

## POSITIVE LEADERSHIP MODELS: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH

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*El objetivo de este artículo es doble, en primer lugar, se define el marco teórico del liderazgo positivo así como las razones de su aparición. Este surge vinculado al paradigma de la psicología organizacional positiva, en cuyo ámbito, se han desarrollado las diferentes formas de liderazgo que lo integran (i.e. transformacional, de servicio, espiritual, auténtico y positivo). Aunque el constructo no parece unívocamente delimitado, los diferentes tipos que se incluyen bajo esta denominación presentan una gran afinidad y elementos comunes. En segundo lugar, se revisan aspectos prácticos vinculados a la investigación empírica que constatan el impacto de este tipo de liderazgo en las organizaciones y se subraya la relación entre estas formas de liderazgo y variables organizacionales positivas. Finalmente, se analizan futuras líneas de investigación para el desarrollo de este marco conceptual.*

**Palabras clave:** Psicología organizacional positiva, Liderazgo transformacional, Liderazgo auténtico, Liderazgo de servicio, Liderazgo espiritual, Liderazgo positivo, Liderazgo ético.

*The objective of this article is twofold; firstly, we establish the theoretical boundaries of positive leadership and the reasons for its emergence. It is related to the new paradigm of positive psychology that has recently been shaping the scope of organizational knowledge. This conceptual framework has triggered the development of the various forms of positive leadership (i.e. transformational, servant, spiritual, authentic, and positive). Although the construct does not seem univocally defined, these different types of leadership overlap and share a significant affinity. Secondly, we review the empirical evidence that shows the impact of positive leadership in organizations and we highlight the positive relationship between these forms of leadership and key positive organizational variables. Lastly, we analyse future research areas in order to further develop this concept.*

**Key words:** Positive organizational psychology, Transformational leadership, Authentic leadership, Servant leadership, Spiritual leadership, Positive leadership, Ethical leadership.

**T**he paradigm of positive psychology has influenced the majority of the conceptual models and methods of psychology since its appearance at the end of the last century. Its object of study focuses on the conditions and processes that contribute to the optimal performance of individuals, groups and organizations, promoting the positive dimensions of the human being (Gable & Haidt, 2005). Psychology must attempt to understand the aspects linked to suffering and happiness and also to study their interaction in order to validate interventions that mitigate suffering and increase happiness in people (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005).

The study of organizational behaviour has evolved in parallel to the progress of research in the field of positive psychology (Luthans, 2002). This has enabled the emergence of what we call positive organizational behaviour, which is an extension of the principles of positive psychology applied to organizational behaviour (Quick et al., 2010). Within positive organizational behaviour, we have identified a number of constructs and processes, including that of leadership. This is one of the

processes of social influence that have received the most attention in the behavioural sciences and in particular in positive organizational psychology. One important reason is that the success of any economic, political and organizational system depends on the efficient action of the leaders of that system (Barrow, 1977). Leadership also plays a crucial role in promoting organizational and occupational well-being and health, both at the individual and collective levels (Peiró & Rodríguez, 2008). This interest has led to the emergence of different models of positive leadership which share a common theoretical basis. These all emphasize the fact that leaders must encourage and maintain optimal levels in their followers' performance, through the promotion of virtuous and eudaimonic behaviours (Cameron & Pews, 2012).

The qualitative review of the theories of leadership by Dinha et al. (2014) categorized two main groups: established theories and emerging ones. In the case of emerging theories, those conceptualized as theories of ethical or positive orientation have been the most analysed. These include theories of authentic, servant, spiritual and moral leadership. All of them, along with transformational leadership, are included within the conceptual framework that we are analysing here, that of positive leadership. Two important elements can be highlighted within its scientific status. Firstly, included under this heading are different leadership models that share a number of common

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characteristics, anchored in the concept of positive organizational behaviour, but there are some differences that prevent an unambiguous definition of the construct. This would lead us to speak, instead, of positive forms of leadership. Thus, Avolio and Gardner (2005) have identified the common components to these forms of leadership: (1) a positive moral outlook, (2) the leader's self-knowledge, (3) positive modelling of the followers' behaviour, (4) personal and social identification of followers with the leader and the group, and (5) positive social exchanges between the leader and the followers.

Secondly, sufficient empirical evidence has not been accumulated in all cases on the validity of these models. Nor have valid psychometric instruments been developed to enable their measurement and the examination of the proposed connections with other constructs, in a nomological network that enables them to demonstrate their predictive validity for organizational behaviour (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Brown, Treviño & Harrison, 2005). We review the main models below.

### TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The concept of transformational leadership was introduced by Burns (1978), based on the qualitative analysis of the biographies of political leaders and the precursor of the current forms of positive leadership. The most notable development of the construct is that of Bass (1985), who proposed the multifactorial leadership theory. This conceptualizes leadership based on defined behaviours that are articulated on the basis of three factors: transformational leadership, transactional leadership and *laissez-faire* leadership.

Transformational leadership has been characterized as one that establishes a vision for the future among the members of the organization; it considers the individual differences between the members of the organization and acts as a stimulus to the achievement of organizational goals and objectives (Yammarino & Bass, 1990). Transformational leaders are described as capable of motivating their followers to transcend their own individual interests, in order to guide their behaviour to achieve collective goals (Bass, 1985). The transformational leader is postulated as contrary to the transactional leader, whose main characteristic is to formulate the exchange of rewards contingent to the followers producing a number of desired behaviours (Burns, 1978). Transformational leadership represents, in this sense, a replacement of the transactional leadership approach, which is the model that had dominated the theoretical landscape until then. According to Bass (1999), the transformational leader integrates four essential factors: (a) idealized influence, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation and (d) the individualized consideration of the followers. Bass (1985) also defined the *laissez-faire* leadership style as one that is paradoxically characterized by the absence of transactional or transformational qualities in the leader. Some authors consider it a destructive kind of leadership which has a systematic relationship with organizational stressors (Rodríguez-Muñoz et al., 2012; Skogstad et al., 2007).

The studies by Bass led to the development of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass, 1985). This questionnaire has been used in construct validation and research; in the case of the Spanish population, its factor structure has been established by Molero, Recio and Cuadrado (2010).

The model of transformational leadership has become one of the most relevant for understanding the effectiveness of leaders in organizations (Lowey Gardner, 2001). There is extensive empirical evidence that behaviours related to transformational leadership have a positive effect on individual and group variables, such as employee engagement, motivation and the efficient execution of tasks (Cruz-Ortiz, Salanova & Martínez 2013a), as well as variables related to the overall organizational effectiveness and performance of a company (Bono & Judge, 2004; Cruz-Ortiz, Salanova & Martínez 2013b).

### SERVANT LEADERSHIP

The concept of servant leadership was conceived and introduced in the organizational context by Greenleaf (1977). The author formulated this type of leadership based on his own professional corporate experience as well as his own intellectual reflection (Spears, 1996). The philosophical foundations of servant leadership are also rooted in the Christian tradition (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002).

The theory of servant leadership emphasizes the concept of service to others and the recognition that the role of the organization is to enable the formation of individuals who can help create a positive organizational environment. The servant leader is one who places the needs, aspirations and interests of his followers over his own; the deliberate choice is to serve others in order to achieve their development and the success of the organization (Greenleaf, 1977). This idea is of vital importance in the current context, in which both researchers and professionals, in various sectors of the economy, aim to respond to the dominant perception that corporate leaders have developed a pattern of behaviour that is rather inconsistent with basic ethical principles (Parris & Peachey, 2013).

The concept of servant leadership has attracted much attention recently, and although there is not yet a large body of supporting data, systematic research has begun to develop on the subject. Much of this is linked to the foundational texts by Greenleaf and the activity of the Greenleaf Center (Parris & Peachey, 2013). This research has focused on two areas of interest so far. First, the development of theoretical frameworks for understanding the construct (Russell & Stone, 2002; Van Dierendonck, 2011; Van Dierendonck, 2014; Chiniara & Bentein, 2016); and secondly, on the development of measurement tools that enable the expansion of the research and the construction of a valid theory (Reid et al, 2014; Liden et al, 2015). This empirical gap currently poses a limitation on the foundation of the model, which requires the research to be developed focused on the essential elements of the theory (Bass, 2000). Currently, the most notable theoretical contributions (Page & Wong, 2000; Russell & Stone 2002), as recognized by the authors themselves, are basically hypothetical constructs that generate debate and lay the structural foundations for further analysis and research.



### SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

The concept of spirituality reflects the state of the intimate relationship with the inner self, the bearer of moral values (Fairholm, 1997). Along with the physical, rational and emotional dimensions, the spiritual dimension facilitates the internal and external balance of individuals in organizations (Moxley, 2000). It is important to note that spirituality is a broader concept than that represented by the organized religions, with their principles, dogmas and doctrines (Zellers & Perrewe, 2003).

The theory of spiritual leadership arises in a context in which conventional leadership does not seem sufficient to meet the needs of individuals in the organizational environment. The initial studies attempted to determine the spiritual characteristics of effective leaders. Thus, authors such as Fairholm (1996) identified a number of qualities, defined as the presence of defined life goals, deeply rooted moral convictions, high intellectual ability, social skills and a special orientation to the development of values in others. Moreover, Reave (2005) in her review of the scientific literature on spiritual leadership, found a clear correlation between spiritual values and practices, and effective leadership.

Fairholm (1996), inspired by the ideas of Greenleaf (1977) on servant leadership, is the author who developed the first model of spiritual leadership. This model incorporates elements associated with the capabilities, needs and interests of both the leader and their followers, as well as the objectives and goals of the organization. Spiritual leaders lend their support to the rest so they can articulate their decisions on the important areas of their life. They develop an inspiring vision and mission that encourages the development of a spirit of cooperation, mutual support and commitment to the effective functioning of the organization. The author himself, however, acknowledges that these parameters and the underlying processes require more precise operationalization to give consistency to the model (Fry, 2003).

Later, Fry (2003), taking the above formulation as a reference, developed a causal theory of spiritual leadership based on a motivational model that incorporates concepts such as vision, hope, faith, altruistic love and spiritual survival. This theory sees leadership as a vector that facilitates organizational transformation as an intrinsically motivated entity, focused on continuous learning.

There are, however, two key areas that these models have not fully clarified. The first is the growing epistemological critique of the existing empirical studies on organizational spirituality; the second is the need to create a more detailed and systematic understanding of the variable we call spirituality that characterizes this form of leadership (Benefiel, 2005).

### AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

Authentic leadership emerges linked to the attempt to overcome the many examples of unethical behaviour that have recently occurred in the political and business environment (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). The concept of authenticity is rooted in Greek philosophy, although it was later used by humanistic psychology (Maslow, 1968), and it has recently been linked to certain areas of positive psychology (Harter, 2002).

Authentic leaders can be described as those endowed with deep moral convictions, whose behaviour is strongly inspired by these ethical principles for the benefit of the group (Gardner et al., 2005). These leaders are well aware of the actual content of their thoughts, emotions, skills, value system and how they are perceived by others. They also possess qualities such as confidence, optimism, hope, resilience and moral strength (Avolio et al., 2004). In addition, they avoid behaving inconsistently and hiding their ideas and emotions, even when these might be uncomfortable for their followers (Luthans & Avolio, 2003).

Avolio and Gardner (2005), the most prominent authors of this field, define, in their model, the components of authentic leadership linked to (1) the leader: positive psychological capital, moral perspective, self-knowledge and self-regulation of behaviour, (2) the processes of influence: personal and social identification, modelling positive behaviour, emotional contagion and social exchange based on reciprocity and consistency, (3) the followers: self-awareness, self-regulation, personal development and (4) the organizational context. The interaction of these components creates a sustainable organizational competitive advantage which produces positive psychological results (Luthans & Youssef, 2004).

To facilitate the research, the construct was operationalized through the development of a scale, the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire. Four dimensions were identified in its validation process: (1) self-knowledge, (2) transparency in interpersonal relationships, (3) internalized moral perspective and (4) balanced processing of information (Walumbwa et al., 2008). This questionnaire was validated for the Spanish population by Moriano et al. (2011).

The conceptual and empirical connections between authentic leadership and the attitudes and behaviours of followers is an area of research that has attracted great interest. There is a promising set of preliminary investigations which requires, however, greater empirical support (Avolio et al., 2004). These authors suggest that authentic leaders increase the social identification of followers with the organizational principles. Authentic leaders are also perceived as more credible sources of information by the followers and they are considered to be generators of clear goals as well as clear plans for reaching them (Luthans & Jensen, 2002). Finally, authentic leaders build the trust of followers by encouraging open communication, sharing critical information and trying to increase their involvement with work (Avolio et al., 2004).

### ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

The ethical dimensions are present in the transformational, servant and especially the authentic model of leadership. Some authors have tried to develop the concept of ethical leadership as an independent construct. Brown and Treviño (2006) provide the most developed and robust model of ethical leadership. According to their definition, ethical leadership seeks to promote normatively appropriate behaviours, in the followers, through personal actions and interpersonal relationships between them and the leader, using a reward system and transparent communication. A fundamental conceptual issue is the fact that

there is a lack of a precise and universally accepted definition regarding what is defined as appropriate normative behaviour, characteristic of this type of leadership (Frisch & Huppenbauer, 2014).

Empirical research has not yet made it possible to determine conclusively the processes that underlie the ethical dimensions of moral leadership. Brown et al. (2005) have suggested a set of psychological processes that explain the relationship between this kind of leadership and behaviours of ethical nature, such as prosocial and antisocial behaviours. These theoretical processes would be related to learning and social exchange (Bandura, 1986). Thus, ethical leaders can be considered as models of behaviour who stand out in an ethically neutral environment.

Finally, there have been few attempts to develop tools for measuring moral leadership. The psychometric properties of the questionnaires developed hinder the validation of the construct and the theoretical progress of this model (Brown et al., 2005; Riggio et al., 2010)

### POSITIVE LEADERSHIP

Positive leadership contains obvious areas of overlap with a number of the types of leadership analysed. The existing literature states that it is linked conceptually to transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) and authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Both models have solid empirical support, as we have seen, however, this is not the case of positive leadership whose theoretical consolidation is still in the process of being confirmed.

The most notable approach is that developed by Cameron (2013). According to this author, this leadership style is based on the application of positive behavioural principles emerging from disciplines such as positive psychology (Seligman et al., 2005) and positive organizational psychology (Cameron et al., 2003). Specifically, positive leadership has three basic components: (1) it places the focus on people's strengths and abilities that reaffirm their human potential, (2) it emphasizes results and facilitates above average individual and organizational performance, and (3) its field of action is concentrated on the components that can be seen as essential virtues of the human condition. Expressed another way, the concept of positive leadership is based on the existence of a continuum, on which any leader can be situated. Positive leaders are those whose behaviours show an orientation towards the positive extreme (Wooten & Cameron, 2010).

The empirical evidence that supports this theoretical framework is not abundant; despite the growing interest in the theory, there are few studies that consolidate it (Kelloway et al., 2013). The relevant contributions with regards to its measurement are equally scarce and the psychometric properties of the existing instruments need further development (Antino et al., 2014). However, there are a number of studies related to the practical aspects linked to the development of healthy organizations that appear to show the validity of the construct. Thus, it has been observed that, in the teams led by a positive leader, the members show higher levels of well-being at work and the presence of positive emotions (Kelloway et al., 2013). It has also been found that positive leadership increases the performance

of the members of the organization and their commitment, improves communication and interpersonal relationships, enables the creation of a positive working environment and stimulates innovation (Cameron, 2013). Finally, the presence of a positive leadership style seems to have facilitated the merger of organizations as well as having increased the levels of customer satisfaction (Cameron & Plews, 2012). Due to the recent appearance of this model, it is hoped that supporting empirical evidence will be constructed in the future.

### CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Over the past decade, organizations have undergone a process of change that is almost unprecedented in history. Increasing global competition, the emergence of new markets and rapid technological development have resulted in the need to generate quick and accurate responses to ensure their survival. This transformation incorporates substantial changes in both values and behaviours in individuals and in the strategies, structures and systems of organizations, to deal with this new reality (Senge, 2014). In this context, it is necessary to re-examine the traditional models of leadership based on authority and the establishment of contracts or transactions between leaders and their subordinates (Gil et al., 2011). The different models of positive leadership emerge as a productive area of theory and research, in response to the need for organizations to adapt to the new and changing context.

These models must face developments of two types: theoretical and methodological. From a theoretical perspective, the first challenge posed, faced with the proliferation of different conceptual approaches, is the difficulty of creating an integrated theory of leadership (VanVught, Hogan & Kaiser, 2008; Yukel, 2010). This is especially relevant in the case of the different varieties of positive leadership. Future research should take into account the consolidation of these models and their hypothetical unification into a theory of positive leadership, with a broader scope, which integrates all of these perspectives. This is relevant because some of the types of leadership mentioned show, simultaneously, conceptual overlaps (Killburg & Donohue, 2011) and remarkable differences (Brown & Treviño, 2006). In parallel, the need emerges to investigate the components associated with each of these leadership models, including the leader, the followers, the context and the levels of interaction (Avolio et al., 2009).

In line with the above, although the efforts to understand the mechanisms explaining the different types of positive leadership have increased, the research results have not been integrated. Furthermore, the studies carried out analyse different types of mediators which makes the task even more complex. Therefore, more effort is required in integrating the results as well as a reduced interest in the mediating variables (Judge et al., 2006).

Another theoretical area of interest is the evolution of some styles of positive leadership. In general, research has paid scant attention to those variables that contribute to or inhibit the development of this leadership. We need to generate research that determines how to accelerate the emergence and development of positive leadership. There is empirical evidence that transformational leadership, which is the positive leadership



model that has the most theoretical support, can be taught through training programs on the basic skills it involves. The behaviours of leaders can be moulded by this type of learning and they can have a positive impact on organizational performance (Dvir et al., 2002; Kirkbride, 2006). However, research needs to validate both the nature of the development of transformational leadership and the other forms of positive leadership, in at least two directions; the first refers to the duration of the effects of the training; and secondly, it is necessary to determine what intervention techniques are used to facilitate the emergence of this style of leadership (Cruz-Ortiz et al., 2013b).

From a methodological perspective, it is necessary to develop new approaches to the study of positive leadership. The research must use mixed methodologies that allow a better understanding of the phenomenon. Quantitative strategies for the study of leadership have dominated the literature and are the most common approach today (Stentz et al., 2012). Although attention to qualitative methods is increasing, it is still insufficient; moreover, these methods need to be combined with existing quantitative studies. Research in organizational psychology has benefited from this methodological combination to make theoretical progress. This mixed approach turns out to be especially important in the case of the study of positive leadership (Bryman, 2004).

Also, it is noted that in the literature on positive leadership there is an abundance of correlational and cross-sectional studies, from which causal inferences are extremely difficult to establish. A set of longitudinal studies, addressing different components of the transformational leadership style, has been generated. Leadership is a dynamic phenomenon whose evolution, therefore, has to be analyzed over time (Mullen & Kelloway, 2009; Tafvelin et al., 2011). However, the outcome of the research is still insufficient and is mainly focused on this specific type of positive leadership, somehow neglecting the other forms of leadership. These studies provide valuable information on the occurrence and withdrawal of certain behaviours related to positive leadership, the continuity of these behaviours, individual changes and, eventually, their potential predictive ability (Farrington, 1991).

Another methodological point of interest is represented by the fact that multilevel analysis has been established as a technique of growing importance in the field of leadership (Yammarino et al., 2005). Studies on positive leadership should start to incorporate different levels of critical analysis beyond the individual, such as the dyad, the group and the organization (Yammarino & Bass, 1991).

Moreover, the lack of a strict consensus on the conceptual definition and theoretical framework, which would encompass each of the different types of leadership analysed, has caused some confusion about the operationalization of the constructs suggested. Currently, there are various multidimensional measuring instruments, and while some of them have extensive validation and empirical support, the psychometric properties of others require much more rigorous research and psychometric support, as highlighted by some authors (Antino, Gil, Rodríguez-Muñoz & Borzillo, 2014).

Finally, we would like to point out that positive leadership has become the dominant approach in the study of leadership in organizations. Probably one of the key causes of this growth is that this kind of leadership, with its emphasis on intrinsic motivation and the positive development of followers, represents a more productive and efficient vision in managing today's complex organizations. Followers not only seek inspirational leaders to guide them in an uncertain and volatile environment, but they also want to deal with challenges in their own personal development (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

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