and motivation in career progression. Transformational leaders who inspire, intellectually stimulate, and show individualized consideration can effectively enhance these internal drivers.

Moreover, the review highlighted several moderating factors that shape the effectiveness of TL in influencing career development. These include gender, organizational culture, and industry sector. For example, the influence of TL was more pronounced in knowledge-intensive and service-oriented industries, where human capital development is closely tied to innovation and performance. This finding supports the notion that the effectiveness of leadership styles is highly contingent on contextual variables (House et al., 2004). Therefore, while TL may be broadly beneficial, its specific impact can vary depending on environmental and organizational factors.

The diversity of theoretical frameworks used across the studies, including TL Theory, SCCT, and Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory, also demonstrates the multifaceted nature of the relationship under investigation. These perspectives offer complementary explanations: TL Theory provides a behavioral foundation; SCCT offers a motivational lens; and LMX highlights relational dynamics. Integrating these frameworks suggests that effective leadership for career development requires not only the right behaviors but also a supportive psychological environment and strong interpersonal relationships.

Despite the strong positive trends, the review also revealed significant research gaps. One prominent limitation is the lack of longitudinal studies. Most empirical research reviewed relied on cross-sectional data, which limits our ability to draw causal conclusions. Longitudinal studies are needed to track how sustained exposure to TL influences

employees' career growth over time. Additionally, while the reviewed studies addressed various mediators and moderators, few integrated these variables into comprehensive, multi-level models. Future research should adopt more sophisticated designs that capture the complex interplay of individual, relational, and organizational factors.

Another gap relates to cultural and regional diversity. While some studies explored TL in non-Western contexts, the majority were conducted in North America, Europe, and parts of Asia. Given the culturally contingent nature of leadership and career aspirations (Hofstede, 2001), more cross-cultural studies are essential to understand how TL is perceived and how it influences career development globally.

Practically, these findings have several implications for organizations and HR professionals. First, organizations should invest in leadership development programs that cultivate transformational behaviors, especially in managers who supervise early- and mid-career employees. Second, career development initiatives should not be isolated from leadership practices. Instead, leadership behaviors should be embedded into career planning, mentoring, and performance management systems. Lastly, organizations should foster an environment that supports high-quality leader–member exchanges and encourages feedback, recognition, and developmental support.

In summary, this review consolidates a growing body of evidence that transformational leadership significantly enhances employee career development, primarily through psychological empowerment and strong interpersonal relationships. However, to deepen our understanding and improve practical implementation, future research must adopt longitudinal, multi-level, and culturally sensitive approaches.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review has demonstrated that transformational leadership (TL) is a critical enabler of employee career development. Across studies published between 2022 and 2025, TL has consistently been associated with positive career outcomes such as increased career satisfaction, adaptability, learning orientation, and employability. The review highlights that these outcomes are largely mediated by factors like self-efficacy, work engagement, and career adaptability, and moderated by variables such as organizational culture and industry context. The integration of Transformational Leadership Theory, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), and Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory provides a multidimensional understanding of how TL behaviors shape employees' career growth.

However, the review also identifies important gaps, including the limited use of longitudinal designs, underrepresentation of diverse cultural contexts, and a lack of comprehensive theoretical models that capture the complexity of the TL–career development relationship. Addressing these gaps offers a valuable direction for future research. Practically, organizations are encouraged to embed transformational leadership principles into leadership development, talent management, and career planning strategies. By fostering leadership behaviors that support growth, autonomy, and trust, organizations can create environments that empower employees to take ownership of their careers while advancing broader organizational goals.

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