

## The Evolution of Leadership Theories and the Role of Transformational Leadership in Modern Organizations

### Liderlik Teorilerinin Evrimi ve Modern Organizasyonlarda Dönüşümcü Liderliğin Rolü

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Review Article

Received: 13.3.2026; Revised: 03.04.2026; Accepted: 06.04.2026

#### ABSTRACT

This review paper examines recent studies on the evolution of leadership theories and highlights the importance of transformational leadership in modern organizations operating in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments. Leadership has been widely studied in management literature, and its conceptualization has evolved from early trait-based approaches to behavioral and situational perspectives, and more recently to contemporary theories emphasizing the complex interactions between leaders, followers, and organizational contexts. The literature indicates that transformational leadership has emerged as one of the most influential leadership models in business research. It is widely recognized for motivating employees through the articulation of a shared vision, fostering innovation, and supporting individual development. In contrast to transactional leadership, which is based primarily on reward and performance exchanges, transformational leadership encourages employees to go beyond their individual interests and align with broader organizational goals. Based on an extensive review of 38 academic sources published between 1970 and 2025, this study synthesizes the theoretical development and organizational implications of transformational leadership. The findings suggest that transformational leadership has significant positive effects on key organizational outcomes, including motivation, creativity, teamwork, and organizational performance. It also plays a critical role in fostering adaptive organizational cultures and supporting innovation-oriented strategies in modern organizations.

**Keywords:** Transformational leadership, Leadership theories, Organizational performance, Innovation, Employee motivation

#### ÖZ

Bu derleme çalışması, liderlik teorilerinin evrimine ilişkin güncel çalışmaları incelemekte ve volatilité, belirsizlik, karmaşıklık ve muğlaklık (VUCA) ile karakterize edilen modern organizasyonlarda dönüşümcü liderliğin önemini vurgulamaktadır. Mevcut literatüre göre, erken dönem liderlik yaklaşımları liderlerin kişisel özelliklerine odaklanırken, sonraki yaklaşımlar davranışsal kalıplar ve durumsal faktörleri ön plana çıkarmıştır. Daha yakın dönemde ise çağdaş liderlik teorileri, liderler, takipçiler ve örgütsel çevre arasındaki karmaşık etkileşimi dikkate almaktadır. Araştırmalar, dönüşümcü liderliğin işletme araştırmalarında en etkili liderlik modellerinden biri olarak öne çıktığını göstermektedir. Dönüşümcü liderliğin ortak vizyon oluşturma, yeniliği teşvik ve bireysel gelişimi destekleme yoluyla çalışanları motive ettiği yaygın olarak kabul edilmektedir. Performans ve ödül temelli değişim ilişkilerine odaklanan işlemsel liderliğin aksine, dönüşümcü liderlik çalışanları bireysel

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çıklarının ötesine geçerek daha geniş örgütsel hedeflere yönelmeye teşvik etmektedir. Geniş kapsamlı veri tabanı taramasına dayanan bu derleme, 1970–2025 yılları arasında yayımlanmış 38 akademik kaynağı sentezleyerek dönüşümcü liderliğin kuramsal gelişimi ve örgütsel yansımalarına ilişkin kapsamlı bir analiz sunmaktadır. Bulgular, dönüşümcü liderliğin motivasyon, yaratıcılık, takım çalışması ve örgütsel performans gibi temel çıktılar üzerinde anlamlı olumlu etkiler yarattığını ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca dönüşümcü liderler, modern organizasyonlarda değişime uyum sağlayabilen örgüt kültürünün geliştirilmesinde ve yenilik odaklı stratejilerin desteklenmesinde kritik bir rol oynamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Dönüşümcü liderlik, Liderlik teorileri, Örgütsel performans, İnovasyon, Çalışan motivasyonu

## ***1. Introduction***

Leadership has been one of the main topics in management and organizational research. Scholars from different disciplines have examined leadership from various theoretical perspectives (Liden et al., 2025). These perspectives aim to explain how leaders influence organizational effectiveness, employee motivation, and strategic outcomes, as well as how well organizations operate in dynamic and complex environments. Understanding the evolution of leadership theories is essential for explaining how leadership contributes to organizational success.

Among the many approaches developed in leadership research, transformational and transactional leadership theories have received particular attention. The conditions under which these two leadership styles are effective, and how they operate across different industries, organizations, and countries, are widely discussed in the literature. Transactional leadership mainly focuses on exchanges between leaders and followers, emphasizing performance, supervision, and reward-based mechanisms (Bass and Riggio, 2006). In contrast, transformational leadership represents a more advanced approach, seeking to inspire followers through a shared vision, encouraging innovation, and fostering individual capability development (Bass and Riggio, 2006). Under this approach, leaders can move beyond simple managerial exchanges to motivate employees toward broader organizational goals.

The theoretical foundations of transformational leadership are also closely connected to psychological theories of motivation. Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory suggests that individual needs move from basic needs like safety or security toward higher levels such as personal development or self-actualization (Maslow, 1970). Self-actualization refers to the realization of individual potential and the shift from personal interests toward broader collective goals. Transformational leadership plays a critical role in encouraging followers to reach these higher levels of motivation by aligning individual aspirations with organizational objectives as

indicated in the literature (Popper and Mayselless, 2002). In this way, transformational leadership creates a sense of purpose that binds employees together around shared goals (Bass, 1995).

In contemporary organizations, rapid changes in technology, increasing competition, and complex organizational structures, along with other characteristics of the VUCA world (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity), create a growing need for a leadership style that fosters creativity, adaptability, and employee engagement (Boccoli et al., 2024). Therefore, transformational leadership has gained considerable attention as a leadership approach capable of promoting innovation, enhancing organizational performance, and supporting long-term strategic adaptation (Dionísio et al., 2022).

This review aims to examine the evolution of leadership theories and to discuss the growing role of transformational leadership in modern organizations. The study seeks to contribute to a clearer understanding of transformational leadership and its influence on organizational processes and outcomes. Accordingly, recent developments in leadership research are summarized by discussing the findings presented in existing academic studies.

This study contributes to leadership literature by offering a comprehensive conceptual overview of leadership theories and specifically the impacts of transformational leadership across multiple organizational areas. While prior studies tend to focus on specific aspects of transformational leadership or examine this leadership style within a single context only, this review brings findings together from a range of different functional areas, including employee motivation, creativity, team collaboration, project management, customer orientation, and supply chain performance. In doing so, the study provides a more integrated perspective by connecting insights that are often addressed separately in literature. More specifically, it presents a conceptual review of how transformational leadership influences organizational outcomes across different domains such as motivation, innovation, and team collaboration.

Rather than proposing a new theoretical model, this study aims to consolidate and interpret existing knowledge to provide a clearer understanding of how transformational leadership operates in complex and dynamic environments. Accordingly, the contribution of the study lies in synthesizing dispersed findings and highlighting the multi-dimensional impact of transformational leadership in modern organizations.

This study is based on a structured review of the existing literature on leadership theories, with a particular focus on transformational leadership. Relevant studies were identified through

searches in major academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, using a combination of keywords including “transformational leadership,” “leadership theories,” “transformational leadership effectiveness,” “transformational leadership and organizational performance,” as well as context-specific terms such as “team collaboration,” “motivation,” “innovation,” and “customer orientation.” After this selection process, 38 academic sources published between 1970 and 2025 were included for a comprehensive examination of the theoretical development of leadership approaches over time.

The selection of sources was guided by their relevance to the research objective and their contribution to understanding the relationship between transformational leadership and organizational outcomes. While the study does not follow a strict systematic review protocol, it adopts a structured and selective approach to synthesize key findings from the literature.

## ***2. Evolution of Leadership Theories***

The concept of leadership has been widely studied in management and organizational research; however, there is no universally accepted definition due to the complexity of the concept. The term “leader” appeared in the English language in the nineteenth century, although earlier forms of leadership roles existed long before this period (Bass and Riggio, 2006).

Leadership theories have largely evolved in parallel with the Industrial Revolution, during which organizations became larger and managerial structures more formalized. Leadership can generally be described as the process of influencing individuals or groups to achieve organizational objectives. While management mainly focuses on organizing resources and coordinating operational activities, leadership primarily focuses on motivating and guiding people toward shared goals (Daft, 2014). As leadership is fundamentally based on influence, motivation, and interpersonal relationships, it has been examined through many theoretical perspectives within the academic literature (Lussier and Achua, 2015).

### ***2.1. Great Man Theory***

The earliest perspective on leadership is commonly referred to as the Great Man Theory. This theory suggests that leadership abilities are inherent characteristics possessed by exceptional individuals. According to this view, leadership success depends on innate personal qualities that distinguish leaders from others in society (Daft, 2014). However, later studies demonstrated that leadership effectiveness cannot be explained solely by personal traits, as individuals rarely possess all the characteristics required to handle complex organizational challenges.

## **2.2. Trait Theory**

This theory emerged in the early twentieth century and focused on identifying the personal characteristics of successful leaders. The aim was to determine whether effective leaders share certain traits such as intelligence, self-confidence, creativity, emotional intelligence, and motivation, thereby explaining leadership success through measurable personal attributes (Phuc et al., 2020).

However, research findings eventually showed that there is no universal set of traits that can consistently explain leadership effectiveness (Khan et al., 2017). Additionally, studies indicated that leadership success may vary depending on environmental and organizational conditions (Nawaz et al., 2016).

## **2.3. Behavioral Theory**

Due to the limitations of trait theory, leadership research shifted its focus toward leader behaviors rather than personal characteristics. This approach aimed to identify observable actions that differentiate effective leaders from less effective ones. In other words, research examined what leaders actually do in organizations rather than who they are (Liden et al., 2025).

Studies conducted at Michigan and Ohio State Universities identified two key dimensions of leadership behavior: concern for task performance and concern for people within organizations (Lussier and Achua, 2015). These findings suggested that leadership effectiveness could be better understood by analyzing how leaders interact with employees.

However, despite its contributions, this theory also failed to identify a single leadership style that would be universally effective across different organizational contexts (Lussier and Achua, 2015).

## **2.4. Contingency and Situational Approaches**

At a later stage, researchers recognized that leadership effectiveness depends heavily on situational factors. Contingency theories suggest that there is no single leadership style that is effective in all circumstances; rather, leadership effectiveness depends on the alignment between leadership behavior and environmental conditions (Nawaz et al., 2016).

One of the most well-known approaches in this area is the Situational Leadership Theory developed by Hersey and Blanchard. This theory emphasized the role of follower characteristics in determining suitable leadership behavior. According to this perspective, leaders should adjust

their style depending on the competence, motivation, and readiness of their followers (Daft, 2014). Thus, follower maturity and task readiness determine whether leaders should adopt a directive, supportive, coaching, or delegating behavior (McCleskey, 2014).

Another important contingency approach is Fiedler's Contingency Model, which suggests that leadership effectiveness depends on the fit between leadership style and situational variables such as leader-member relations, task structure, and positional power (Daft, 2014). This model highlights the importance of adjusting leadership strategies according to organizational conditions (Khan et al., 2017).

In addition, the Path-Goal Theory developed by Robert House further expanded contingency approaches by explaining how leadership behavior influences employee motivation and performance (Gerhardt, 2006). According to this theory, leaders may adopt directive, supportive, participative, or goal-oriented styles depending on follower characteristics (Lussier and Achua, 2015).

### ***2.5. Contemporary Leadership Approaches***

Starting from the 1980s, leadership research has expanded significantly to include many contemporary leadership approaches that reflect the evolving nature of modern organizational needs. The most recognized ones are charismatic leadership, authentic leadership, servant leadership, entrepreneurial leadership, and transformational leadership (Esmer and Dayi, 2016).

Charismatic leadership emphasizes the leader's ability to influence followers through personal charisma, persuasive communication, and compelling vision of the future (Lee, 2020).

Authentic leadership focuses on transparency, self-awareness, and consistency between individuals' values and actions (Covelli and Mason, 2017).

Servant leadership emphasizes the leader's commitment to prioritizing the development and well-being of followers (Daft, 2014).

Entrepreneurial leadership highlights innovation, opportunity recognition, and risk-taking behaviors that contribute to competitive advantage in organizations (Esmer and Dayi, 2016).

In general, the development of leadership theories shows that these approaches evolved from focusing primarily on personal traits to emphasizing behavioral patterns and situational dynamics. Among these perspectives, transformational leadership has emerged as one of the most influential approaches in modern organizational history and research.

The evolution of leadership theories reflects a perspective of focusing on leader characteristics towards a more complex understanding of leadership as a dynamic and context-dependent process. Early approaches such as trait and behavioral theories primarily attempted to identify what defines an effective leader, whereas contingency and situational perspectives emphasized the importance of environmental factors and follower characteristics (Dionísio et al., 2022).

In contrast, transformational leadership can be seen as an extension of these perspectives, shifting the focus toward inspiration, change, and alignment between individual and organizational goals. Unlike earlier approaches that primarily focused on identifying leader traits, behaviors, or situational fit, transformational leadership emphasizes shaping values, fostering commitment, and driving organizational change.

However, transformational leadership should not be considered a universally superior approach. While it is often associated with positive outcomes such as motivation and innovation, its effectiveness may depend on organizational context and task structure or market conditions. For instance, in highly structured or efficiency-driven environments, leadership approaches that emphasize control, clarity, and performance monitoring may remain equally important. Therefore, rather than replacing earlier leadership theories, transformational leadership can be interpreted as a complementary approach that builds upon and integrates elements from previous theoretical perspectives.

### ***3. Transformational Leadership***

Transformational and transactional leadership are often discussed together in the literature, as understanding transactional leadership helps explain the characteristics of transformational leadership. The conceptual foundations of this theory were first introduced by Burns in 1978 and later expanded by Bass. Bass further developed the theory and integrated it into organizational leadership research (Lussier and Achua, 2015). In a later stage, a measurement framework through the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) was introduced, which became the most widely used instrument for assessing leadership styles within this theory (Avolio and Bass, 2002).

Transformational leadership theory suggests that leaders motivate followers by creating a shared vision, encouraging innovation, and fostering individual development. In general, transactional leadership is primarily based on exchanges between leaders and followers. It focuses on performance management through rewards or corrective actions (Bass and Riggio, 2006). Transactional leadership emphasizes operational stability and goal attainment, whereas

transformational leadership aims to inspire followers to move beyond immediate self-interest toward broader organizational objectives.

Transformational leadership consists of four key dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Idealized influence reflects the ability of the leader to act as a role model who is respected and trusted by followers. Inspirational motivation refers to the ability of the leader to communicate a compelling vision. Intellectual stimulation refers to the ability to challenge followers to think creatively and question the status quo to develop innovation. Individual consideration refers to the leader's attention to the personal development and well-being of followers (Clarke, 2012). Studies confirm that these dimensions contribute positively to employee motivation and organizational performance (Dussault and Frénette, 2015).

On the other hand, transactional leadership involves two primary dimensions: contingent reward and management-by-exception. Contingent reward refers to providing recognition or rewards when employees meet defined performance expectations. Management-by-exception involves monitoring performance and intervening when deviations occur (Bass and Riggio, 2006).

Passive leadership includes management-by-exception (passive) and laissez-faire leadership, where leaders avoid decision-making and intervene only when problems become severe. Studies show that such passive-avoidant leadership behaviors are associated with negative organizational outcomes. These outcomes include lower job satisfaction, reduced motivation, and weaker performance (Hemsworth et al., 2013). Similarly, laissez-faire leadership often results in ambiguity, reduced employee engagement, and ineffective decision-making processes (Rajbanshi, 2020). Many leaders demonstrate both elements of transactional and transformational leadership depending on environmental conditions (Daft, 2014).

Empirical research supports the significance of transformational leadership in organizational contexts. Studies show that transformational leadership strengthens team identification, psychological safety, and innovative work behavior in organizations (Ruggieri and Abbate, 2013). Findings also suggest that transformational leadership contributes to higher levels of employee motivation and job satisfaction (Mickson and Anlesinya, 2019). Research also shows that leadership effectiveness and employees' willingness to exert extra effort are strongly influenced by transformational leadership behaviors (Rowold and Heinitz, 2007).

Overall, the MLQ framework provides a comprehensive perspective on leadership by linking leadership behaviors with organizational outcomes such as leader effectiveness and employee satisfaction. Findings consistently highlight the central role of transformational leadership in modern organizations, particularly in environments that require innovation, adaptability, and employee engagement.

#### ***4. Effects of Transformational Leadership on Organizations***

Academic research indicates that transformational leadership has significant positive effects on organizational outcomes. These can be categorized as organizational performance, development, and cultural change. Transformational leaders are often seen as drivers of change, who encourage teamwork, collaboration, and innovation (Braun et al., 2013). Empirical research also links transformational leadership with improved organizational performance indicators and overall effectiveness (Choudhary et al., 2013).

Transformational leadership encourages its followers to shift from self-interests to the interests of collective organizational goals. Such transformation increases employee engagement and strengthens commitment to organizational objectives. This influence is achieved through inspiration, vision, and the ability to motivate followers toward shared future goals (Bass, 1985).

Several studies demonstrate that employees working under transformational leadership report higher levels of job satisfaction and empowerment. These leaders are also associated with lower levels of stress and higher levels of creativity among employees. These outcomes support improved decision quality and stronger organizational performance (Eisenbeiß and Boerner, 2013).

Modern organizations operate in conditions often described as the VUCA environment as mentioned earlier, which refers to volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Horney and Pasmore, 2010). These dynamic conditions require leadership approaches capable of supporting adaptability, innovation, and continuous organizational learning. This highlights the increasing importance of leadership styles that promote flexibility and creative problem-solving (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014).

Under these conditions, employee creativity and innovative work behavior are widely recognized as critical factors of survival and competitive advantage. Transformational leadership contributes to these outcomes by challenging existing assumptions and encouraging

followers to adopt innovative approaches. By creating a compelling vision for the future, these leaders motivate employees to reconsider established practices and actively participate in organizational change (Lussier and Achua, 2015).

Research also demonstrates a strong relationship between transformational leadership and employee creativity. Studies show that this leadership style enhances intrinsic motivation, which in turn stimulates creative thinking and innovative work behavior (Mohsin et al., 2019). Creative employees generate valuable ideas that contribute to organizational development and adaptation to change.

In addition to individual outcomes, transformational leadership also influences performance at the functional level of organizations (Boccoli et al., 2024). For instance, empirical research conducted in multiple industries demonstrates a positive relationship between transformational leadership and market orientation. Organizations led by transformational leaders tend to develop stronger market awareness and customer-focused strategies, which contribute to competitive advantage and improved firm performance (Menguc et al., 2007).

In a very similar way, research examining supply chain contexts demonstrates that this leadership style significantly influences quality management and supply chain performance. Results show that higher levels of transformational leadership among managers are associated with improved operational effectiveness and stronger supply chain outcomes (Teoman, 2015).

Additionally, studies conducted in service and retail contexts further support the positive impact of transformational leadership on employee effectiveness and customer outcomes. Findings indicate that transformational leaders who emphasize employee self-worth contribute to higher employee motivation and improved service performance in the retail sector (Gerhardt, 2006). This leadership style influences employee attitudes and emotional engagement, which indirectly affects customer satisfaction and service quality (Abolnasser et al., 2023).

As is already well known, leadership also plays a crucial role in shaping employees' emotional experiences, particularly in customer-facing roles such as call centers or retail frontlines (Bao & Jolly, 2024). Research suggests that supportive or positive leadership behaviors enhance employees' emotional engagement and improve their interactions with customers. Through such positive social interactions, employees are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward their work and toward customers (Chuang et al., 2012).

In addition to operational functions, transformational leadership also demonstrates strong relevance in project management environments. These leaders are capable of motivating project teams by articulating clear project goals, as well as encouraging collaboration among team members. Their ability to strengthen team unity and shared understanding contributes significantly to project success, as confirmed by empirical findings showing a positive relation between transformational leadership and project outcomes (Kabore et al., 2021).

Overall, these findings demonstrate that transformational leadership contributes to organizational success at multiple levels. These levels include individual motivation, team collaboration, innovation, and overall organizational performance. By fostering creativity, strengthening employee engagement, and supporting adaptive organizational cultures, this leadership plays a critical role in helping organizations respond effectively to the challenges of modern business environments.

## ***5. Discussion & Conclusion***

In conclusion, today's VUCA-driven business landscape requires organizations to move beyond traditional management approaches and embrace leadership approaches that support adaptability innovation and continuous change. Sustaining competitive advantage depends not only on existing capabilities but also on the ability to continuously improve processes and adapt to strategic change in a dynamic and complex environment. Leadership has evolved, moving from early trait-based explanations toward more complex behavioral, situational and contemporary leadership approaches. This evolution reflects that leadership effectiveness cannot be explained by a single universal model but rather depends on the interaction between leaders, followers, and organizational contexts. Among the many leadership approaches, transformational leadership has emerged as one of the most influential theories. It explains how leaders inspire followers, encourage innovation, and support organizational change. These leaders go beyond traditional managerial practices by creating a shared vision, motivating employees, and fostering individual development.

This review demonstrates that transformational leadership positively influences organizational outcomes at multiple levels, including individual motivation, team collaboration, and overall effectiveness. Moreover, its impact extends across various functional areas such as supply chain management, customer service, retail, project management, and marketing. Its ability to foster adaptive cultures and support innovation-oriented strategies makes it particularly relevant in complex and rapidly changing environments. However, the effectiveness of transformational

leadership should be interpreted in relation to organizational context. Different structures, operational requirements, and industry conditions may influence the extent to which this leadership approach produces desired outcomes. In this sense, transformational leadership is best understood not as a universally dominant model, but as a complementary approach that interacts with other leadership styles. Empirical studies using the MLQ further support these findings.

Based on the reviewed literature, several directions for future research can be identified. First, more context-specific studies are needed to better understand how transformational leadership operates across different industries, markets, and national settings. Second, future research may benefit from examining more complex relational structures by exploring mediating and moderating mechanisms that shape the relationship between leadership styles and organizational outcomes. Finally, further empirical studies could contribute to a deeper understanding of how leadership effectiveness varies under different environmental and organizational conditions.

#### ***Author Contribution Statement***

The authors have made equal contributions to this work.

#### ***Conflict of Interest***

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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