

KOAN BRIEF

Leading Academic Research in Plain English for Project Managers

How Great Leadership Can Hurt Teams and Products



The Summary

The Question: How much does leadership style affect team performance in R&D teams in Japan?

The Study: 122 new product teams made up of 708 people (683 team members and 25 team leaders)

The Details: Leaders were broken out in transformational and gatekeeper styles and measured against their team's performance, key cultural norms, and their communication approach.

Key Benefit

You meet your new R&D team. Sally tells you the team is on the verge of a war and you have to pull it together so they can get to the finish line.

KOAN BRIEFS

Every summary includes:

Key Benefits - how the study helps the active project managers. Written with an "at a glance" focus.

Talk to the Author - how to contact the folks that studied the problem. Or where to find the study for yourself.

The Summary - the findings in plain-speak, substituting academic speak for every-day English.

The Research Nutshell - key details from the study for those who want to dive into the details.

For more studies on the challenges facing project managers sign-up at <http://koffeekoans.com/projectnotes>

The Findings: Teams led by gatekeepers achieved higher levels of success, despite the wider range of opinions.

Teams led by transformational leaders sought to maintain or increase their consensus and were not as successful. Norms of consensus are a force that interprets how a team manages new information. A leader's approach to this plays a significant factor in determining team success.

Ted tells you that Sally's desire to get along is creating one of the worst products the company has made and it is destined to flop unless you take the lead.

What do you do? (Answer found on last page)



The Research Nutshell

The following sections are findings from the study.

Transformational Leaders

Transformational leaders encourage others to look beyond what is in front of them, to be confident, and go beyond what others expect.

There are 4 key traits of the transformational leader:

- They inspire others so much that they create a following.
- They motivate others by painting a picture of a possible future that encourages others to follow.
- They encourage curiosity and ways to think seriously about problems and find new ways to solve them.
- They coach others and support them in their desire to make a contribution.

These leaders create jobs people enjoy and want to excel in. Project quality under these leaders is high. Transformation leaders tend to be accurate in their predictions about the time it will take to get a product to market and the cost of producing it.

This study looks at whether these traits can be applied to cultures like the ones inside Japanese R&D teams. They are measured in terms of their effect on group norms of consensus and their communication skills. How they impact teams is measured by team performance quality and the level of innovation generated by the team in their finished product.

Transformational leadership is a contender as a one-size-fits-all approach to team management. Most of its support is found in western cultures.

Gatekeeper Leaders

Gatekeepers communicate, often and effectively. That is their defining strength. Researchers have studied them since 1975.

Successful gatekeeper leaders keep both internal and external people in their circle of influence and are often referred to as bridges between various groups. In addition to being information hubs, they are known for an ability to translate information from one group to another.

In the 70s gatekeepers were separated from the leadership function. It confused people. In studies from 1977 to 1980 gatekeepers who were not supervisors were seen in a negative light. Once they were seen as supervisors they were able to influence communications with both inside teams and outside the company.

Today, most gatekeepers perform the leadership function as well.

The result is better communication and higher team performance.

Gatekeeper influence teams to take part in goal setting and feedback, both are positive steps in spreading information around the team.

Norms of Consensus

Major research scientists have measured the norms controlling Japanese R&D teams since 1984. The results have been quite consistent. Team norms gain strength when team survival is at stake and lose it when the team doesn't believe the norm will help them survive. Belief is the key motivator in helping a team decide when to alter the norms that hold them together.

Japanese R&D teams deeply believe in consensus. In studies since 1995 and onwards, we find that employees, recruited as students from college, stay with the team for much of their life. In-house training and skill development specific to the company encourage the desire to stay. This desire encourages team members to consider what they say and discourages behaviors that interfere with their getting along with others. The result is less radical innovations than in the west.

If a transitional leader leads the team he is seen as someone worth pleasing, even to the point of imitation. The downside to this is that criticism is shunned and so are the critics.

The transitional leader is a two-sided sword. They focus on goals but not on opposition. That makes it hard for new ideas to take hold. These norms make it hard to increase team performance.

Gatekeeper leaders reduce the pressure for group consensus. They encourage members to explore information outside the team and bring it back to be shared. They encourage variety in viewpoint, values, and opinions. Diversity makes gatekeeper led teams successful. The impact on the shaping of norms is the opposite. Teams under gatekeepers value diverse opinions and resist norms that seek consensus. They see norms as a hindrance to their performance.

Communication

For this study, internal communications include communication inside the company with department and others under the same internal umbrella.

External communications include vendors, consultants, and other specialists outside the organization.

MORE FINDINGS

The Study Composition

The sample consisted of 122 R&D teams from seven industrial parts manufacturers in Japan. In addition to 122 team leaders (response rate: 100%), 683 R&D team members (response rate: 82.4%) and 25 managers (response rate: 100%) also participated in the study. Each team member belonged to a single team, and each team was managed by one of the 25 managers.

Among the team leaders, 94.1% were men, 9.3% held a doctoral degree, and their average age was 36 years old. Among the team members, 89.1% were men, their average age was 30 years old, and their average tenure in the team was two years. The average team size was six persons.

Why Is Challenge Stress Good?

Challenge time pressure is associated with fulfillment and a strong desire to succeed.

Under such circumstances, a person, despite being busy, will still engage the team and respond to innovations and ideas. They will consider new approaches, listen to teammates, and explain their own research and findings in ways that teams working with hindrance pressure will not.

Continued...

The Research Nutshell

Continued...

Beginning with studies in 1966 and affirmed in other studies, some as recent as 2010, it's true that open communication is the best way for R&D teams to be effective.

To be successful in R&D information from sources both technical and non-technical in their nature must be turned into knowledge that the company can use.

As a coach, the transformational leader understands the importance of communicating information from both team R&D findings and outside sources.

Gatekeeper leaders understand this too, but handle it differently.

Transformational leaders clarify goals and get team commitment to them. That makes it easier to figure out what information is needed for the team to succeed.

A transformational leader coaches the team to share information and be curious. They want to stimulate the intellect of the team and by setting up goals encourage their teams to follow them and satisfy their curiosity. They support team members who are willing to pay the price for the benefit of the team.

Gatekeeper leaders also promote goals but believe that frequent communication helps achieve them. They share information about the vision of the company, the strategy they are using, how others see the project, and include continual feedback to the team.

They downplay the need to build followers and encourage the need to build deep communication networks that brings information back to the team.



The key finding - one size does not fit all.

Culture matters when trying to maximize performance.

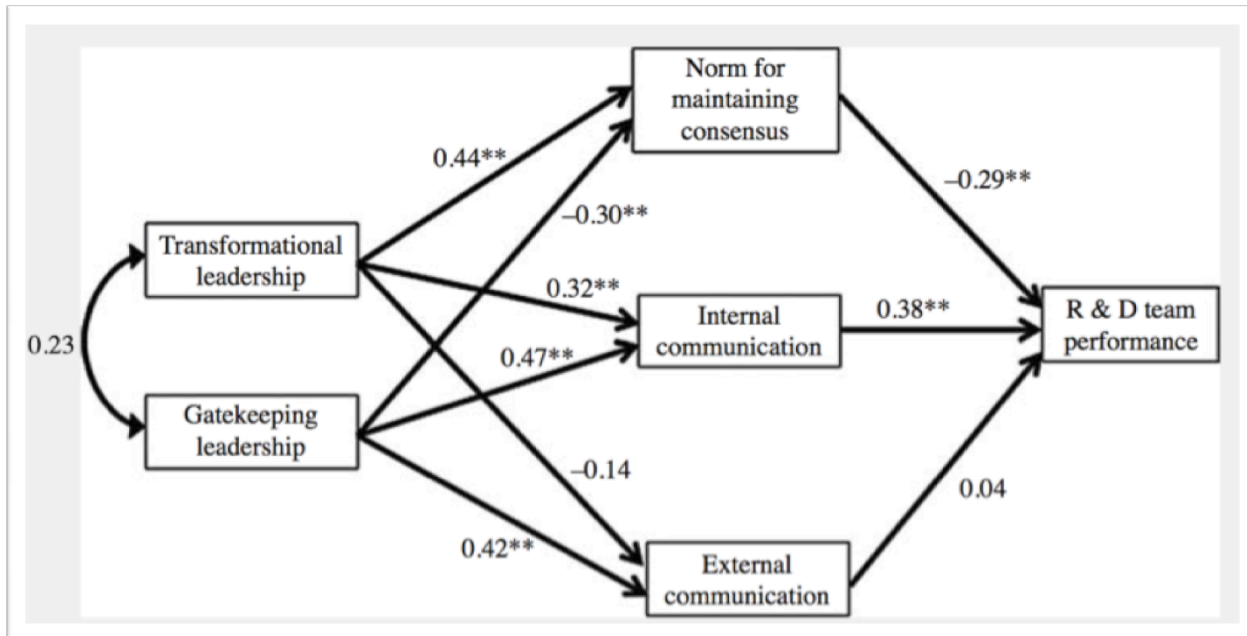
How a leader interacts with it matters even more.

Research Findings

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations.

	Mean	s.d.	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Team size	5.59	1.21								
2. Team tenure: Member	1.94	1.14		0.02						
3. Transformational leadership	3.15	0.59	0.93	0.01	0.04					
4. Gatekeeping leadership	3.36	0.75	0.81	-0.10	-0.02	0.23*				
5. Norm for maintaining consensus	2.38	0.72	0.81	0.16	0.19*	0.37**	-0.20*			
6. Internal communication	3.80	0.53	0.80	-0.04	0.18*	0.43**	0.54**	0.14		
7. External communication	2.50	0.84	0.85	-0.09	-0.21*	-0.04	0.39**	-0.41**	0.09	
8. Team performance	3.01	0.91	0.84	-0.12	0.12	0.17	0.32**	-0.24**	0.37**	0.17

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.



Performance Under Gatekeepers

Teams led by gatekeepers increased their communication at the price of consensus. They achieved higher levels of success, despite the wider range of opinions.

Gatekeepers built strong communication between team members and reduced the value on consensus. That encouraged free discussions and disagreements. The openness in those teams brought about less consensus and greater achievements. Teams were more successful under this type of leadership.

Performance Under Transformational Leaders

Teams led by transformational leaders sought to maintain or increase their consensus and were not as successful.

Transformational leaders, while increasing communication, also put higher value on consensus, reducing the team's performance. The increased importance of consensus interfered with critical analysis, and reduced the quality of decisions. While transformational leaders and their relationship to consensus stayed in sync the relationship between consensus and performance did not rise and fall together. In fact, the higher the consensus, the lower the performance.

Key Take Away

On the first page of this brief we posed this scenario:

You walk into a new team. Sally tells you the team is on the verge of a war and you have to pull it together so they can get to the finish line. Ted tells you that Sally's desire to get along is creating one of the worst products the company has made and it is destined to flop unless you take the lead. What do you do?

Your Choices:

Choice A - Be the charismatic leader that gets everyone on the same path by telling them to be curious, apply their minds, and trust you. March forward.

Choice B - Find all the information you can get your hands on, from inside and outside the company. Put it all on the table and let the team duke it out.

Who wins according to Dr. Ishikawa's Research?

Choice B.

Here's why.

Transformational leaders have followers that admire them. That admiration in a team driven by consensus becomes the competitive element. Teams that want their leaders praise will suppress information that falls outside the goal posts the leader sets. That is the key problem. Their desire to win the leader's respect pushes out people with different points of view and important information - information that may move the product from average to remarkable.

Gatekeepers don't care about their personal charisma. Their teams fight over ideas and the gatekeeper keeps everyone in the ring until the bell is rung. Teams turn towards each other and compete by offering up their best ideas, knowing that they will have to fight for them. The result is quality, both in performance and product.

The professor's study proves this out scientifically. And in Japan, a place where getting along matters more than in most other cultures, the inspired transformational leader can not win against a gatekeeper who simply supplies all the data available to the team.

Contact the Author

Jun Ishikawa - Professor of organizational behavior and human resource management at Rikkyo University. Email: jun@rikkyo.ac.jp

Locate the Complete Study

Leadership and performance in Japanese R&D teams. Asia Pacific Business Review. Vol. 18, No. 2, April 2012, 241-258 ISSN 1360-2381 print/ISSN 1743-792X <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13602381.2010.532907> Taylor & Francis. <http://www.tandfonline.com>