# Communication Styles and Qualities of High and Low Performing Transformational Leaders – Subordinates' Perspective

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ABSTRACT: This study explored 98 Finnish leaders' strengths and weaknesses as described by their followers. The leaders were appraised by their transformational leadership and communication styles by their followers. The results were divided into two groups: leaders who obtained good evaluations of their leadership style and those with lower results. The subordinates' verbal comments were grouped based on themes about the strengths and weaknesses of both groups, revealing interesting differences between the two groups. Those leaders with high leadership ratings are especially good in Enabling behavior and Emphatic communication style. According to verbal comments of the subordinates, the strengths of high leadership ratings are more strongly emphasized in higher-level leadership traits such as courage, interpersonal skills, a positive attitude, and motivation. On the other hand, the strengths of low leadership ratings focus more on fundamental leadership skills like organization, planning, fairness, and stress management.

KEYWORDS: transformational leadership, communication style, strengths, and weaknesses of leaders

## 1. Introduction

Transformational leadership has several benefits and plenty of studies in different cultures have shown its efficiency. It has shown substantial validity in predicting several outcomes, including leader performance and effectiveness ratings in addition to subordinates' satisfaction and motivation (Judge and Piccolo 2004; Sashkin 2004).

Transformational leaders act as mentors to their followers by encouraging learning, achievement, and individual development. They provide meaning, act as role models, provide challenges, evoke emotions, and foster a climate of trust. Leaders should inspire and motivate others with their visions, role modelling and verbal skills. These inspiring and motivating behaviors require well-developed verbal communication skills.

Leaders' communication style has been noted as an important quality and it is specially connected to enhancing self-awareness. Surprisingly, this area still lacks research. There are only a few studies which confirm the importance of the topic and show that leaders who pay attention to their own communication are more effective change agents than those who do not (Gilley, Gilley, and McMillan 2009), and that leaders' communication styles are linked to their subordinates' levels of satisfaction (Infante, Elissa, and Gorden 1982) and motivation (Kay and Christophel 1995).

Communication is a key dimension of leadership and only a few studies have focused on this aspect. Fewer studies have focused on verbal comments on leaders' qualities—the focus of our study. Our interest is to examine whether good and weaker transformational leaders are verbally described differently. To develop leadership behavior, leaders should know the typical communication areas to focus on. The purpose is to examine transformational leadership and communication style solely from followers' perspective and see if there are differences between comments of high ratings received by transformational leaders and lower ratings received by other leaders.

## 2. Literature review

### *Transformational leadership*

Transformational leadership improves the morale and performance of employees and motivates them in a variety of ways. It gives employees a sense of belonging, making each employee and manager feel like a collective unit (Fassina et al. 2008). Transformational leaders show concern towards the needs of their subordinates, motivating and inspiring them to achieve organizational goals and objectives. Transformational leaders are not solely focused on the task at hand; they mentor subordinates, help employees create a bond within the organization, developing individuals into leaders. These types of leaders can boost the performance level of their staff and ensure that they are satisfied within the working environment, thus making them fully committed to the organization (Chen et al. 2014). Transformational leaders express social and emotional intellect and are often charismatic, instilling organizational vision and goals in their employees (Bass and Avolio 1993). A study by Daus and Ashkanasy (2005) also indicates that emotional intelligence is significantly related to transformational leadership.

### *Communication and leadership*

Interpersonal communication is conceptualized as the verbal and nonverbal interaction between two or more interdependent individuals (DeVito 2013). In work settings, dyadic communication is a two-way communication between superiors/leaders and their subordinates (Kristof-Brown et al. 2005).

Among the few studies on communication and leadership, De Vries et al. (2010) reported on charismatic, human-oriented, and task-oriented leadership and concluded that leadership is very much grounded in communication style in relation to charismatic and human-oriented leadership. They found charismatic leadership to be characterized by communication styles incorporating assuredness, supportiveness, argumentativeness, and preciseness. Berson and Avolio (2004) found that leaders assessed as transformational were more effective communicators in all three areas factored in—that is, they were careful listeners, open, and careful transmitters. According to Lehmann-Willenbrock et al. (2015), transformational leadership was positively linked to functional problem-solving communication by team members. This positive relationship was mediated by leaders' solution-focused communication. Pacleb and Bocarnea (2016) conducted a study on the relationship between leadership styles and communication styles and the impact it has on leader-member exchange amongst employees in the United States banking sector. Findings revealed that transformational leadership positively predicts expressiveness, preciseness, and questioningness; and negatively predicts verbal aggressiveness, emotionality, and impression manipulativeness as communication styles.

According to Brandt and Uusi-Kakkuri (2016), leaders who judged themselves to have a strong transformational leadership style also reported they had an emotionally intelligent, controlled, and transparent communication style. Their leadership style was marked by the absence of avoiding or dominating approaches. This was supported by followers' perspective in their ratings that more transformational leaders use more Emphatic communication style. The more Enabling leader was, the more Emphatic, Open and Non-Unclear s/he was evaluated. Emphatic communication style increases Modelling behavior, and the higher the subordinate's education level is, the more leadership is experienced as Modelling. Open communication also impacts Individual consideration (Brandt and Mäntyvaara 2024). According to Brandt (2021), highly transformational female leaders communicate differently than less transformational female leaders, indicating that the highly transformational leaders are using more Impatient, Self-Controlled, Dominant and Clear communication styles than less transformational female leaders.

## 3. Research methodology

*Sample and method*

The sample consisted of  98 respondents, most of them women (71%), at the age 31-40 year (32%) and an educational background in economics (31%). Most (60%) of the respondents had also experience of being in a leadership position. However, over half of them (62%) did not have subordinates. The leaders who were evaluating were mostly women (89%). Factor analyses were done with SPSS-program.

       Respondents are grouped into two groups:

1) High transformational leaders - those who got good ratings (mean over 5 in the Likert scale 1-7) on their transformational leadership style, and
2) Low transformational leaders - those who got more weak ratings (mean below 5 in the Likert scale 1-7). Their communication styles and received written comments are analysed in this study.

Subordinates' verbal comments were grouped according to the themes raised. Open questions were as follows: 1) What are the strengths of your leader? 2) What are the weaknesses of your leader?

*Questionnaires*

Transformational leadership (TF) was measured with the Finnish version of the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI), originally developed by Kouzes and Posner (1988).  The Finnish version of the LPI used in this study has been in use since 2005 (see e.g. Hautala 2006; Brandt and Laiho 2013; Brandt 2021). The items in the questionnaire were rated on a Likert scale with options ranging from 1 (S/he never behaves like this) to 7 (S/he always behaves like this). The dimensions of transformational leadership are: Enabling, Challenging, Modelling, Rewarding, and Individual Consideration. Enabling ($\alpha$=0,937) means including everyone into projects, challenging ($\alpha$=0,793) constantly developing ways of working, and taking also risks, Modelling ($\alpha$=0,690) means showing example in the way of working, Rewarding ($\alpha$=0,862) means celebrating outcomes and Individual consideration ($\alpha$=0,686) means taking others individually into account in various ways.

       Communication style was measured with 34 items, examining different perspectives on communication styles with a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (S/he never behaves like this) to 7 (S/he always behaves like this). Following factor analyses with Varimax rotation, four communication styles were designated: Emphatic, Avoidant, Dominating and Correct. Emphatic ($\alpha$=0,842) style means that a person can notice the other person's feelings, if in doubt that s/he has been insulting, s/he is apologizing, and s/he can easily put his/her soul into the other's position. The Avoidant style ($\alpha$=0,869) means that a person has the tendency to avoid or delay the critical subjects. Dominant style ($\alpha$=0,849) means that person takes a crucial role in the discussions and can raise his/her voice during the discussions; others might be a little bit scared of his/her presence. The Open style ($\alpha$=0,645) means that a person does show his/her weaknesses as well and is able to ask forgiveness if noticing doing something wrongly.

## 4. Results

*Numerical results of transformational leadership and communication style*

Table 1 shows the numerical results of transformational leadership. In the total sample, the mean of the TF-total is 5,06 and the highest was the Modelling behaviour while the lowest was Individual consideration. In the case of the communication, the highest was Emphatic communication and lowest Dominant.

       When looking at the high and low transformational leadership groups, Dominant and Unclear communication are higher than the Total Sample in low-TF leaders and Openness is clearly lower than in Total Sample group. In the high-TF leaders the Empathic communication is highest and Dominant and Unclear communication are lower in the Total Sample.

Those leaders with high leadership ratings are especially good in Enabling behaviour and their weakest part is Individual consideration. The leaders with low leadership ratings are at their best in Modelling and they are weakest in both Rewarding and Individual consideration.

Table 1. Means of the different groups of transformational leaders, and t-test between the groups

| | Total Sample Mean (s.td) N=98 | Low-TF Mean(s.td) N=41 | High-TF Mean(s.td) N=56 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Transformational leadership style (TF)** | | | |
| TF-Total | 5,06 (0,71) | 4,37 (0,47) | 5,56 (0,34) |
| TF-Enabling | 5,97 (0,94) | 5,26 (0,99) | 6,49 (0,43) |
| TF-Challenging | 5,28 (1,00) | 4,61 (1,07) | 5,77 (0,58) |
| TF-Modelling | 6,15 (0,93) | 5,66 (1,11) | 6,22 (0,53) |
| TF-Rewarding | 4,43 (1,65) | 3,17 (1,34) | 5,38 (1,17) |
| TF-Individual Consideration | 3,45 (1,08) | 3,17 (1,21) | 3,67 (0,94) |
| **Communication style** | | | |
| Unclear | 3,13 (0,71) | 3,35 (0,79) | 2,97 (0,61) |
| Emphatic | 5,09 (0,82) | 4,71 (0,84) | 5,38 (0,68) |
| Dominant | 2,60 (1,25) | 2,77 (1,30) | 2,50 (1,21) |
| Open | 4,80 (1,29) | 4,27 (1,35) | 5,16 (1,12) |

Table 2. Analyses of the High-TF and Low-TF leaders' received verbal comments of their strengths

| High-TF leaders' strengths | Low-TF leaders' strengths |
|---|---|
| **Promptness and Responsibility:**<br>– Approaches all tasks with enthusiasm and ensures nothing is left undone.<br>– Promptness in actions and decision-making.<br>– Takes responsibility and delivers on promises within deadlines.<br><br>**Fairness, Trust and Reliability:**<br>– Emphasizes fairness and perseverance.<br>– Reliable, straightforward, and self-aware.<br>– Fair and takes stand for his/her team.<br>– Natural ability to gain people's trust.<br>– Strong self-confidence and trust in others.<br>– Embraces openness and honesty.<br><br>**Positive Attitude:**<br>– Approaches all tasks with enthusiasm.<br>– Sense of humor and positive outlook.<br>– Recognizes positive qualities in people.<br>– Maintains a positive and motivating demeanor.<br>– Approaches situations with positivity and encouragement. | **Communication and Interaction:**<br>– Working with diverse individuals.<br>– Presentational skills, positive, and innovative.<br>– Focus and staying on topic.<br>– Solution-oriented approach and handling challenging issues.<br>– Clear communication and effective interaction.<br>– Listening and paying attention.<br>– Providing positive feedback and encouragement.<br>– Openness and taking a stand.<br>**Determination and Courage in Action:**<br>– Determined approach, not afraid of challenges.<br>– Taking initiative and achieving goals.<br>– Willingness to express strong personal views.<br>– Courage to defend one's position and promote ideas.<br>– Belief in one's strengths.<br>– Ability to navigate through difficult situations and conflicts. |

| **Communication Skills:** | **Fairness and Equity:** |
|---|---|
| – Excellent communication skills. | – Fairness and justice. |
| – Recognizes positive qualities in people. | – Precision and approachability. |
| – Capable of handling challenging situations constructively. | – Fair and demanding when necessary. |
| – In team settings, considers everyone's input. | – Authoritative when needed. |
| – Empathetic and considerate leadership style. | – Addressing unequal treatment. |
| – Highly emotionally intelligent and adept at reading people. | **Efficiency and Professionalism:** |
| – Strong interpersonal skills and collaboration abilities. | – Efficiency, precision, and professionalism. |
| – Possesses a helpful and caring attitude. | – Knowledge and the ability to figure things out. |
| | – Excellent teaching in work-related matters. |
| **Motivation and Support:** | – Excelling in personal work. |
| – Leads change by engaging team members. | – Performance and staying on schedule. |
| – Ability to motivate the team towards set goals. | **Organization and Planning:** |
| – Provides support in facing challenges and considers individuals' needs. | – Planning and logical progression. |
| – Practices common-sense leadership, acting as both a boss and a friend. | – Staying on schedule and advancing tasks. |
| | – Organizational skills and precision. |
| **Expertise, Innovation, and Eagerness to Learn:** | – Striving for goals and maintaining focus. |
| – Extensive expertise in the field. | – Systematic and efficient approach. |
| – Eagerness to learn and quick learning ability. | – Calmness, analytical thinking, and logicality. |
| – High education, experience, and proficiency. | – Seeing tasks through to completion and taking responsibility. |
| – Presents innovative ideas for improvement. | – Leadership in processes and continuous development as a leader. |
| – Logical thinking and solution-oriented. | **Expertise and Trust:** |
| | – Strong expertise and trust in subordinates. |
| | – Leading the team and trusting the team. |
| | – Caring for colleagues and promoting fairness. |
| | – Considering the well-being of colleagues. |
| | **Stress Management and Self-Care:** |
| | – Emotional intelligence and stress management. |
| | – Recognizing personal well-being boundaries and resilience. |
| | – Ability to say "no" and reducing stress. |

Table 3. Analyses of the High and Low-TF leaders' received verbal comments of their developmental areas

| **High-TF leaders' areas for improvement** | **Low-TF leaders' areas for improvement** |
|---|---|
| **Courage and boldness:** | **Building Team Spirit and Cohesion:** |
| – Courage. | – Needs to prioritize inspiration and visioning more than administrative tasks. |
| – Taking on roles boldly. | – Improvement in communicating ideas within the organization. |
| – A leader can shine, even when driving the team's matters! | – Highlighting the well-being and rejuvenation of subordinates/team. |
| – Having the courage to fight more strongly for one's position, its progress, and personal ideas. | – Acknowledging and enjoying task milestones. |
| – Believing in one's strengths. He could express his views more boldly, especially in situations where they differ from the prevailing perspective. | |

- He might be too modest about himself when speaking, but confident when talking about work matters. It's essential to consider not undervaluing oneself.

**Consistency, Delegating:**
- Consistency. Holding the line.
- You don't have to do everything yourself. Being quick-witted and efficient can sometimes lead to doing too much for others. The team needs to keep up the pace. Occasionally delegating responsibility.

**Focus on the big picture:**
- Perfection cannot always be pursued.
- In meetings, sometimes delving too deep into details, making it difficult to stay on schedule. Staying focused on the big picture would often be better for the end result.
- Sometimes, fussing over even the smallest details, and energy may be unnecessarily spent on them.

**Stress Management: Taking Care of Personal Resources, Organization:**
- Recognizing the limitations of one's own resources. Taking care of personal well-being.
- Directing energy only towards things that one can influence. While highly determined, sometimes, they may not realize the extent of their responsibilities. More attention should be paid to their well-being and resilience.
- Organizing and remembering to calm down in stressful situations.
- Sometimes, it feels like they are overly conscientious about work. Managing time in handling work-related matters could be an aspect worth developing.
- Patience for the sake of personal resilience.
- While it's admirable that the producer cares about small things, they shouldn't be driven to exhaustion!
- Knowing how to say "no" at the workplace. A conscientious and kind employee who also takes care of tasks that are not part of their job description.

**Communication: Openness, Staying on Topic, and Addressing Challenging Issues:**
- Sometimes information is heard through the grapevine rather than directly from the supervisor.
- Attention could be paid to how he presents matters to others. He could elaborate and share more about the presented issues.
- Staying on topic.
- Listening is occasionally forgotten when a topic isn't interesting enough.

**Recognition of diversity and equality:**
- Adopting a different approach to diverse colleagues and subordinates.
- Treating people and departments more equally.
- Emphasizing humanity and acknowledging each individual.
- Striving for greater fairness among a large group of subordinates.

**Trusting others and authority**
- Holding staff accountable and addressing issues more proactively.
- Sharing responsibility and trusting employees.
- Using authority to address negative issues.
- Understanding their position in more challenging situations.

**Feedback and communication**
- Receiving feedback constructively.
- Providing more direct and assertive feedback.
- Clarifying communication to avoid misunderstandings.
- Reducing stress in managing difficult situations and finding common ground.
- Speaking more slowly and calmly, especially in customer and other situations.
- Adopting a calmer and more inclusive leadership style.

| – Bringing up and discussing challenging issues. Even difficult matters can and should be addressed.<br>– Occasionally a bit impulsive, accelerating from zero to a hundred too quickly.<br>– Some may perceive his style as too lively; in certain situations, it might be beneficial to restrain a bit and observe others' reactions more closely. | |

## 5. Discussion

When leadership skills are better, Dominant and Unclear communication decreases and leaders are more emphatic. Better leaders excel in Enabling, while less effective leaders have strengths in Modelling. According to these results, the lower group is more hands-on type of leaders while the higher group is leading with including everyone with empathy. Individual consideration was weakest in both groups, which might indicate that there are quite many subordinates per one leader.

It seems that transformational leaders are very reliable in many ways (promptness, reliable, taking responsibility, meeting deadlines) and they enhance a culture of openness and trust. Enabling leadership and emphatic communication are seen in many comments (considers everyone's input, collaboration abilities, helpful and caring, emphatic). Comments include positive attitude and ability to motivate and show example with eagerness to learn and innovate. Individual consideration is observed by their recognition of positive qualities of team members.

***Strengths in comparison (high-TF and low-TF strengths in comparison)***
Stress management, emotional intelligence, and the ability to say "no" are linked to strengths of both leader types. While the strengths of both leader groups have been categorized differently, it is noteworthy that several similarities exist between them. For instance, an emphasis on openness, a positive approach, and the ability to handle challenging situations is common among both good and poor leaders' strengths.

The strengths of high-TF leaders are more strongly emphasized in higher-level leadership traits such as courage, interpersonal skills, a positive attitude, and motivation. On the other hand, the strengths of low-TF leaders focus more on fundamental leadership skills like organization, planning, fairness, and stress management. The differences may stem from the fact that the strengths of high-TF leaders aim to complement and further emphasize existing strengths, whereas the strengths of low TF-leaders represent areas for improvement in basic skills and social abilities.

In summary, the strengths of high TF-leaders are inclined towards the "soft" aspects of leadership, while the strengths of low TF-leaders highlight more fundamental aspects and working methods.

***Comparing developmental areas***
The difference in responses between the two groups with respect to developmental areas is due to their focus on different aspects of leadership improvement. The development areas for high-TF leaders emphasize stronger qualities such as courage, consistency, and stress management. Many comments related to their well-being and how to get their strengths more in use, and how they should be proud of their qualities and stronger with their opinions. Comments about organizing and detail-orientation were mentioned because team members were worried about their workload. Regarding low TF-leaders, the focus was more about impact on the others, that they should focus more on softer skills, such as building team spirit, recognizing diversity and

equality, trusting others, and communication. In these cases, more emphasis was placed on social and interpersonal skills that directly impact team dynamics and organizational atmosphere.

In summary, the development areas for high TF-leaders emphasize complementing existing strong leadership qualities, while the development areas for low TF-leaders highlight more fundamental leadership skills and team building.

This study shows the benefits of transformational leaders in the eyes of the team members. The study has important contribution and insights to leaders themselves, human resources, and organization consultants. The most important qualities are trustfulness in many ways, openness, positivity and straight talking. When developing leaders, the qualities like trusting others, openness and stress management are key focus areas.

These results also show what kind of qualities Finnish respondents overall appreciate in their leaders, and what areas they think are important for improvement. It should be noted that all the leaders in the sample were quite effective transformational leaders, so there were not any "bad" leaders, but all got average level or higher ratings from their subordinates. Despite the small sample size, the study produced clear results.

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