

Transformational Leadership in Higher Education: Commitment to Change as a Mediator for University Teachers' Innovative Behavior

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

This conceptual study examines the role of transformational leadership in fostering innovative behavior among university teachers in Chinese higher education, with a focus on the mediating role of commitment to change. Drawing on Transformational Leadership Theory, Organizational Change Theory, and Innovation Diffusion Theory, the study develops a framework to explore how transformational leadership influences faculty commitment to organizational change and innovative practices. The proposed framework is contextualized within the unique cultural and institutional characteristics of Chinese universities, addressing challenges posed by hierarchical structures and traditional management styles. The study posits three research propositions: transformational leadership positively influences innovative behavior, commitment to change mediates this relationship, and commitment to change enhances innovative behavior by reducing resistance and encouraging adaptability. Theoretical contributions include advancing understanding of the mechanisms linking leadership and innovation and providing a framework for studying leadership within diverse cultural and institutional contexts. The study highlights the need for empirical testing of the framework and future exploration of additional mediators, moderators, and cross-cultural applications. These insights aim to inform both theoretical discourse and practical strategies for promoting innovation in higher education.

Introduction

The landscape of higher education is continually evolving, demanding innovative solutions to meet the challenges of a globalized, technology-driven world. Within this context, transformational leadership has emerged as a critical factor in fostering innovation and adaptability in academic institutions. In higher education, transformational leadership not only sets a vision for institutional excellence but also cultivates an environment where faculty members are inspired to exceed conventional expectations and contribute creatively to their fields (Zhu & Tabajen, 2024).

China's universities are navigating a complex interplay of internal reforms and external pressures to align with international standards of education and research. This dynamic landscape requires university leaders who can inspire and motivate faculty to embrace change and innovate in their teaching and research practices (Wang et al., 2024). Transformational leadership has proven to be a potent tool for achieving these objectives by promoting trust, intellectual stimulation, and a shared sense of purpose among faculty members (Meng, 2022).

However, a critical gap persists in understanding how transformational leadership specifically influences the innovative behavior of university teachers in China. While research has established that such leadership positively impacts knowledge sharing and performance in Chinese universities (Chen & Chang, 2023), there is limited exploration of the mechanisms through which commitment to change mediates this relationship. This study aims to address this gap, providing valuable insights into the interplay between leadership, commitment to change, and innovation.

Problem Statement

Innovation is a cornerstone of academic excellence and societal advancement, yet fostering innovative behavior among university teachers remains a significant challenge. In China, where higher education is undergoing rapid transformation to meet global standards, the need for innovative teaching and research practices is more pressing than ever. Despite the recognized importance of transformational leadership in inspiring such behaviors, many university teachers exhibit resistance to change, citing structural, cultural, and motivational barriers (Hu, 2024).

Commitment to change is a critical mediator that bridges the gap between leadership and innovation. Without a clear understanding of how this commitment influences innovative behavior, higher education institutions risk underutilizing the potential of transformational leadership. This research problem is further compounded by the unique cultural and institutional context of Chinese universities, where traditional hierarchical structures may conflict with the participatory ethos of transformational leadership (Bao, 2024).

Objectives of the Study

This study is guided by the following primary objectives:

- To examine the impact of transformational leadership in Chinese higher education institutions on the innovative behavior of university teachers.
- To investigate the mediating role of commitment to change in the relationship between transformational leadership and innovative behavior.
- To identify the impact of commitment to change in Chinese higher education institutions on the innovative behavior of university teachers.

By addressing these objectives, the study aims to bridge the gap in existing literature and provide actionable insights for higher education leaders and policymakers.

Significance of Study

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the theoretical understanding of transformational leadership in the context of Chinese higher education, emphasizing its role in fostering innovative behavior. By investigating the mediating role of commitment to change, the study offers a nuanced perspective on the mechanisms that drive innovation among university teachers. Such insights are essential for designing leadership development programs and institutional policies that align with the unique needs of Chinese universities.

Second, the findings have practical implications for university administrators, policymakers, and educators. By identifying strategies to enhance commitment to change, institutions can create a more supportive environment for innovation, ultimately improving teaching quality, research output, and student learning experiences. Moreover, this study addresses a broader global concern: how to adapt leadership practices to diverse cultural and institutional contexts, thereby enriching the

discourse on transformational leadership in education (Lin et al., 2023).

Hence, this research aligns with China's strategic goals of becoming a global leader in education and innovation. By equipping university leaders with the tools to inspire and motivate their faculty, this study supports the nation's broader agenda of fostering a knowledge-based economy.

Literature Review

The dynamic landscape of higher education in China necessitates leadership styles that foster innovation and adaptability among university faculty. This section synthesizes existing literature on the influence of transformational leadership on innovative behavior, focusing on the mediating role of commitment to change. It provides theoretical insights and contextualizes them within the Chinese higher education system.

Transformational Leadership in Higher Education

Transformational leadership has emerged as a critical driver of innovation and adaptability in educational institutions. By inspiring a shared vision, stimulating intellectual engagement, and offering personalized support, transformational leadership empowers leaders to motivate faculty toward achieving institutional goals. Studies demonstrate that transformational leadership enhances trust and collaboration, fostering environments conducive to innovation (Chu & Kim, 2021).

In Chinese universities, transformational leadership is particularly relevant given the systemic challenges posed by hierarchical structures and traditional approaches to management. Leaders employing transformational practices have been shown to encourage faculty members to experiment with new methods and embrace change despite these constraints (Feng et al., 2016). Furthermore, transformational leadership helps align individual goals with institutional objectives, promoting collective commitment to educational innovation (Lin et al., 2023).

Additionally, evidence suggests that transformational leaders are instrumental in bridging the gap between institutional vision and individual faculty goals. They achieve this by fostering a sense of purpose and belonging among their teams. By highlighting shared achievements and emphasizing collective progress, transformational leaders create a culture where innovation becomes a natural outcome of collaboration and mutual trust.

Innovative Behavior Among University Teachers

Innovative behavior among faculty is vital for advancing institutional excellence and societal impact. Faculty innovation encompasses generating new ideas, adopting novel teaching and research methods, and implementing systemic changes to improve performance. In Chinese universities, innovative behavior is increasingly recognized as a critical competency, particularly in response to educational reforms and globalization pressures (Zhu & Tabajen, 2024).

Research highlights that transformational leadership plays a significant role in fostering innovative behavior by creating an environment of psychological safety and trust. For example, faculty members in transformational-led departments report greater openness to experimentation and creative problem-solving, often citing their leaders' encouragement and intellectual stimulation as key motivators (Afsar & Badir, 2014). These findings emphasize the importance of leadership in overcoming barriers such as resistance to change and resource constraints.

Moreover, innovative behavior is not solely an individual attribute but often emerges within a supportive organizational culture. The role of transformational leaders in establishing such cultures cannot be overstated. By encouraging open communication, recognizing individual contributions, and providing developmental opportunities, leaders create conditions conducive to sustained faculty innovation (Amankwaa et al., 2019).

Commitment to Change as a Mediator

Commitment to change is a psychological state that reflects an individual's willingness to engage in and support organizational transformations. It is a critical mediator in the relationship between transformational leadership and innovative behavior. Transformational leaders promote commitment to change by articulating compelling visions and fostering a culture of inclusivity, thereby encouraging faculty to embrace new practices (Zhao, 2023).

Empirical research underscores the significance of this mediation effect. For instance, a study on Chinese higher education institutions found that faculty members with strong commitment to change, supported by transformational leadership, were more likely to demonstrate innovative behavior (Chu & Kim, 2021). Commitment to change also reduces resistance, enabling faculty to adapt more readily to new policies and methodologies, thereby sustaining a cycle of innovation.

Further exploration of this relationship has revealed that commitment to change acts as a buffer against organizational inertia. In environments where resistance to change is deeply rooted, transformational leaders can cultivate psychological readiness and resilience among faculty. This not only facilitates immediate adaptations but also builds a long-term foundation for continual innovation.

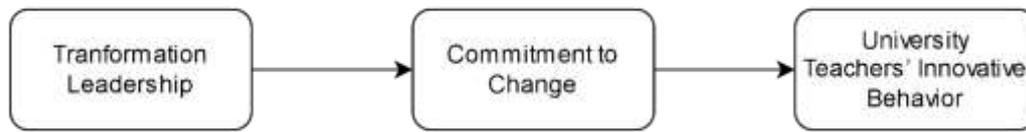
Challenges in Chinese Higher Education

The unique cultural and institutional characteristics of Chinese higher education pose challenges for implementing transformational leadership. Hierarchical structures and traditional management practices often conflict with the participatory ethos of transformational leadership, making it difficult for leaders to foster open collaboration and trust.

Despite these challenges, there is significant potential for transformational leadership to drive innovation in Chinese universities. Leadership development programs that emphasize trust-building, cultural sensitivity, and adaptability are essential for addressing these systemic barriers. These programs can help leaders align their strategies with the unique needs and expectations of Chinese faculty, thereby maximizing the potential for sustained innovation (Huang et al., 2020).

In addition, institutional resistance to transformational practices can be mitigated through incremental changes that demonstrate the tangible benefits of innovation. Pilot programs and small-scale initiatives led by transformational leaders can act as proof-of-concept, gradually building broader support among faculty and administrators alike. Furthermore, creating cross-departmental collaborations and engaging external stakeholders can enhance the effectiveness of transformational leadership in overcoming entrenched cultural and organizational barriers.

Conceptual Framework



Underpinning Theories

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in three interrelated theories: Transformational Leadership Theory, Organizational Change Theory, and Innovation Diffusion Theory. These theories provide distinct but complementary perspectives on leadership dynamics, organizational change processes, and the adoption of innovative practices, forming a robust foundation for examining how transformational leadership fosters innovative behavior through commitment to change in Chinese higher education.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory, initially conceptualized by James Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bernard Bass (1985), is a cornerstone of leadership studies. The theory focuses on the ability of leaders to inspire, motivate, and elevate their followers' aspirations and performance levels by going beyond transactional exchanges. Transformational leaders are characterized by their ability to craft a compelling vision, instill a sense of shared purpose, and foster a culture of trust and collaboration within their organizations.

The four dimensions of transformational leadership—idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration—are pivotal in creating an environment where innovation thrives. Idealized influence involves the leader acting as a role model, embodying values and behaviors that inspire admiration and respect among followers (Bednall et al., 2018). Inspirational motivation is achieved by articulating a vision that energizes followers and aligns their personal goals with the organization's objectives (Afsar & Badir, 2014). Intellectual stimulation encourages creativity and critical thinking by challenging traditional ways of working and promoting problem-solving (Zhu & Tabajen, 2024). Finally, individualized consideration focuses on understanding and addressing the unique needs of each follower, fostering their professional and personal growth (Amankwaa et al., 2019).

In the context of higher education, transformational leadership has proven to be particularly effective in navigating complex challenges such as globalization, technological advancements, and rapidly changing academic environments. Leaders employing transformational practices can cultivate trust and collaboration among faculty members, creating a foundation for sustained innovation. Studies have shown that transformational leaders in Chinese universities play a crucial role in fostering innovative behavior by encouraging faculty to embrace new teaching methods, research practices, and administrative approaches (Zhu & Tabajen, 2024). This theory underpins the study's exploration of how leadership can inspire faculty commitment to change and innovative behavior.

Organizational Change Theory

Organizational Change Theory provides a systematic framework for understanding how organizations transition from their current states to desired future states. Kurt Lewin's (1947) foundational work on change management introduced the unfreeze-change-refreeze model, which emphasizes the importance of disrupting existing

mindsets, implementing new behaviors, and solidifying those changes to ensure sustainability (Burnes, 2021). Modern extensions of the theory highlight the iterative and dynamic nature of organizational change, considering factors such as leadership, culture, and individual readiness.

Organizational Change theory is particularly relevant in examining the mediating role of commitment to change. Commitment to change reflects an individual's psychological attachment to and engagement with organizational transformation efforts. Organizational Change Theory posits that successful change requires not only structural and procedural adjustments but also the active participation and buy-in of individuals within the organization. Leaders play a central role in fostering this commitment by articulating a clear vision for change, addressing resistance, and creating an environment that supports experimentation and adaptation (Jung et al., 2020). Additionally, changes in perceived leadership support over time have been shown to enhance employee commitment to change, highlighting the importance of sustained leadership engagement throughout the transformation process (Ford et al., 2020).

In Chinese higher education, where traditional hierarchical structures often dominate, fostering commitment to change is essential for driving innovation. Transformational leaders can leverage organizational change principles to address faculty concerns, build trust, and encourage active participation in new initiatives. Studies have shown that when faculty members perceive their leaders as supportive and visionary, they are more likely to embrace changes in teaching methodologies, research priorities, and administrative practices, ultimately contributing to a culture of innovation (Chu & Kim, 2021).

Innovation Diffusion Theory

Innovation Diffusion Theory, developed by Everett Rogers (1962), provides insights into how new ideas, practices, or technologies spread within social systems over time (Miller, 2015). The theory identifies five stages of the innovation-decision process: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation. These stages describe how individuals and organizations move from initial awareness of an innovation to its sustained adoption and integration into everyday practices. Factors such as relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability influence the likelihood of adoption (Currie et al., 2021).

A key aspect of the theory is the role of opinion leaders and early adopters in accelerating the diffusion process. Transformational leaders in higher education often act as opinion leaders, championing new ideas and creating a supportive environment for their adoption. They influence faculty members by demonstrating the benefits of innovative practices, reducing perceived risks, and fostering a culture that values creativity and experimentation (Tierney & Lanford, 2016). Furthermore, Innovation Diffusion Theory highlights the importance of social networks and peer influences in shaping individual and collective behaviors, which is particularly relevant in collaborative academic environments (Sutton & DeSantis, 2017).

In the context of Chinese higher education, Innovation Diffusion Theory explains how transformational leadership and commitment to change work together to drive the adoption of innovative practices. Faculty members who are inspired by their leaders' vision and supported in their efforts to innovate are more likely to experiment with new teaching methods, research paradigms, and administrative processes (Owusu-Agyeman,

2019). The diffusion of innovation is further facilitated by institutional policies and cultural shifts that align with the values of creativity and progress (Ramdhani et al., 2021).

Integration of Theories

These three theories are interwoven to provide a comprehensive framework for this study. Transformational Leadership Theory elucidates the role of leaders in inspiring and motivating faculty. Organizational Change Theory explains the process of fostering commitment to change as a mediating mechanism, and Innovation Diffusion Theory explores how this commitment translates into the widespread adoption of innovative behaviors. Together, these theories offer a holistic understanding of the dynamic interplay between leadership, organizational change, and innovation within Chinese higher education institutions.

Research Propositions

This study develops the following research propositions based on its objectives, aiming to explore the relationship between transformational leadership, commitment to change, and innovative behavior among university teachers in Chinese higher education.

Proposition 1

Transformational leadership positively impacts the innovative behavior of university teachers by fostering an environment of intellectual stimulation, trust, and collaboration. University leaders who inspire and motivate faculty encourage the adoption of new teaching and research practices.

- P1: Transformational leadership is positively associated with the innovative behavior of university teachers.

Proposition 2

Commitment to change mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and university teachers' innovative behavior. Faculty members who are psychologically committed to change are more likely to translate transformational leadership into practical, innovative outcomes.

- P2: Commitment to change mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and innovative behavior among university teachers.

Proposition 3

Commitment to change enhances the innovative behavior of university teachers by reducing resistance to organizational transformation and encouraging adaptability. A strong commitment to change ensures that faculty members are more likely to engage in innovative practices.

- P3: Commitment to change is positively associated with the innovative behavior of university teachers.

Implications

Theoretical Implications

This study makes several key contributions to the theoretical understanding of leadership and innovation in higher education. By integrating Transformational Leadership Theory, Organizational Change Theory, and Innovation Diffusion Theory, the study advances existing frameworks by demonstrating how commitment to change mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and innovative behavior. While transformational leadership has long been associated with improved organizational outcomes, this study emphasizes the importance of intermediary

psychological states, such as faculty commitment to change, in translating leadership vision into practical, innovative actions. This perspective deepens the understanding of the mechanisms by which transformational leadership influences organizational innovation.

The study also addresses the contextual gap in the literature by focusing on the unique cultural and institutional characteristics of Chinese higher education. Existing leadership theories, often developed in Western contexts, may not fully capture the nuances of leadership practices in environments with strong hierarchical structures and traditional management styles. By examining the dynamics of transformational leadership within these settings, the study provides insights into how leadership approaches can be adapted to align with local norms while fostering innovation. Additionally, the emphasis on commitment to change enriches Organizational Change Theory by highlighting its role in overcoming cultural and structural barriers to innovation. This integration of theories not only strengthens the conceptual foundation of the study but also offers a comprehensive framework for future empirical research on leadership and innovation in higher education.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study are particularly relevant for higher education institutions seeking to enhance innovation through effective leadership and organizational change strategies. One of the primary recommendations is to promote transformational leadership practices that foster trust, intellectual stimulation, and a shared vision among faculty members. Universities can achieve this by investing in leadership development programs that equip leaders with the skills to inspire, motivate, and support their teams. Transformational leaders who create an environment of psychological safety and collaboration are more likely to encourage faculty to experiment with new teaching and research methods, thereby driving innovation.

Fostering commitment to change is another critical strategy for higher education institutions. Faculty members who are committed to organizational change are more likely to embrace and implement innovative practices. To build this commitment, university leaders should prioritize transparent communication about the rationale and benefits of change, actively involve faculty in decision-making processes, and recognize their contributions to institutional goals. These strategies can help reduce resistance to change and align individual and organizational objectives, creating a culture that supports continuous improvement.

The study also highlights the importance of tailoring leadership strategies to fit the cultural and institutional contexts of Chinese higher education. Given the dominance of hierarchical structures and traditional practices, transformational leaders should adopt approaches that respect existing norms while gradually fostering a more participatory and collaborative organizational culture. For instance, pilot programs and small-scale initiatives can serve as proof of concept, demonstrating the tangible benefits of innovative practices and building broader support among faculty and administrators. By gradually introducing change, institutions can reduce resistance and create a foundation for long-term innovation.

Lastly, supportive institutional policies are essential for amplifying the impact of transformational leadership. Universities should ensure that faculty members have access to the resources and opportunities needed to innovate, such as funding for

experimental projects, professional development programs, and platforms for interdisciplinary collaboration. Establishing mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the outcomes of leadership and innovation initiatives can also help institutions identify the best practices and scale successful strategies. These measures will enable higher education institutions to better navigate global challenges, improve teaching and research outcomes, and strengthen their competitive positioning in a rapidly evolving academic landscape.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations

As a conceptual study, this research is limited by its reliance on theoretical frameworks and existing literature without empirical validation. While the integration of Transformational Leadership Theory, Organizational Change Theory, and Innovation Diffusion Theory provides a robust foundation, the absence of primary data or case studies limits the generalizability of the proposed framework. Additionally, the study's focus on Chinese higher education institutions means that cultural and institutional factors unique to this context may not be directly applicable to other regions or systems. Theoretical insights drawn from this study require empirical examination to validate their relevance and applicability across different cultural and organizational settings.

Another limitation lies in the scope of the mediating variable—commitment to change. Although the study emphasizes its critical role, it does not consider other potential mediators or moderators that might influence the relationship between transformational leadership and innovative behavior, such as organizational culture, faculty autonomy, or external pressures. The framework also assumes a linear relationship, which may oversimplify the complex, iterative processes underlying organizational change and innovation.

Future Directions

To address these limitations, future research should focus on empirically testing the proposed framework through qualitative and quantitative studies. For instance, surveys and interviews with university leaders and faculty members could provide valuable insights into how transformational leadership influences commitment to change and innovative behavior. Longitudinal studies could explore the dynamic relationships among these variables over time, capturing the evolving nature of leadership and innovation in higher education.

Future research should also investigate the role of additional mediators and moderators. Variables such as organizational culture, resource availability, and faculty perceptions of autonomy may significantly affect the outcomes of transformational leadership. Exploring these factors would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms driving innovation in academic institutions.

Cross-cultural studies represent another promising avenue for research. By examining the applicability of the proposed framework in diverse cultural and institutional contexts, researchers can identify universal principles and context-specific adaptations of transformational leadership. Comparative studies involving universities in different regions could highlight best practices and common challenges, enriching the global discourse on leadership and innovation in higher education.

Finally, experimental designs and case studies could be employed to test specific interventions based on transformational leadership practices. For example, pilot

programs aimed at fostering commitment to change and promoting innovative behavior could be implemented and evaluated in selected universities. Such empirical work would not only validate the conceptual framework but also provide actionable insights for higher education leaders and policymakers.

Conclusion

This study provides a conceptual framework that underscores the pivotal role of transformational leadership in fostering innovative behavior among university teachers, mediated by commitment to change. Drawing on Transformational Leadership Theory, Organizational Change Theory, and Innovation Diffusion Theory, the research advances theoretical understanding by elucidating the mechanisms through which leadership inspires faculty to embrace organizational change and drive innovation in higher education. The framework also contextualizes these dynamics within the unique cultural and institutional environment of Chinese universities, offering valuable insights into leadership practices tailored to hierarchical and tradition-bound settings.

The study highlights three key insights. First, transformational leadership significantly influences innovative behavior by fostering trust, intellectual stimulation, and shared vision among faculty members. Second, commitment to change serves as a critical mediator, bridging the gap between leadership practices and practical, innovative outcomes. Third, the success of leadership-driven innovation is shaped by contextual factors, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive and institutionally adaptive approaches. These insights not only enrich existing literature but also provide a robust foundation for future empirical research.

Addressing the proposed relationships in future studies is essential for both theoretical and practical advancement. Empirical testing of the framework can validate its relevance and applicability, shedding light on the dynamic interplay between leadership, commitment to change, and innovative behavior. By exploring additional mediators, moderators, and cross-cultural contexts, researchers can refine the framework and expand its generalizability. Furthermore, practical applications of the study's findings can empower higher education leaders to design strategies that promote innovation, thereby enhancing institutional performance and global competitiveness.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the importance of transformational leadership and commitment to change as drivers of innovative behavior in higher education. By bridging theoretical gaps and offering a pathway for empirical exploration, it contributes to the broader discourse on leadership and innovation, ultimately supporting the development of resilient and forward-thinking academic institutions.

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