

# A study on the effect of transformational leader on retaining knowledge workers

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the paper is to study the effect of transformational leader on retaining knowledge workers. The paper provides a preliminary understanding on the effect that transformational leaders have over knowledge workers and how this style of leadership can facilitate in retaining knowledge workers. Transformational leaders are the type of leaders who are very clear about the objectives that they wish to achieve and thus they are usually self-motivated and focused to guide the employees towards completion of tasks by incorporating personal beliefs, values and ethics that give out more energy to the employees and have a great impact on building a holistic work environment. Such leaders are proactive in nature and therefore take very calculated risks. They do recognize the possibility of a knowledge worker leaving the organization for greener pastures and the impact it may have on the operations of the business, and therefore with the help of their good judgement and beliefs they stimulate the knowledge employees to stay within the organization by working towards their job satisfaction, providing new opportunities, communication and involvement of these workers in creative and innovative processes within the organization.

**Keywords:** *Creative, Employees, Knowledge Workers, Retention, Transformational leader, Values.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

“Transformational Leaders don't start by denying the world around them. Instead, they describe a future they might wish to create instead” – Seth Godin

A transformational leader as an individual is someone who is considered to be a belief maker and helps people to believe in themselves and their capabilities. For any business or organization, the main aim for all activities is to achieve success by fulfilling all the goals devised for different workers or employees within the organization that would ultimately lead to the success of the business. For guiding and collaborating within different employees, having different needs and working techniques a leader is necessary, but when the same leader possesses transformational qualities, he/she becomes exceptional at encouraging and promoting discussion within the workers that facilitate and allow in channelizing ideas for growth and sustenance of the organization. A transformational leader challenges and inspires the workers in such a way that they collectively use and implement their own creative and innovative ideas that would help in boosting their morale and at the same time contribute towards building the competitive advantage of the business.

A transformational leader influences their subordinates in such a way that their behavior is modified and characterized with advanced moral values and ideas. Workers of such intellect must be retained by the organization to ensure continuous thriving towards development and growth and hence the role of a transformational leader is not only limited to rebuild the approach of the workers towards their job but also involves maintaining the inspiration that drives the

strong purpose of innovation and creativity for the welfare of the organization within the employees. Retaining knowledge employees is essential for an organization, if it is to maintain a successful trend within the dynamic business environment and if the workers within the organization are experienced to adapt and cope up with changes, their retention becomes even more necessary for the business as their contribution towards the betterment of the organization is significant. Transformational leader facilitates in eliminating any reason that would instigate a knowledge worker to leave the organization.

A transformational leader is proactive in nature and thus they do take risks with the aim of having an active role in the growth of the organization and for the same motive, they always make deliberate yet considerate efforts to involve subordinates and their ideas in every stage of their work and decision-making process which distinguishes them from other leaders and facilitates in achieving greater satisfaction amongst the employees who are guided by a transformational leader. The four dimensions that characterize the behavior of a transformational leader are-idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation and individualized consideration, which together play a very important role in inspiring and retaining the essential knowledge workers. The same will be further elaborated and discussed in the paper. The main aim of this paper is to gain a better understanding and perspective about the role of a transformational leader in retaining knowledge employees. The impact of a transformational leader in motivating the employees and boosting their morale is something that is well defined, but their purpose in retaining key knowledge workers for the organization is not elaborated

upon and therefore this paper aims at analyzing their role from this perspective as well.

The methodology adopted by the researcher to address the research questions established and based on the nature of the given subject is secondary research method. Various papers, studies and articles published by academics, researchers, scholars and publications that explored and presented the research subject in depth were used by the researcher to conduct the secondary research, understand and present the topic well.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Hakan Erkulu (2008) in “The impact of transformational leadership on organizational and leadership effectiveness” discusses the influence of leadership in stimulating organizational commitment and job satisfaction within the employees under transformational leadership with special reference to the hospitality industry. A significant relationship has also been established within organizational and leadership effectiveness.

Kyle Sandell (2012) in “Transformational leadership, engagement, and performance : A new perspective” describes the follower engagement that is received when transformational leadership is adopted by a leader and how transformational leadership is perceived with performance on task by the subordinates. The study also focuses on how transformational leaders inspire their subordinates to engage on a particular task that can be successfully harnessed for the organizational development.

Venkat R. Krishnan (2005) in “Transformational leadership and outcomes: role of relationship duration” describes how the transformational style of leadership facilitates in establishing an effective sense of commitment within the employees and the positive relationship that can be observed within the employee and the leader when the subordinate works under a transformational leader for a long duration of time.

Nadeem Khalid et al. (2016) in “Losing your best talent: Can leadership retain employees? The dilemma of the banking sector of Hyderabad Sindh, Pakistan: A mediation Investigation” describes how retaining employees in an organization is one of the most important factors in determining the success of an organization (here in commercial banks). The literature discusses and investigates the significant relationship that exists between the leadership styles adopted by the leaders, job satisfaction derived by the employees and the role of commitment and retention of workers while mentioning the role of transformational leadership in the same situation.

Cemil Top et al. (2020) in “Transformational leadership Impact on Employees Performance” study the effect of transformational leadership on employee performance and through this study the researchers derived a positive correlation between the implementation of transformational

leadership and employee performance. The research further suggests how transformational leaders motivate employees with care that inspires them to increase the quality of their performance.

T. Sharanaya and Dr. P. Himabindu (2017) in “Impact of transactional and transformational leadership: a study on employees’ perception towards employee retention in IT sector” describe how leadership styles, particularly transactional and transformational have an impact on employee retention within the sector. The view and perception of employees towards these styles of leadership are taken into account to analyze their response and behavior towards the leaders who follow transactional or transformational leadership styles and how it motivates them to remain in the same organization under the guidance of these leaders.

M. Moradi Korejan and H. Shahbazi (2016) in “An analysis of the transformational leadership theory” have done an in-depth analysis of the concept of transformational leadership by mentioning the concept as a leadership style, describing its necessity and importance within an organization, enlisting the characteristics that a transformational leader possesses and explaining the various factors that effect this form of leadership.

Taly Dvir. Et al. (2002) in “Impact of transformational leadership on follower development and performance: A field experiment” mention how the central target of following transformational leadership is to ensure subordinate development and improvement in performance wherein the leader has a positive relationship with the thinking, performance and attitude of the subordinate towards the work as well as towards the leader.

Soumendu Biswas (2012) in “Impact of psychological climate and transformational leadership on employee performance” describes how the perception and approach of an employee towards their work play a very significant role in determining their commitment towards the job. When the satisfaction which the employee derives from their work is collaborated with the guidance provided by the transformational leader, the employee performance can be led to better and improved levels.

Cam Caldwell Et al. (2012) in “Transformative leadership achieving unparalleled excellence” detail on how leaders following the transformational leadership style are regarded to be ethical leaders as they integrate and honor elements that reflect commitment, welfare and consistency. The style of transformative leadership allows in meriting the trust and respect a leader expects from his/her subordinates.

## III. SIGNIFICANCE

The concept of Transformational leadership was first coined by the American historian and political scientist James MacGregor Burns in his book *Leadership* in 1978, which was further studied and expanded by Bernard M. Bass during

the 1980s. Transformational leadership can be described as a leadership style wherein the leaders use their discrete skills and traits to work alongside their subordinates so that their followers develop the skill of recognizing any change that occurs and develop proactive steps of action under the leader's guidance. As the name suggests, transformational leadership means that the leaders aim to bring in a transformation amongst others (workers and followers) by empowering and motivating their subordinates to become leaders of themselves. A transformational leader aims at enhancing the morale and motivation amongst the employees by inspiring them in such a way that they feel a strong purpose towards the organization and their work. They create a culture of trust within the group of subordinates and encourage innovation within the organization. Transformational leaders recognize their position of power and do not let that interfere with the interest of their knowledge workers, i.e., they put the welfare of the organization and the subordinates before their own personal interest and gains.<sup>1</sup>

As leaders and individuals, they are highly motivated by themselves and use the same motivation to guide their subordinates. They respect the values of each individual in their team and make an attempt to align the same with the beliefs and goals of the organization. The transformational leaders also aim at taking calculated risks wherein they use and incorporate the intelligence of their knowledge workers in order to take informed and conducive decisions. As the leaders take inputs from their workers on how they should approach the risk, it facilitates growth amongst the organization as the workers feel that they have a greater purpose within the organization and are motivated to perform better. A transformational leader is characterized by four elements i.e., **Idealized influence, Intellectual simulation, Inspirational Motivation and Individualized consideration**. These elements allow a transformational leader to elevate the maturity as well as sense of achievement within the employees. When transformational leadership is adopted by a leader, it influences and motivates the workers to accomplish more than what is expected of them and when workers gain this perspective, it becomes very important and essential for an organization to retain such workers as these employees get inspired to subside their self-interests for the development and betterment of the organization. The role of a transformational leader in such a situation becomes more significant as they are not only responsible for maintaining such level of effectiveness and motivation amongst the workers but also need to take care that such employees are retained by the organization and they are satisfied by the work that is being assigned to them.<sup>2</sup>

The impact of the four crucial elements of transformational leadership can be understood and described in the following way by transformational leaders when the knowledge workers apply their creative intellect, work above and beyond the norms that are expected of them and have to be retained in order to maintain the quality of work performed:

- **Idealized Influence:** This means the way in which a transformational leader exerts their influence over the workers. Leaders have the capacity to affect the development and behavior of their subordinates and when leaders are considerate towards the needs of the workers and develop a shared vision, their subordinates regard them as their role model. A transformational leader influences the team members by imbuing strong work ethics and moral values. Through idealized influence the leaders can give a sense of challenge to the knowledge workers, i.e., by reframing the routine tasks that the workers have to perform so that the employees see problems from a new perspective and associate a greater sense of meaning to their jobs. This factor would allow the workers to view their jobs from a new perspective which would make them want to stay in the organization as it challenges their limits.
- **Intellectual Stimulation:** This concept means that the leaders following transformational style of leadership encourage innovation and creativity along with moral thinking and creative problem-solving techniques. The leaders push the concepts and values that the employees believe in and give them an opportunity to apply the same in scenarios of any problem rising so that the workers come out with a solution that is morally acceptable and aims at achieving organizational objectives. The leaders for intellectual stimulation among employees, share all the information for open communication that would involve employees in decision making and generate ideas that would contribute to analytical thinking. Intellectual stimulation helps in achieving high levels of motivation and satisfaction amongst the workers as they get the feeling of significance and autonomy. When knowledge workers are intellectually stimulated under the guidance of a transformational leader, they get a feeling of being useful and valuable to the organization that increases the sense of meaning the employee derived from the organization which finally results in more engagement towards their work. Through this the leaders can ensure the retention of valuable knowledge employees.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://yscouts.com/10-transformational-leadership-characteristics/>

<sup>2</sup> Hakan Erkutlu (2008) "The impact of transformational leadership on organizational and leadership"

<sup>3</sup> Kyle Sandell (2012), "Transformational leadership, engagement, and performance: A new perspective."

- *Inspirational Motivation*: Inspirational motivation in the simplest terms means the different ways adopted by a transformational leader which aims at boosting the morale and motivation level amongst their subordinates. The leaders do the same by utilizing their communication skills and honesty. While communicating they reflect an optimistic approach that resonates and attracts the employees towards them. Moreover, they try connecting with each worker on an emotional level to cater to the individual motivation needs. Inspirational motivation propagated by the transformational leader makes them more charismatic and adds up to the integrity that they hold. When the leaders speak enthusiastically about the future goals and aims, the motivation to work towards the achievement of those goals heightens amongst the employees and as the leaders invest their trust and belief on the employees, the knowledge employees foresee a successful and promising future in the organization that inspires them to stay in the organization and work towards the group's benefit.<sup>4</sup>
- *Individualized Consideration*: This term means how considerate and thoughtful a transformational leader is towards the needs of the employees. A transformational leader practices this element by attentively listening and understanding the needs, problems and concerns of their subordinates, individually as they may not feel comfortable sharing it with everyone. Through this, the leaders build a strong and unbreakable interpersonal connection with their workers that facilitates them in working towards the overall mental well-being of their subordinates. The leaders, while compassionately taking care of their subordinate's needs, mentor them individually in a unique way that allows the workers to grow professionally and personally. When the leader, individually considers and works towards the needs of the knowledge employees, they get a feeling that their individuality, thinking process and uniqueness as a distinct person is appreciated and the same acts as a catalyst which motivates each one of them to become more involved in the organizational activities and tasks. Transformational leaders acting as a mentor and guide to their subordinates individually, leave a significant and remarkable impact on their subordinates which inspires them to be a better version of themselves.

#### IV. NEED FOR KNOWLEDGE EMPLOYEES

The term "knowledge worker" was devised by Peter F Drucker in 1959 in his book "The landmarks of Tomorrow" wherein he defined a knowledge worker to be an individual who applies his/her theoretical and analytical knowledge for troubleshooting. In an organization the role of knowledge workers is very important and essential as these employees have a high level of creativity and possess great analytical skills. Just like how manual laborer's perform physical activities for an earning remuneration, knowledge workers apply their thinking and intellectual techniques. These types of workers routinely innovate and come up with creative ideas to meet the goals and objectives of the organization and hence they have an increasingly important role in contributing towards the growth of the business. Employees who are regarded as knowledge workers are experts in their area and possess special skills.<sup>5</sup> These workers have the ability to access, recall and apply essential information at times of need, interact well with others and have the scope of continuous development and improvement as the business environment is dynamic in nature. The greatest advantage of a knowledge worker is that they know the value of understanding and applying knowledge and skills that are essential for accomplishing an objective and therefore it is of utmost importance that such valuable assets are retained by an organization in order to maintain employees who incorporate their talent and abilities into their work for achievement of greater goals that are mutually beneficial. Whenever tasks of high acumen and abilities are performed the judgement, improvisation and guidance of a leader is necessary and therefore no matter how specialized some knowledge worker is, for unleashing un-used thinking, unique perspective and adding value to a matter, the involvement of a leader is necessary and if the leader follows the transformational style of leadership, it is beneficial for knowledge employees as such leaders always look forward to involving employees with creative and innovative ideas into problem solving mechanisms. The work that is performed by a knowledge worker requires continuous growth and modifications in its application as developments take place frequently in a business set up. The interest and spirit of the workers must be maintained so that they are motivated towards finding new information and applying it to the work that they perform. If the knowledge workers become lethargic in their approach or feel unmotivated to work towards the development, that might put the organization in a situation of risk where they can lose out on valuable knowledge workers as they might look out for new job opportunities that cater to their requirements. A transformational leader uses his/her discretion in motivating

<sup>4</sup> Vedant R. Krishnan (2005), "Transformational leadership and outcomes :role of relationship duration."

<sup>5</sup> John Benson & Michelle Brown (2007), "Knowledge workers: what keeps them committed; what turns them away"

the knowledge workers in such a way that their thinking pattern transforms and is directed towards a direction where they are highly motivated to handle complex task and integrate all the changes that are necessary in order to meet the change in the business environment. The transformational leader plays a significant role in reflecting how the organization contributes towards the future prospect of the knowledge workers and involves the workers in an equal power leadership that boosts the sense of belongingness and importance the workers have towards their work. Transformational leaders have a sustainable behavior that allows the organizations to have a competitive advantage over other businesses. In a turbulent and unpredictable environment, an organization can trust their transformational leaders as they deliver the ultimate values of personal and professional standards. For retention of knowledge employees, the leaders should not only act as mentors or advisors but also should provide new set of challenges to the employees, trust them, instill a sense of mission and respect the individual working styles which would give the employees a chance to add more value to their work. When a leader works as transformational leader, they constantly look out at ways to draw the subordinate's attention and convert their individual interests into collective goals, that help in building trust and commitment. When knowledge workers work in a set up wherein the leader cares for them, promotes values and beliefs, links perspective with passion and is always open and welcoming to new ideas<sup>6</sup>, the worker's desire to work under the same leader increases as the transformational leader understands and provides the exact opportunities that the subordinate desires which facilitates their retention. The central idea that must be satisfied by a transformational leader for retention of knowledge workers is that they must ensure that the employees are satisfied with the work that is given to them and their individual needs are recognized so that they can be duly addressed to avoid any unsatisfactory or uncomfortable working condition.<sup>7</sup>

## V. IMPACT OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERS ON RETENTION OF KNOWLEDGE EMPLOYEES.

As leaders, transformational leaders always aim at treating their employees with respect and dignity. They have the ability to motivate the employees by not only treating every employee as a valued individual but also take time to understand the factors that motivate them which inspires the workers to work beyond the expected standards. The

transformational leaders are evermore open to new ideas and promote a culture where the success of the organization is dependent on the effort of each and every subordinate. By actively growing the role of each and every individual in the organization, the leaders create a common vision for their subordinates which helps them in strongly guiding the subordinates in the direction that they want.

The transformational leaders hold the accountability as well as the responsibility of retaining knowledge workers and they are the ones who are in charge of building an organizational climate that retains employees and supports the culture and values that the knowledge workers follow. When a leader shows interest in the contribution that the knowledge worker makes towards the organization, it helps in establishing a high-quality relationship between the employees and the leaders that motivate the workers to stay in the organization for a longer period of time. The satisfaction that an employee derives from their job plays a very significant role in retaining the knowledge workers and in such situations the transformational leaders have an advantage as a guide, mentor and role model, the reason being that these types of leaders use moral agents to engage the employees to their jobs. The actions and methods adopted by transformational leaders elevate the interests of their subordinates that generates awareness about their purpose and importance in the team which inspires the knowledge workers to feel proud of being associated with the organization. The job satisfaction that the knowledge workers derive also increases with the influence of transformational leaders as they instill pride among the subordinates, encourage them to provide innovative and creative ideas, involve the workers in decision making processes that are pivotal for the growth of the organization, set personal examples of commitment and collaborate the organizational goals with ethical standards that adds more value and meaning to the job of the knowledge workers. As transformational leaders speak optimistically about the future prospects, their emotional influence makes the knowledge workers feel secure about the job and they get the assurance of the fact that they have an attractive future within the organization.<sup>8</sup> In transformational leadership, there no exchange of commodities but the leaders share their personal values and beliefs and try to understand the values of their subordinates in order to develop a constructive personality. By expressing personal standards, the leaders create a bond and understanding with the knowledge workers that results in achievement of higher performance levels and retention of employees.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> M Moradi Korejan & H. Shahbazi (2016), "An analysis of the transformational Leadership Theory"

<sup>7</sup> Dr. K.S. Sekhara Rao et. Al (2018), "Role of leadership on employee retention – A study on corporate Hospitals"

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ligsuniversity.com/en/blogpost/new-approach-to-job-satisfaction-and-transformational-leadership>

<sup>9</sup> Karl W. Kuhnert & Philip Lewis (1987), "Transactional and Transformational Leadership: A constructive/developmental Analysis."

The primary benefit that a transformational leader can bag by retaining knowledge workers is that a significant portion of turnover hassle can be prevented. When a knowledge worker leaves the organization, the process itself takes a lot of time and other than that finding a replacement for the same worker again requires a huge time commitment as the leaders will have to go through the recruitment process all over again, conduct interviews and use their discretion to identify the candidate that would most conveniently fill the vacant position.

This entire process can be taxing and exhausting which can bring a temporary halt to achievement of organizational objectives and thus if leaders focus on knowledge worker retention by expanding the horizons of the workers job and providing them with new opportunities, such cumbersome process can be avoided. Other than that, some knowledge worker under the guidance of a transformational leader acquires values, visions and learnings that are developed over time and cater to every employee uniquely, and if such employees leave the organization, the leaders have to start from square one to understand the needs of the new knowledge worker, make them familiar with the common vision and intensively inspire and motivate them to look at the greater good of the organization. This would have a negative effect on the time and guidance that the other workers need from the leader. Therefore, it can be concluded that the turnover of knowledge workers has a multi-fold effect on the entire organization as well as the leader and hence the transformational leaders must play their role in such a way that the knowledge workers grow on the desire to stay under their guidance in the organization.

## VI. PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS

According to The Retention Report of Tech Scaleups 2019, 100% of the respondents regarded leadership as the primary factor in influencing employee satisfaction and ensuring employee retention. As transformational leaders are the ones who extensively promote and make certain of a positive transformation within the approach of the employees towards the organizational goals and aims, such leaders are responsible for almost 34% of the innovation that takes place within an organization. Being part of such an organization adds up to the esteem of the employees and reflects that their skills, understandings and knowledge are being considered and implemented effectively. This further motivates them to stay within the organization.

Steve Jobs, Chairman, CEO and co-founder of Apple Inc. can be considered to be one of the most influential transformational leaders whose leadership techniques and style allowed him to retain good knowledge employees. Knowledge employees look out to be guided by leaders who are ethically honest and therefore the leader should be able to keep their promises with the employees, as otherwise they would struggle to form an emotional bond with their team. Steve Jobs was considered as a reflection of confidence and

his continuous desire, action and positive attitude towards bringing innovational change, inspired the employees to stay with the organization in order to be a part of something exceptional.

Other than this, Steve Jobs as a transformational leader not only worked towards his own growth, but also ensured that he provided growth opportunities to the knowledge employees. He directly interacted with the employees who were responsible for a particular project and collaborated with them on various aspects such as the design of the product, user interface, front end etc. As a leader, he worked seamlessly in order to set an example for the employees to carry out their actions with honest intentions, accept failures, function to correct the mistakes and emerge as better professionals and individuals.

Steve Jobs believed in producing and delivering delight which meant that his aim was to manufacture simple and focused products and ideas that would satisfy the customer with all five senses. The same idea would be communicated to the knowledge workers and such purpose motivated these employees to remarkably use and apply their special skills and knowledge in ensuring the accomplishment of such an idea. The same would contribute towards the job satisfaction of the employees which retained the competent and knowledge workers.

Such analysis can help in substantiating the impact a transformational leader has on the retention of knowledge workers.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Under the transformational style of leadership, the leader motivates the subordinates in such a way that they are self-driven towards the achievement of the organizational goals and objective. The leader not only improves the worker's status on an organizational level but also contributes to the personal development of the employee as an individual. The most important factor of transformational leadership is the engagement that the leader has with the employees. A transformational leader allows the employees to flourish and pays more attention to the teamwork that makes the knowledge workers feel valued and important which motivates them to stay with the organization. Transformational leaders possess the ability to inspire and bring out the values of the knowledge workers, unleash the creativity within their subordinates, maintain great interpersonal relationship through communication and pursue the vision of the organization in such a way that the employees start believing the vision to be their own. Knowledge workers are considered to be a valuable asset for the company because they possess specific information and skills regarding a particular job, and they not only use these skills optimally but also share their innovative ideas and practices with others. For an organization, retention of knowledge employees is quite necessary as they already have a mindset that drives them towards growth, and they

have the ability to analyze and utilize new information which makes them adaptable to change. If an organization aims to carefully harness the creativity and innovation of knowledge workers, the leaders must ensure that their sense of motivation is maintained, and they are continuously engaged in their work. Transformational leaders understand and respect all the workers and subordinates and hold high regard and esteem towards the knowledge workers. The leaders, through their actions provide a climate where they carefully listen to their subordinates, become role models who develop strong ideals and act as agents to implement new directions within the organization. Knowledge workers are individuals who display their skills by focusing on a particular concept or idea and such workers are responsible for coming up with new ideas and strategies. Their contribution towards the organization, allows the business to grow. As such employees are invested in learning, adapting and applying new information and put their talent to work, the transformational leaders motivate them by providing a view of the bigger picture, wherein they enthusiastically discuss about future prospects and ideas. This facilitates the knowledge workers in having a greater sense of connection to the organization and fuels their motivation to work towards success in the same business organization.

In order to retain knowledge workers, the transformational leaders provide these employees with work that requires creative approach towards problem solving, is more meaningful and fulfilling in nature, which gives them a sense of improved job satisfaction as they regard such work with high value. This also facilitates improvement in the scope of leadership for the transformation leader as they need to constantly re-arrange the objectives in order to provide new opportunities while ensuring that they stay in alignment with the overall business vision and goals. Therefore, it can be concluded that the transformational leaders have a significant effect on the retention of knowledge employees in an organization.

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