What the Research Says

Transformational Leadership

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Across 32 studies, 75% confirm that transformational leadership improves individual, team, and organizational outcomes, with medium to large effect sizes.

N = 32 studies



Yes 75% · Possibly 9% · Mixed 16% · No 0%

50	183M	1978
papers included	papers searched	Burns coins the term

Introduction

Transformational leadership is one of the most studied models in organizational science, and one of the best supported. Political sociologist James MacGregor Burns introduced it in 1978. He drew a line between two kinds of leadership. Transactional leadership trades reward for compliance. Transformational leadership lifts people through shared vision, moral purpose, and real investment in their growth. Burns argued that this kind of leadership changes both the leader and the follower, raising each to higher levels of motivation and ethical action.

In the 1980s, Bernard M. Bass turned Burns's idea into something you could measure. He built a four-factor model and the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) to assess it, which opened the door to decades of research across sectors and cultures. Bass named four core behaviors:

Idealized Influence	Leaders model integrity and earn deep trust, so people want to follow their example. This rests on ethical behavior, not charisma.
Inspirational Motivation	Leaders describe a vision compelling enough that people commit to more than the task in front of them.
Intellectual Stimulation	Leaders challenge assumptions, invite creative thinking, and make room for people to question things, including the leader's own approach.
Individualized Consideration	Leaders pay attention to each person's needs and stage of development. They act as coaches and mentors, not just managers.

Is Transformational Leadership Effective?

Effectiveness Evidence

Short answer: yes. Meta-analytic reviews keep finding medium to large positive effects in business, healthcare, education, public administration, and nonprofits. That breadth and consistency is what sets transformational leadership apart from most other models.

Outcome	Effect Size	Key Sources
Employee motivation & engagement	**Medium to Large**	Deng et al., 2022; Palla et al., 2025
Job satisfaction	**Medium to Large**	Akdere & Egan, 2020; Eliyana & Ma'arif, 2019
Creativity & innovation	**Medium to Large**	Agazu et al., 2025; Abdul-Azeez et al., 2024
Team cohesion & collaboration	**Medium**	Bao et al., 2024; Deng et al., 2022
Organizational commitment	**Medium to Large**	Eliyana & Ma'arif, 2019; Nanda & R, 2025
Follower performance	**Medium to Large**	Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Deng et al., 2022
Overall firm and organizational performance	**Medium to Large**	Agazu et al., 2025; Bao et al., 2024
Leader-follower trust	**Large**	Bass & Riggio, 2006; Alessa, 2021

Claims & Evidence Strength

We publish the moderate and emerging claims next to the strong ones. You deserve to see the whole picture.

Claim	Strength	Key Papers
Transformational leadership improves individual, team, and organizational outcomes across sectors	Strong	Deng et al., 2022; Agazu et al., 2025; Bao et al., 2024; Judge & Piccolo, 2004
Coined by Burns (1978) and turned into four measurable dimensions by Bass	Strong	Eaton et al., 2024; Harsoyo, 2022; Bass, 1999
Effect sizes are medium to large across meta-analytic reviews	Strong	Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Bao et al., 2024; Deng et al., 2022
Effectiveness varies by cultural and organizational context	Moderate	Bao et al., 2024; Alessa, 2021; Litz & Blaik-Hourani, 2018
The model overlaps with charismatic and servant leadership	Moderate	Harsoyo, 2022; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013
Current tools don't cleanly measure whether followers actually change	Moderate	Siangchokyoo et al., 2020; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013
Risk of elitism or dependence when applied without shared participation	Emerging	Ali, 2026; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013

Applications Across Sectors

One of the model's most important traits is that it holds up across contexts. Researchers have tested it across industries, organization types, and national cultures, and the results are consistently positive.

Business & Corporate	Drives innovation, engagement, and firm performance in large organizations and small businesses alike. Especially powerful where change is constant. (Abdul-Azeez et al., 2024; Agazu et al., 2025)
Healthcare	Linked to higher clinician engagement and job satisfaction, lower burnout, and better patient care. Increasingly treated as a core competency for healthcare administrators and medical directors. (Akdere & Egan, 2020)
Education	Transformational principals correlate with stronger school culture, faculty motivation, and student outcomes. In higher education, the model also supports faculty development and change leadership. (Litz & Blaik-Hourani, 2018; Yakob et al., 2025)
Public Administration	Meta-analytic evidence from government shows significant effects on motivation, team performance, and organizational outcomes, even inside bureaucratic structures that limit a leader's discretion. (Bao et al., 2024)
Nonprofits & Mission-Driven Orgs	A natural fit where purpose and values drive people. The model's focus on vision and individual development suits volunteer management and high-commitment cultures.

Critiques & Limitations

A strong evidence base does not put transformational leadership above critique. Good practitioners hold these limits right next to the positive findings.

Conceptual overlap. The model shares a lot of ground with charismatic, servant, and visionary leadership. That makes it harder to define and measure, and hard to say which elements drive which outcomes. (Harsoyo, 2022; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013)

Context dependency. Results vary by national culture, organizational structure, and industry. Highly bureaucratic settings and cultures with high power distance may see weaker effects. (Alessa, 2021; Bao et al., 2024; Litz & Blaik-Hourani, 2018)

Power concentration and dependency. Put too much weight on the heroic, visionary leader and power concentrates. That can breed unhealthy dependence, quiet dissent, and undercut shared leadership. (Ali, 2026; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013)

Measurement limits. Siangchokyoo et al. (2020) call follower transformation the linchpin of the model, and it is also the least well-measured part. Most studies measure what the leader does, not whether followers actually change. The MLQ itself has been criticized for weak construct validity.

Taken together, the critiques call for refinement, not retreat. The weight of high-quality evidence from meta-analyses and systematic reviews still places transformational leadership among the best-supported models for positive change, for individuals and for organizations.

Conclusion

Few models in organizational science have evidence this strong. Across 32 studies and decades of research across sectors, the core claim holds. Leaders who share a vision, model integrity, challenge thinking, and invest in each person get meaningfully better results than leaders who don't.

What sets this model apart is more than its track record. It treats the people being led as whole humans. That is not a soft idea. It is a high-leverage practice with measurable effects on engagement, performance, retention, and innovation.

Use it wisely. Hold the strengths next to the limits: the risk of concentrated power, cultural variation, gaps in measurement, and the trap of treating "transformational" as a personality type instead of behaviors anyone can practice. The research makes a clear case: develop these behaviors on purpose, and keep the limits in view.

> ### *A Note from Waypoint Labs*
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> *We curate research like this because leadership practice should rest on evidence, not trends, buzzwords, or gut feel alone. Transformational leadership shapes much of our work with leaders and teams. We use it as a lens, not a checklist. It shows where leaders are strong and where their people are asking for more.*
>
> *Curious where your leaders stand on these four behaviors? Let's talk: waypointlabs.co/contact*

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