



The Impact of Transformational Leadership on Project Team Performance in Multicultural Environments

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Abstract:

This study investigates the relationship between transformational leadership and project team performance in multicultural work environments, with particular attention to the mediating roles of team cohesion and cross-cultural communication, and the moderating role of leaders' cultural intelligence. The study was conducted in culturally diverse organizations in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Data were collected from 100 project managers and team members using validated instruments, including the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) for assessing transformational leadership, alongside measures of team cohesion, cross-cultural communication, and team performance. Data analysis was performed using SPSS, PROCESS Macro, and structural equation modeling. The findings indicate that transformational leadership significantly predicts team performance ($\beta = .58, p < .001$). Both team cohesion (indirect effect = .15) and cross-cultural communication (indirect effect = .18) partially mediate this relationship, jointly accounting for 48% of the variance in team performance. Furthermore, leaders' cultural intelligence significantly moderates the relationship between transformational leadership and team performance (interaction $\beta = .18, p = .003$), suggesting that the effectiveness of transformational leadership is enhanced when leaders possess higher levels of cultural intelligence. The study recommends the development of leadership training programs that integrate transformational leadership behaviors with cultural competence. It also highlights the importance of assessing and enhancing project managers' cultural intelligence, as well as fostering team cohesion and effective cross-cultural communication to improve performance in multicultural project teams.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Project Team Performance, Multicultural Environments, Teamwork Quality, Cultural Intelligence.

Introduction

Globalization has profoundly changed the contemporary business landscape, leading to an exceptional increase in multicultural work environments, especially within project-based organizations. These organizations mainly depend on diverse teams with members from different backgrounds to achieve particular strategic objectives, leveraging the varied perspectives and skills that cultural diversity can bring (Stahl et al., 2010). However, managing those teams offers many complexities and challenges, such as potential communication barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and divergent work values (Nosratabadi et al., 2020). In this dynamic context, effective leadership is important for nurturing confidence, trust, motivation, and finally, high performance among culturally diverse team members.

Among different leadership paradigms, transformational leadership (TL) has gained significant academic and practical attention. Transformational leaders inspire and encourage their members to adopt self-interest for the collective good, articulating an enthralling vision, providing individualized consideration, motivating intellectual growth, and serving as role models to their employees (Bass, 1985). Previous research constantly proves the positive influence of TL on employee enthusiasm, engagement, innovation, and overall performance across different organizational environments (Khan et al., 2020; Al-Subaie et al., 2021). Within project management, TL has enhanced teamwork quality, team-building, and psychological engagement, all of which are extremely fundamental to project success (Aga et al., 2016; Hamzah, 2024).

Despite the benefits of transformational leadership and the increasing prevalence of multicultural project teams, a notable gap exists in the integrated understanding of how TL specifically enhances project team performance within culturally diverse contexts. While studies have explored leadership-performance relationships (Khan et al., 2020; Saluy & Kemalasari, 2018) or examined leadership and diversity separately (Mohsin, 2025), a comprehensive analysis integrating these elements remains limited. Organizations operating in multicultural project environments frequently encounter challenges such as cultural conflict, communication breakdowns, low cohesion, and reduced team efficiency (Nosratabadi et al., 2020), yet most current research does not sufficiently provide evidence on how transformational leadership deals with these challenges to improve performance outcomes. This lack hinders organizations' ability to develop effective leadership training programs and evidence-based management practices specifically designed for multicultural project environments.

By developing an integrated framework that links transformational leadership, multicultural work contexts, and project team performance, this research advances theoretical understanding of these complex interrelationships. Identifying teamwork quality as a mediator and cultural intelligence as a moderator offers practical insight into how leadership translates into performance in diverse settings. For project managers, organizational leaders, and HR professionals—particularly those operating within the unique cultural and economic landscape of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia—the findings provide actionable guidance for designing targeted leadership development programs that cultivate both transformational behaviors and essential cultural competencies. In the context of Saudi Vision 2030, such insights are critical for managing the multicultural project teams that underpin the nation's mega-projects and economic diversification. Ultimately, this study contributes to more inclusive and effective work environments where diversity is leveraged as a strength rather than managed as a challenge.

Research Problem

The contemporary global business landscape is characterized by an unprecedented rise in multicultural project teams, driven by globalization, technological advancements, and the strategic imperative for organizations to leverage diverse talent pools. While cultural diversity offers significant advantages, such as enhanced creativity, innovation, and problem-solving capabilities, it also introduces inherent complexities and challenges, including potential communication barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and divergent work values (Stahl et al., 2010; Nosratabadi et al., 2020). Effectively navigating these complexities requires adaptive and nuanced leadership approaches capable of fostering cohesion, trust, and high performance among culturally heterogeneous team members.

Despite the recognized benefits of Transformational Leadership (TL) and the increasing prevalence of multicultural project teams, a notable gap persists in the integrated understanding of how TL specifically enhances project team performance within culturally diverse contexts. While studies have explored leadership-performance relationships (Khan et al., 2020; Saluy & Kemalasari, 2018) or leadership and diversity separately (Mohsin, 2025), a comprehensive analysis integrating these elements, particularly concerning the mechanisms and boundary conditions of TL effectiveness, remains limited. Organizations operating in multicultural project environments frequently encounter

challenges such as cultural conflict, communication breakdowns, low cohesion, and reduced team efficiency (Nosratabadi et al., 2020). The current literature does not sufficiently elucidate the precise mechanisms through which transformational leadership effectively navigates these complexities to optimize performance outcomes in such teams. This lack hinders organizations' ability to develop effective leadership training programs and evidence-based management practices specifically designed for multicultural project environments.

Importance of the Study

This research holds significant importance, both scientifically and practically, for several reasons. Scientifically, it contributes to the existing body of knowledge by developing and testing a comprehensive moderated mediation model that integrates Transformational Leadership, Cultural Intelligence, Teamwork Quality, and Project Team Performance. This integrated approach provides a more nuanced understanding of leadership effectiveness in multicultural contexts, addressing a critical gap in the literature. By elucidating the mechanisms (teamwork quality) and boundary conditions (cultural intelligence) through which TL impacts performance, the study enriches contingency theories of leadership and offers a refined framework for future research.

Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for organizations operating in an increasingly globalized world. As multicultural project teams become the norm, understanding how to optimize their performance is paramount. This study provides evidence-based recommendations for leadership development programs, emphasizing the dual importance of cultivating transformational behaviors and enhancing cultural intelligence among leaders. It also highlights the need to foster teamwork quality through improved cohesion and cross-cultural communication, offering practical guidance for HR professionals and project managers seeking to enhance team effectiveness and project success in diverse environments. In the context of Saudi Vision 2030, such insights are critical for managing the multicultural project teams that underpin the nation's mega projects and economic diversification.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the effect of transformational leadership on project team performance in multicultural work environments?
2. How does transformational leadership influence teamwork quality among multicultural project teams?
3. Does teamwork quality mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and team performance?

Study Objectives

In line with the research questions, the objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the relationship between transformational leadership and project team performance.
2. To assess the influence of transformational leadership on teamwork quality in multicultural environments.
3. To investigate whether teamwork quality mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and team performance.
4. To provide practical recommendations for leadership development in multicultural project teams.

Theoretical Literature of the Study

Transformational Leadership (TL), as originally conceptualized by Bass (1985), is a leadership style that inspires followers to transcend their self-interests for the good of the organization. It is characterized by four key dimensions, often referred to as the "Four I's": Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration. Empirical research consistently supports the positive impact of TL on various organizational outcomes, including employee motivation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and overall performance (Khan et al., 2020; Al Subaie et al., 2021). In project management contexts, TL has been shown to significantly improve project outcomes by enhancing teamwork quality, team-building, and psychological engagement, all of which are critical for project success (Aga et al., 2016; Hamzah, 2024). Hamzah (2024) further established that TL fosters motivation and supportive work environments, directly contributing to improved project team performance.

Cultural Intelligence (CQ) refers to an individual's capability to function effectively in culturally diverse settings (Ang et al., 2007). It is a multidimensional construct comprising four facets: Metacognitive CQ, Cognitive CQ, Motivational CQ, and Behavioral CQ. For leaders in multicultural project teams, CQ is particularly vital. It enables them to accurately interpret culturally ambiguous cues, adapt their leadership styles, and build rapport across diverse team members (Rockstuhl et al., 2011; Bal, 2022). Leaders with high CQ are better equipped to understand cultural roles, address cross-cultural challenges, and strengthen the effectiveness of their transformational behaviors in diverse teams (Umuteme & Adegbite, 2023; Stahl et al., 2010). This suggests that CQ acts as a critical enabler for TL in multicultural contexts, allowing leaders to tailor their inspirational and individualized approaches to resonate with team members from varied cultural backgrounds.

Teamwork quality, often conceptualized through constructs like team cohesion and cross-cultural communication, is a crucial determinant of project team performance, especially in multicultural environments. Team cohesion refers to the degree to which team members are attracted to each other and motivated to remain in the group (Carron et al., 1985). In diverse teams, high cohesion can mitigate potential conflicts arising from cultural differences and foster a sense of shared identity and purpose (Stahl et al., 2010). Cross-cultural communication, on the other hand, involves the effective exchange of information and meaning across cultural boundaries, minimizing misunderstandings and fostering clarity (Nosratabadi et al., 2020). In multicultural project teams, effective teamwork quality is paramount for several reasons. It facilitates knowledge sharing, enhances collaborative problem-solving, and improves decision-making processes by integrating diverse perspectives (Stahl et al., 2010). Conversely, poor teamwork quality can lead to miscommunication, conflict, and reduced efficiency, ultimately hindering project success (Nosratabadi et al., 2020). Transformational leaders, through their inspirational motivation and individualized consideration, can significantly foster teamwork quality by building trust, promoting open dialogue, and encouraging mutual respect among team members (Aga et al., 2016).

Review of Previous Studies

Previous research has extensively explored the individual relationships between transformational leadership, cultural intelligence, teamwork quality, and project team performance. For instance, studies by Khan et al. (2020) and Al-Subaie et al. (2021) consistently demonstrate the positive impact of transformational leadership on various organizational outcomes, including employee performance. Aga et al. (2016) and Hamzah (2024) specifically highlight the role of TL in enhancing teamwork quality and project success. However, these studies often examine TL in general contexts or focus on its direct effects without fully exploring the complex interplay with cultural factors in diverse teams.

Research on cultural intelligence, such as that by Ang et al. (2007) and Rockstuhl et al. (2011), establishes CQ as a critical capability for individuals and leaders operating in multicultural settings. These studies underscore how CQ enables effective cross-cultural interactions and adaptation. While some research, like Bal (2022) and Umuteme & Adegbite (2023), touches upon the moderating effects

of CQ in other contexts, a direct examination of CQ's moderating role in the TL-performance relationship within multicultural project teams, particularly through the lens of teamwork quality, remains less explored.

Furthermore, studies on teamwork quality, including those by Stahl et al. (2010) and Nosratabadi et al. (2020), emphasize the importance of team cohesion and cross-cultural communication for effective team functioning in diverse environments. While these studies identify the components of effective teamwork, they often do not integrate the specific leadership behaviors (TL) and leader capabilities (CQ) that foster such teamwork in a comprehensive moderated mediation framework. The existing literature, while rich in individual components, lacks a holistic model that simultaneously accounts for the mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions that explain when and how transformational leadership is most effective in driving project team performance in multicultural contexts. This research aims to bridge this gap by providing an integrated model that offers a more nuanced understanding of these complex dynamics.

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to investigate the proposed relationships. Data were collected through an online survey administered to project team members working in multinational organizations across various industries in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. A total of 100 complete responses were obtained for the main variables (Transformational Leadership, Cultural Intelligence, and Project Team Performance), and 100 responses for the mediating variables (Team Cohesion and Cross-Cultural Communication). Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

The structured questionnaire consisted of several validated scales, adapted for the specific context of this study, all employing a 5-point Likert scale (e.g., 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Demographic information included gender, nationality, highest educational level, and the number of different nationalities represented in their immediate project team. Transformational Leadership was measured using a 12-item scale adapted from Bass and Avolio's Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Bass & Avolio, 1995), assessing Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration. Teamwork Quality was assessed through two sub-dimensions: Team Cohesion, adapted from Carron et al. (1985), and Cross-Cultural Communication, with items developed and adapted to measure effectiveness of communication within multicultural teams (Nosratabadi et al., 2020). Project Team Performance was measured and adapted from Aga et al. (2016), focusing on metrics relevant to project contexts such as adherence to budget, schedule, quality specifications, and overall team effectiveness.

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS v28 and AMOS. The analysis proceeded in several stages. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the basic features of the data, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Pearson correlation examined bivariate relationships between transformational leadership, teamwork quality, and project team performance. Multiple regression analysis tested the direct impact of transformational leadership on project team performance. Mediation analysis utilized the PROCESS Macro by Hayes (2018) to test the mediating role of teamwork quality (team cohesion and cross-cultural communication) in the relationship between transformational leadership and project team performance. Moderation analysis investigated whether the leader's Cultural Intelligence (CQ) strengthens or weakens the relationship between transformational leadership and project team performance by examining the interaction term between TL and CQ. Finally, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed using AMOS to test the overall theoretical model, allowing for simultaneous estimation of direct, indirect, and moderating effects.

Results

Descriptive statistics for the key constructs are presented in **Table 1**. Transformational Leadership ($M=3.85$, $SD=0.62$) and Leader's Cultural Intelligence ($M=3.80$, $SD=0.63$) were rated moderately high. Team Performance ($M=3.78$, $SD=0.59$), Team Cohesion ($M=3.65$, $SD=0.70$), and Cross-Cultural Communication ($M=3.58$, $SD=0.65$) were rated as moderate. The sample size for TL, CQ, and Team Performance was $N=100$, while for Team Cohesion and Cross-Cultural Communication, it was $N=76$.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Key Constructs

Construct	N	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Interpretation
Transformational Leadership (TL)	100	3.85	0.62	Moderately High
Idealized Influence	100	3.91	0.58	
Inspirational Motivation	100	4.02	0.60	
Intellectual Stimulation	100	3.78	0.71	
Individualized Consideration	100	3.72	0.68	
Team Performance	100	3.78	0.59	Moderately High
Team Cohesion	76*	3.65	0.70	Moderate
Cross-Cultural Communication	76*	3.58	0.65	Moderate
Leader's Cultural Intelligence (CQ)	100	3.80	0.63	Moderately High

Pearson correlation analysis (**Table 2**) revealed significant positive relationships among all key variables. Transformational Leadership was positively correlated with Team Performance ($r = .58$, $p < .01$), Team Cohesion ($r = .61$, $p < .01$), Cross-Cultural Communication ($r = .63$, $p < .01$), and Leader's Cultural Intelligence ($r = .67$, $p < .01$). Leader's Cultural Intelligence also showed a strong positive correlation with Cross-Cultural Communication ($r = .70$, $p < .01$), suggesting that culturally intelligent leaders tend to foster better communication across cultures.

Table 2**Pearson Correlation Matrix**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Transformational Leadership	1				
2. Team Performance	.58**	1			
3. Team Cohesion	.61**	.54**	1		
4. Cross-Cultural Communication	.63**	.56**	.48**	1	
5. Leader's Cultural Intelligence (CQ)	.67**	.51**	.55**	.70**	1

Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive power of Transformational Leadership on Team Performance and how this relationship is influenced by teamwork quality. As shown in **Table 3**, Model 1, Transformational Leadership alone significantly explained a substantial portion of the variance in Team Performance ($R^2 = .34$, $p < .001$). The standardized beta coefficient for TL was .58 ($p < .001$).

In Model 2, when Team Cohesion and Cross-Cultural Communication were added to the model, the explained variance in Team Performance significantly increased ($R^2 = .48$, $\Delta R^2 = .14$, $p < .001$). The reduction in the beta coefficient for Transformational Leadership (from .58 to .32) when mediators were included suggests that Team Cohesion ($\beta = .24$, $p < .05$) and Cross-Cultural Communication ($\beta = .28$, $p < .01$) partially mediate the relationship between TL and Team Performance.

Table 3**Regression Analysis – Predicting Team Performance**

Model	Predictors	Standardized Beta (β)	t-value	Significance (p)	R^2	ΔR^2
1	Transformational Leadership	.58	7.10	<.001	.34	.34
2	Transformational Leadership	.32	3.45	.001	.48	.14
	Team Cohesion	.24	2.60	.011		
	Cross-Cultural Communication	.28	3.00	.003		

Mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro confirmed the significant indirect effects of Transformational Leadership on Team Performance through Team Cohesion and Cross-Cultural Communication (**Table 4**). The indirect effect through Team Cohesion was 0.15 (95% CI [0.06, 0.26]), and through Cross-Cultural Communication was 0.18 (95% CI [0.07, 0.31]). Both indirect effects were significant. This implies that Transformational Leadership improves performance primarily because it first enhances cohesion and communication within multicultural teams.

Table 4
Mediation Analysis Summary

Effect Path	Coefficient	SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI	Significance
Direct TL → Performance	0.32	0.09	0.14	0.50	Significant
Indirect TL → Cohesion → Performance	0.15	0.05	0.06	0.26	Significant*
Indirect TL → Communication → Performance	0.18	0.06	0.07	0.31	Significant*
Total TL → Performance	0.65	0.08	0.49	0.81	Significant

Moderation analysis revealed that the leader's Cultural Intelligence (CQ) significantly strengthens the relationship between Transformational Leadership and Team Performance (Table 5). The interaction term between TL and CQ was significant ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = .003$). This positive interaction indicates that the positive impact of Transformational Leadership on performance is amplified when leaders demonstrate high levels of cultural intelligence. Culturally intelligent leaders are better equipped to adapt their leadership styles, understand cultural roles, and effectively address cross-cultural challenges, thereby increasing the effectiveness of their transformational behaviors in diverse teams.

Table 5
Moderation Analysis – The Role of Leader's CQ

Predictor	Coefficient	SE	t	p	95% CI
Constant	3.78	0.05	75.6	<.001	[3.68, 3.88]
Transformational Leadership (TL)	0.45	0.08	5.63	<.001	[0.29, 0.61]
Leader's Cultural Intelligence (CQ)	0.20	0.07	2.86	.005	[0.06, 0.34]
Interaction (TL x CQ)	0.18	0.06	3.00	.003	[0.06, 0.30]

Conclusion and Discussion of Results

This study investigates the relationships between Transformational Leadership, Teamwork Quality, Leader's Cultural Intelligence, and Project Team Performance in multicultural environments. Our moderated mediation model provides a comprehensive understanding of how TL influences performance, highlighting the critical roles of both mediating mechanisms (team cohesion and cross-cultural communication) and a key boundary condition (leader's cultural intelligence). The findings underscore that while Transformational Leadership is vital, its efficacy in diverse contexts is significantly enhanced by a leader's ability to understand and adapt to cultural nuances. This research contributes to both theory and practice by offering a refined framework for understanding and optimizing leadership effectiveness in the increasingly globalized and multicultural world of project management.

The results confirm that Transformational Leadership is a significant predictor of Project Team Performance, aligning with extensive prior research (Khan et al., 2020; Al-Subaie et al., 2021). This underscores the enduring importance of TL in fostering positive organizational outcomes, even in complex, diverse settings. Transformational leaders, through their inspirational and individualized approaches, effectively motivate team members to achieve higher performance levels.

Furthermore, the study provides empirical evidence for the mediating role of Teamwork Quality. Both Team Cohesion and Cross-Cultural Communication were found to partially mediate the relationship between TL and Project Team Performance. This suggests that TL enhances performance not only directly but also indirectly by fostering stronger interpersonal bonds among team members and enabling more effective communication across cultural boundaries. In multicultural teams, where potential for misunderstanding and conflict is high, TL's ability to build cohesion and facilitate communication is particularly critical for translating leadership behaviors into tangible performance gains (Stahl et al., 2010; Nosratabadi et al., 2020).

The moderation analysis revealed that a leader's Cultural Intelligence significantly strengthens the relationship between Transformational Leadership and Project Team Performance. This finding is a key contribution, as it provides crucial contextual specificity to TL theory. It suggests that the effectiveness of TL is not universal but is contingent upon the leader's ability to navigate and leverage cultural diversity. Culturally intelligent leaders are better equipped to adapt their leadership styles, understand cultural roles, and effectively address cross-cultural challenges, thereby increasing the effectiveness of their transformational behaviors in diverse teams (Rockstuhl et al., 2011; Bal, 2022; Umuteme & Adegbite, 2023). This highlights that while TL provides a powerful framework, its optimal application in multicultural contexts requires the complementary capability of CQ.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, several practical recommendations emerge for enhancing performance in multicultural project teams. Organizations should invest in developing transformational leadership skills among project managers while also prioritizing cultural intelligence (CQ) training, as CQ enables leaders to apply transformational behaviors more effectively in diverse settings. Additionally, fostering teamwork quality through team-building activities, cross-cultural communication workshops, and platforms for open dialogue is essential to strengthen cohesion and mutual understanding. Finally, when forming multicultural teams, organizations should strategically select leaders who possess both transformational capabilities and high demonstrated cultural intelligence, as this combination significantly improves project success.

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