Unit-Focused and Individual-Focused Transformational Leadership: The Role of Middle Leaders in the Midst of Incremental Organizational Change

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Although organizational change depends on leadership, researchers have recently begun to integrate the two bodies of literature. Moreover, researchers have largely overlooked the middle leaders' role. Our study develops a conceptual framework explaining the role of middle leaders during incremental organizational change. We propose that leader unit-focused transformational leadership influences unit performance via unit change efficacy, individual-focused transformational leadership influences follower change-oriented organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) via follower change commitment, and change-oriented OCB positively impacts unit performance. Further, we posit that change magnitude moderates the leadership effects on unit change efficacy and follower change commitment, respectively.
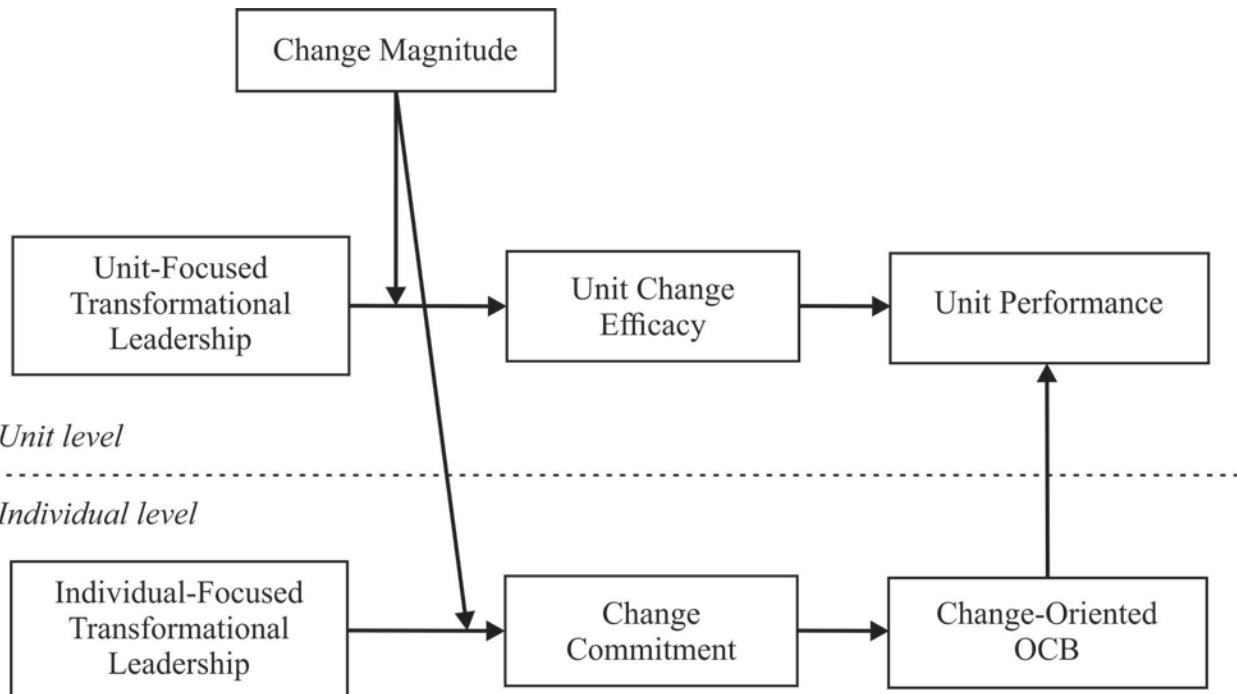
INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of organizational change is central to and pervades researchers' and practitioners' thinking on organizations (Ford & Ford, 1994). Organizations are purposeful or goal-driven social systems that seek to attain efficiency and adaptation in a changing environment. Attainment of efficiency demands creating an operational system with clear guidelines for the choice of means to achieve performance goals, whereas adaptation (i.e., organizational change) requires modifying the current system and then institutionalizing new, more efficient approaches into the system (Kotter, 1996). In effect, organizations often try to operate systems with relative stability or efficiency-oriented functioning, which are interrupted by periods of adaptation that are brief mostly (i.e., incremental organizational change) or long rarely (i.e., radical change) (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Weick & Quinn, 1999). To effectively balance the conflict between efficiency and adaptation requires leadership at all levels in organizations (Burke, 2002; Huy, 2002; Huy, Corley, & Kraatz, in press; Pawar & Eastman, 1997).

Although organizational change depends on leadership, the organizational change and leadership bodies of literature have not been sufficiently integrated (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Burke, 2002). Given the notion that transformational leadership is effective in the context of organizational change (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Pawar & Eastman, 1997), researchers recently have begun to integrate the two bodies of literature (e.g., Agle, Nagarajan, Sonnenfeld, & Srinivasan, 2006; Carter, Armenakis, Feild, & Mossholder, 2013; Groves, 2005; Waldman, Ramirez, House, & Puranam, 2001; Zhang, Li, Ullrich, van Dick, in press). Though useful for understanding its effectiveness from a strategic perspective, most of these studies focused on top leadership consistent with the notion that only top leadership leads the change while middle leadership mainly acts as a supporting role at best (Shrivastava, 1986; Tushman & Romanelli, 1985). As such, middle leaders have been overlooked by researchers (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005; Huy, 2002). Arguably, in top-down, radical change contexts, middle leaders must carry out the change mission from top management while trying to attain efficiency in their work units. In reality, however, organizations have increasingly replaced their traditional hierarchical organizational structure with a more modular and decentralized structure in response to environmental complexity and uncertainty (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Bass & Riggio, 2006), and most of them compete by changing incrementally and continuously (Burke, 2002). Consequently, middle leaders play an increasing leadership role in incremental change programs, and their efforts on balancing both efficiency and adaptation deserve more attention (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005; Farjoun, 2010; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997).

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of middle leaders in incremental organizational change. We develop a conceptual framework that explains how, why, and under what conditions middle leaders effectively balance efficiency and adaptation in their work units. Specifically, based on a recent research development (Kunze, de Jong, Bruch, in press; Wang & Howell, 2010; Wu, Tsui, & Kinicki, 2010; Zhang et al., in press), we focus on middle leaders' unit- and individual-focused transformation leadership, and examine such leadership effects on units' and followers' change-related attitudes and subsequent performance outcomes in the midst of organizational change. We propose that unit-focused transformation leadership influences unit change efficacy which, in turn, impacts unit performance, that individual-focused transformation leadership influences follower change commitment which, in turn, impacts their change-oriented organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), and that change-oriented OCB has a positive impact on unit performance. Further, given that the effects of leadership depend on the situation (Yukl, 2010, 2012), we propose that change magnitude moderates the relationship between unit-focused transformation leadership and unit change efficacy as well as the relationship between individual-focused transformation leadership and followers' change commitment. Figure 1 depicts our proposed model.

FIGURE 1
PROPOSED MODEL

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT AND PROPOSITIONS

Organizational Change

By and large, there is a consensus that organizations actively or reactively pursue adaptations in response to pressures caused by competition, technology, and globalization (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Burke, 2002; Burns, 2005; Huy, 2002). Coincident with this reality, longstanding inquiry into organizational change has provided theoretical and practical insights into change dynamics and successful implementation (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Oreg, Vakola, & Armenakis, 2011; Weick & Quinn, 1999). Despite intensive research efforts, organizations undergoing change often find themselves failing to implement change or achieving desired outcomes (Burke, 2002; Burns, 2005; Huy et al., in press). The high failure rate, "sometimes 80% or above" (Burns, 2005, p. 73), suggests that additional studies are indeed needed to advance our knowledge of change management (Burke, 2002; Burns, 2005; Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008; Pawar & Eastman, 1997).

Organizational change scholars generally agree that two forms of change, incremental and radical, may both occur in organizations (Burke, 2002; Weick & Quinn, 1999). Incremental change comprises purposeful adjustments that are small but ongoing and cumulative in effect, whereas radical change, though quite rare, occurs in leaps, spurts, and disruptions (Burke, 2002). In effect, most organizations, "more than 95%", compete by changing continuously through incremental adaptations to solve problems or to change a part of the large organizational system (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Burke, 2002, p. 67). Our study focuses on incremental change in work units. In such change contexts, from an operational perspective, work units seek to achieve performance goals through maintaining work procedure continuity. On the other hand, work units initiate and implement incremental change necessary to be more efficient. Therefore, both continuity and change coexist in such contexts (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Farjoun, 2010; Leana & Barry, 2000).

In such work environments, middle leaders are active contributors initiating change adaptations while pursuing performance goals, since they, by definition, are to take responsibility for, and control of, the managerial problems (i.e., balancing the conflict between efficiency and adaptation within their work units) (Thompson, 1967). They act as the linking pins connecting the strategic direction provided by top leaders with the day-to-day operations of their units and followers (March & Simon, 1958; Thompson, 1967). As organizations are increasingly geographically distributed with a flatter structure, the role of middle leaders in change processes has been elevated in the sense that they are given more autonomy and power to manage their work unit operations for efficiency as well as initiate and implement change programs through continuously improving products or services (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997).

Organizational change, with the underlying goal of being more efficient, is often systemic and can impact both a work unit and its members. When a change is under way in a work unit, change magnitude may represent the characteristics of such a context (cf. Herold, Fedor, Caldwell, & Liu, 2008; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). We define change magnitude as the quantifiable amount of change that involves modifications of work unit operational procedures. These modifications not only require individual followers to adapt their daily work routines but also the unit as a whole to configure a new, more efficient operational system. As the change magnitude increases, greater modifications in unit work procedures heighten the adaptation demands on all members which may interfere with their prior work routines. Members and their unit as a whole may experience increased levels of uncertainty, fear of failure, and loss of control, all of which have a negative impact on their attitudes toward the change (Herold, Fedor, & Caldwell, 2007; Herold et al., 2008), which in turn impact change outcomes and unit efficiency. To effectively balance efficiency and change, middle leaders must exhibit appropriate dual-level leadership, oriented toward both individual members and the unit as a whole, to initiate, lead, and institutionalize change programs continuously for higher levels of efficiency (Yukl, 2012).

Transformational Leadership and Change

The leadership literature posits that transformational leaders are effective in the context of organizational change (Pawar & Eastman, 1997), because such leadership is, "at its core, about issues around the processes of transformation and change" (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 225). Examining transformational leadership as a global construct, a substantial body of research has found transformational leadership was consistently related to positive work-related attitudes and performance in general (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996), and during times of organizational change in particular (Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003; Carter et al., 2013; Nemanich & Keller, 2007). Recently, researchers (e.g., Kirkman, Chen, Farh, Chen, & Lowe, 2009; Wang & Howell, 2010; Wu et al., 2010) contended that transformational leadership is flexible as to levels of analysis, comprising behaviors targeted at both units (i.e., unit-focused) and individuals (i.e., individual-focused) (also, see Kark & Shamir, 2002). Following such a contention, we suggest that both unit- and individual-focused transformational leadership are essential in balancing the conflict between efficiency and adaptation. Unit-focused transformational leaders recognize the need for change, create and share a compelling change vision with all followers, inspire them to accomplish challenging performance and adaptation goals, and motivate them to perform beyond expectations and transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the unit. Individual-focused transformational leaders, vary their leadership behaviors based on each follower's different capabilities and needs, consulting with them about solutions to problems, and coaching and guiding them for performance and adaptations during times of change.

At the unit level, transformational leaders influence the unit as a whole during times of change through idealized influence and inspirational motivation that emphasize the unit and unified effort to achieve unit performance and adaptation goals (Wang & Howell, 2010; Wu et al., 2010). Idealized influence refers to leadership behaviors that reflect leaders' values and beliefs, moral and ethical orientations, and sense of purpose for their unit (Antonakis & House, 2002). Such leaders challenge the status quo and induce change elements into their work units through articulating a collective vision of the future that directs the units toward desired outcomes and away from undesired results. This appealing

vision provides a clear statement of the purpose of the work unit, connects followers' self-concept to the mission, and assures that the unit's interests will be advanced through organizational change. Inspirational motivation refers to leadership behaviors that inspire and motivate the unit to achieve ambitious efficiency and change goals by raising their expectations and instilling confidence that they will be successful (Antonakis & House, 2002). Moreover, such leaders actively shape and enlarge their units in the change process by their personal attributes including their energy, self-confidence, assertiveness, and ambition (Bass, 1999). As a result, followers in the unit are emotionally aroused and their efforts toward accomplishing the vision are elevated by the presence of a favorable future that the change will bring into the work unit (Bass, 1999).

Through such leadership influence, units as wholes believe in the collective vision and their capability to achieve it. These shared change efficacy beliefs promote followers' collective efforts in their performance and the change process (Walumbwa, Wang, Lawler, & Shi, 2004). Work units with high levels of change efficacy tend to set more ambitious efficiency (i.e., increasing performance quality and quantity standards) and adaptation (i.e., improving the process of converting raw materials to final products) goals, develop strategies and tactics to achieve them, and actively engage themselves in reaching better performance outcomes for the sake of the units. At the individual level, Gong, Huang, and Farh (2009) provided evidence that employee creative efficacy mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and follower creativity. Similarly, Wu et al. (2010) found that group-focused transformational leadership influenced group effectiveness via group identification and efficacy. Given the theoretical and empirical evidence, we propose:

> *Proposition 1: Unit-focused transformational leadership will be positively related to unit performance via unit change efficacy.*

At the individual level, transformational leaders influence individual followers in the change process by their individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation that aim to build strong connections between the leader and each follower (Wang & Howell, 2010). Individualized consideration refers to leadership behaviors that provide customized socio-emotional support to followers (Antonakis & House, 2002). They treat each of followers individually, give special attention to followers who are facing adaptation challenges, and express appreciation for their effort in performance and adaptation (Bass, 1999). Leaders engaging in individual consideration act as coaches and mentors rather than bosses to followers—they recognize each of the followers' unique needs and skills, assign tasks that fit their capabilities, enhance their confidence and readiness in coping with change, provide personal and emotional support to those who are in need, and help them to achieve challenging goals. These types of considerate, supportive, and positive leader behaviors create follower buy-in to the change program. Intellectual stimulation refers to leadership behaviors that appeal to followers' intellect by encouraging them to take charge and think critically, search for new ways to complete tasks, and seek solutions to problems from different angles and perspectives (Antonakis & House, 2002). These followers' inputs can be valuable elements of the change program (cf. Carter et al., 2013), and a source of commitment because followers develop a sense of ownership of the change program (Groves, 2005). Thus, followers' willingness to be part of change is enhanced and, ultimately, they actively involve themselves in the change process.

When a change is embraced by followers, their attitudes towards the change tend to be positive, and their intention to support it and willingness to work on behalf of its successful implementation (i.e., commitment to change; Herold et al., 2008) are likely to be high. That is, rather than just reflecting a favorable disposition toward change, change commitment represents a psychological alignment with change and is a predictor of followers' support for change (Herold et al., 2008). Their support for change may be captured by change-oriented OCB that is intended to make constructive changes in their individual work and the unit functioning for the purpose of increasing efficiency (Choi, 2007). Such OCBs include behaviors of revising task, taking charge, and making suggestions, all of which improve unit performance (Choi, 2007). In times of change when it is difficult, if not impossible, to specify all of

the required behaviors contributing to individual and unit performance efficiency, such OCBs are especially valuable because they indicate the support followers give to their peers, leader, and unit (Lavelle, Rupp, & Brockner, 2007; Nielsen, Bachrach, Sundstrom, & Halfhill, 2012). Therefore, individual-focused transformational leaders are expected to motivate followers to make a strong commitment to change which, in turn, enhances their change-oriented OCBs. Further, such OCBs aggregately translate into higher levels unit performance. Research has consistently demonstrated positive relationships among transformational leadership, organizational commitment, and OCB in general (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe et al., 1996) and during times of change (Carter et al., 2013; Herold et al., 2008; Shin, Taylor, Seo, 2012). In addition, studies suggested that OCB is positively associated with unit performance (e.g., Bachrach, Powell, Collins, & Richey, 2006; Kunze et al., in press; Nielsen et al., 2012).

> *Proposition 2: Individual-focused transformational leadership will be positively related to follower change-oriented organizational citizenship behavior via change commitment.*
> *Proposition 3: Follower change-oriented organizational citizenship behavior will be positively related to unit performance.*

Leadership scholars have long acknowledged that transformational leadership is not a context-free construct (Yukl, 2010). Contingency theories of leadership take contextual factors into account and examine how the relationship between leadership and outcomes varies across situations (Yukl, 2010). During times of change, the amount of change (i.e., change magnitude) may differ from one work unit to another especially when units perform different tasks or serve different types of customers. For example, after the launch of a customer service call center, work teams modified their operational procedures based on the types of customers and service requirements from the customers (Carter et al., 2013). Different magnitudes of change may (a) have an impact on followers' attitudes toward change (e.g., Herold et al., 2007; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006), (b) create needs and demands for transformational leadership (e.g., Carter et al., 2013; Herold et al., 2008), and (c) influence the relationship between transformational leadership and their attitudes toward change (e.g., Herold et al., 2008).

Organizational change often disrupts followers' work routines and a unit's operational system, poses adaptation demands, and creates work conflicts and constraints—the greater the distractions are, the more cynicism about change the followers feel and the greater instability and uncertainty the work unit faces (Herold et al., 2007; 2008). All these change contextual characteristics demand leadership interventions, since middle leaders are responsible for resolving distractions and problems, maintaining certain levels of efficiency, and leading adaptations for competitive advantages. In a small magnitude change context, however, a work unit operational system remains relative unchanged, followers' work routines are not interrupted much, and adaptation demands and work constraints are not significant. As such, followers mostly perform tasks at hand and their work unit largely remains its efficiency-oriented functioning. This relative stability creates less need for leadership interventions

When change is large in magnitude, the change places great demands on followers and their work unit in terms of adaptation demands, increased work load, constraints, conflicts, and expenditure of energy and additional resources that interfere with getting their current work done (Carter et al., 2013; Herold et al., 2008). As a result, at the unit level, this type of change can result in extensive adaptation that interrupts a work unit's efficiency-oriented functioning thereby creating great uncertainty. Such uncertainty induces doubts about the future of the unit as well as questions in its ability to change the current operational system and incorporate new elements into the system. Such a context heightens the demand for leadership, and leaders' unit-focused transformational leadership behaviors can play a critical role to promote an attractive and aspiring vision of the future and build the unit's confidence and capability in coping with the adaptations.

At the individual level, followers react more emotionally to high levels of change magnitude, and their assessment of the change tends to be less than favorable (Huy, 2002). This context highlights followers' needs for leadership, and leaders' individual-focused transformational leadership can redirect

followers' negative reactions to change through providing customized support and learning opportunities, empowering them in dealing with adaptations, and working with them to solve constraints and problems (Antonakis & House, 2002). This situation also creates an inclination by followers to accept leadership influence (Yukl, 2010). Given that the distractions (i.e., adaptation demands, work constraints and conflicts) tend to be significant in a high magnitude change context, leadership behaviors should be more salient and, therefore, more related to the level of follower commitment to change (Herold et al., 2008) and work unit change efficacy. Therefore, the effect of transformational leadership on outcomes is contingent on change magnitude.

> Proposition 4: Change magnitude will moderate the relationship between unit-focused transformational leadership and unit change efficacy such that the positive relationship will be stronger when change magnitude is high.
> Proposition 5: Change magnitude will moderate the relationship between individual-focused transformational leadership and follower change commitment such that the positive relationship will be stronger when change magnitude is high.

DISCUSSION

Despite intensive research on leadership and change, the integration of the two bodies of literature is insufficient and scholars have repeatedly called for more change contextually embedded studies on transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Burke, 2002; Detert & Burris, 2007; Herold et al., 2008). Moreover, middle leaders, who must lead and implement changes while trying to attain efficiency in their work units, have received less attention by researchers (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005; Huy, 2002). In response to these calls, we develop a conceptual framework that examines the role of middle leaders in balancing the conflict between efficiency and change adaptation in their work units. We propose that, to be effective in the midst of incremental organizational change, middle leaders need to exhibit contextualized, dual-level transformational leadership, oriented toward both the unit as a whole (i.e., unit-focused) and individual members (i.e., individual-focused).

Our framework is in line with the central assertion of contingency leadership theories that leaders need to behave differently based on contextual factors as well as followers' characteristics (Fiedler, 1967; Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2001; Yukl, 2010). During times of change, we suggest transformational leaders need to exercise appropriate interventions that are contingent upon change initiatives. Further, such leadership focuses not only on building a unit's collective capability to adapt and perform at high levels, but also on promoting individual followers' readiness and willingness to engage in change programs and exhibit citizenship behaviors geared at increasing efficiency through adaptations.

Our study has implications for managers. As organizational change is inevitable and its structure becomes flatter in the global economy, middle managers are expected to simultaneously lead their followers and units for higher efficiency via adaptations (cf. Wang & Howell, 2010). As such, organizations may customize transformational leadership training programs aiming at developing middle managers' group-focused and individualized leadership skills contingent upon situations in their work units. Focusing on a unit's functioning and adaptation alone may not be sufficient to warrant successful change programs, since neglecting the socio-emotional and intellectual development needs of the followers during times of change may be a source of resistance to change (cf. Ford et al., 2008). In this sense, a middle manager acts as a strategist, transformer, problem solver, coach, advocate, and cheerleader to the unit and individuals within (cf. Yukl, 2012).

Furthermore, given implementation of change efforts depends upon the acceptance, support, and participation of the followers, leader-centric approach to change may be a one-sided story (cf. Ford et al., 2008; Kellerman, 2008). In organizations with flat or organic structures, followers play increasingly important roles in taking charge and making suggestions to improve efficiency. Such discretionary behaviors are vital to the unit as a whole, especially in the midst of change. As such, organizations may provide training programs to develop followers in organizational strategy and task-related knowledge and

skills. In addition, leaders should be involved in developing followers to satisfy their social and growth needs (i.e., mentoring and coaching). These skill development, relationship building, and role-modeling by middle managers shape followers' involvement and contribution to change programs.

In conclusion, we developed a framework examining how, why, and under what situations middle leaders can motivate individual followers and promote unit performance in the midst of incremental organizational change. This framework lays the groundwork for a better understanding of middle leadership effectiveness in the context of incremental change, and will hopefully spur further research into issues surrounding contextual factors and levels of analysis.

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