



Public Sector Leadership: A Meta-Analysis of Transformational Leadership's Efficacy in Bureaucratic Change and Development

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of transformational leadership in supporting bureaucratic change and organizational development within public sector institutions. Using a meta-analytic approach, the study synthesizes empirical findings from 45 quantitative studies across multiple public sector contexts. The analysis evaluates transformational leadership across three dimensions: change implementation, bureaucratic challenge mitigation, and leadership development effectiveness. The findings reveal that transformational leadership has a positive and statistically significant effect on organizational change, employee psychological empowerment, and innovation capacity. Leadership development programs also improve transformational competencies, particularly when training is long-term and practice-oriented. However, leadership effectiveness is moderated by bureaucratic formalization, cultural hierarchy, and institutional rigidity. These results indicate that transformational leadership is valuable for improving public sector adaptability but cannot operate optimally without supportive organizational structures. The study contributes to leadership and public administration literature by providing evidence that successful bureaucratic transformation requires both leadership capability and institutional reform.

INTRODUCTION

Public sector organizations worldwide are operating in an increasingly turbulent environment characterized by rapid technological transformation, fiscal constraints, complex governance networks, declining public trust, and growing societal demands for transparency and accountability. The post-pandemic recovery period has further intensified these challenges, compelling governments to improve organizational adaptability while maintaining institutional legitimacy and service effectiveness (OECD, 2023; Van der Wal, 2020). Under such conditions, leadership has emerged as a critical determinant of organizational resilience and public value creation. Effective leadership is no longer limited to administrative control and procedural compliance but increasingly involves the capacity to inspire change, mobilize

employees, and foster innovation within highly regulated bureaucratic environments (Moynihan, 2023; Aisyah et al., 2025; Indrayanti et al., 2025; Baravelli & Pilotti, 2022).

The growing complexity of public administration has stimulated extensive scholarly attention toward leadership approaches capable of supporting organizational transformation (Maolani, 2023; Sirisawat & Chaiya, 2025; Hamblin et al., 2024). Among various leadership paradigms, transformational leadership has attracted substantial interest due to its emphasis on inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and idealized influence (Bass & Riggio, 2021; Gistituati, 2025; Mburu et al., 2024; Bashori et al., 2022). Transformational leaders encourage employees to transcend routine obligations, embrace organizational goals, and actively participate in institutional change processes. Recent studies indicate that transformational leadership contributes positively to employee engagement, organizational commitment, public service motivation, and innovation performance within governmental organizations (Kim & Fernandez, 2022; Alamri, 2023; Boussaidi & Korbi, 2025; Tran & Hoang, 2024). These findings suggest that transformational leadership may offer a viable mechanism for addressing persistent bureaucratic challenges while enhancing public sector performance.

Despite growing empirical support, the effectiveness of transformational leadership in public organizations remains subject to considerable debate. Public bureaucracies differ fundamentally from private organizations because they operate within formalized structures, legal constraints, political oversight, and multiple accountability mechanisms (Ouyang et al., 2026; Park et al., 2025; Dedyayev, 2026; Dahlström & Lapuente, 2022; Park et al., 2025). Such characteristics often limit managerial discretion and may reduce leaders' ability to implement transformational behaviors effectively. Research has shown that excessive procedural formalization, hierarchical authority structures, and political interference can weaken leadership influence and constrain organizational innovation (Jacobsen et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2024; Getha-Taylor, 2023). Consequently, leadership approaches that demonstrate strong effectiveness in private-sector contexts may not necessarily produce similar outcomes in government institutions.

Recent literature has attempted to address this issue by examining transformational leadership across various public sector settings. Studies conducted in local governments, public healthcare organizations, educational institutions, and regulatory agencies generally report positive relationships between transformational leadership and organizational outcomes (Tsapnidou et al., 2024; Alwali & Alwali, 2022). Transformational leadership has been associated with increased employee empowerment, stronger organizational commitment, enhanced innovation capability, and improved change management performance (Asencio, 2021; Belle et al., 2023). However, empirical findings remain fragmented and occasionally inconsistent. While some studies report strong positive effects, others reveal only modest relationships or context-dependent outcomes influenced by institutional and cultural conditions (Jacobsen et al., 2022; Vogel et al., 2023). Such inconsistencies indicate the need for a more systematic synthesis of existing evidence.

The growing emphasis on public sector modernization further reinforces the importance of understanding transformational leadership effectiveness. Governments across developed and developing countries continue to implement administrative reforms aimed at improving service quality, digital governance, and organizational responsiveness. Successful implementation of these reforms depends heavily on leadership capacity to overcome resistance to change and foster employee commitment (Hartley et al., 2023; Vveinhardt & Sedziuviene, 2022). At the same time, public organizations face increasing pressure to encourage innovation despite bureaucratic constraints. Transformational leadership is frequently proposed as a

strategic solution to these challenges because it promotes adaptive behavior, collaborative problem-solving, and organizational learning (Andersen et al., 2021; Rojak & Khayru, 2022; Gistituati, 2025; Maolani, 2023). Nevertheless, the conditions under which transformational leadership generates the greatest benefits remain insufficiently understood.

Existing reviews have provided valuable theoretical insights regarding public sector leadership; however, several limitations remain evident. First, many previous studies focus on individual organizational contexts, making generalization difficult. Second, prior reviews often rely on narrative approaches that lack rigorous quantitative synthesis of effect sizes (Campbell et al., 2019; Löfflad-Bürkin et al., 2025). Third, limited attention has been devoted to examining contextual moderators that may influence transformational leadership effectiveness, including government level, organizational formalization, and cultural dimensions. Fourth, research investigating the effectiveness of leadership development interventions designed to cultivate transformational leadership competencies in public managers remains relatively fragmented (Vogel et al., 2023; Ferraz, 2025; Gentsoudi, 2024; Chau et al., 2022). Consequently, current knowledge provides limited guidance regarding whether transformational leadership consistently contributes to bureaucratic change and under what circumstances such contributions are most significant.

This situation reveals a clear research gap. Although transformational leadership is widely promoted as a mechanism for improving public sector performance, there remains insufficient meta-analytic evidence synthesizing its overall impact on organizational change implementation, employee empowerment, innovation capability, and leadership development outcomes across diverse public sector contexts. Furthermore, limited understanding exists regarding how institutional and cultural characteristics shape leadership effectiveness within bureaucratic systems. Addressing these gaps is essential for advancing leadership theory and informing evidence-based public management practices.

Accordingly, this study conducts a comprehensive meta-analysis of empirical research examining transformational leadership in public sector organizations. By synthesizing findings from quantitative studies across multiple governmental contexts, this research evaluates the overall effectiveness of transformational leadership in facilitating organizational change, mitigating bureaucratic challenges, and enhancing leadership development outcomes. The novelty of this study lies in its integrated assessment of transformational leadership effectiveness across three interconnected dimensions: change implementation, bureaucratic challenge mitigation, and leadership development efficacy while simultaneously examining contextual moderators such as government level, bureaucratic formalization, and cultural power distance. The findings contribute theoretically by refining understanding of transformational leadership within public administration and contribute practically by providing evidence-based recommendations for leadership development and public sector reform initiatives.

METHODS

The study developed a reproducible research method that satisfies the requirements of PRISMA guidelines through its systematic research process. The researchers conducted an extensive search through various online databases, which included PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, and Public Affairs Information Service (PAIS), to find all available literature from the start of these databases until December 2023. The search strategy used a combination of keywords and subject headings to investigate three main concepts, which combined ("transformational leadership" OR "charismatic leadership") with ("public sector" OR "government" OR "bureaucracy") and ("change" OR "innovation" OR "development" OR "performance"). The eligibility

requirements were established using the PICOS framework, which specified that only quantitative empirical studies that had been peer-reviewed needed to show transformational leadership research results from the public sector through data that enabled effect size computation. The first step of the screening process required reviewers to remove duplicates before two reviewers performed independent evaluations of two distinct steps, which included title and abstract assessment, as well as complete article evaluation of documents tagged as possibly fitting eligibility criteria. The researchers discovered relevant information from the studies used in the review, which contained details about sample attributes, assessment tools used, effect size measurements, and factors that influenced their outcomes. Correlation coefficients (*r*) were taken as the main effect size for Meta-Analyses 1 and 2; for Meta-Analysis 3, the standardized mean difference (*g*) was computed. All analyses were conducted through comprehensive meta-analysis software utilizing random-effects models, which were used to compensate for expected heterogeneities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Study Selection

Table 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Study Identification, Screening, and Inclusion Process

Phase	Number of Records/Studies	Action/Reason
Identification	Records identified: 2,187	Database searching
Screening	Duplicates removed: 612	
	Records screened: 1,575	Records excluded: 1,480
Eligibility	Full-text assessed: 95	Full-text excluded: 50
		• Insufficient quantitative data
		• Non-public sector context
		• Non-validated measures
		• Other reasons
Included	Studies in synthesis: 45	
	→ MA1 (TFL & Change): 28	
	→ MA2 (TFL & Challenges): 30	
	→ MA3 (Development): 8	

Source: Researcher, 2026

The comprehensive investigation of digital databases and additional manual searches led to the identification of 2,187 records that might be relevant. After the duplicates were removed, the titles and abstracts of 1,575 records were compared with the eligibility criteria. This step eliminated 1,480 records that did not fulfill the population, design, or outcome specifications. The full texts of the other 95 articles were examined thoroughly, which resulted in the removal of 50 studies, mainly because there was not enough quantitative data, the context was the private sector, or non-validated leadership measures were used. The last synthesis comprised k = 45 independent studies that were fully compliant with all the inclusion criteria.

Study Characteristics

Table 2. Characteristics of Included Studies (N = 45)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Region	North America	18	40.0
	Europe	15	33.3
	Asia	8	17.8
	Oceania	4	8.9
Government Level	National/Federal	22	48.9
	Local/Municipal	17	37.8

	State/Provincial	6	13.3
Research Design	Cross-sectional	38	84.4
	Longitudinal	5	11.1
	Quasi-experimental	2	4.5
Leadership Measure	MLQ	33	73.3
	Other validated scales	12	26.7

Source: Researcher, 2026

The main features of the 45 studies were presented by region; the studies represented different contexts, with 18 studies (40%) in North America, 15 (33%) in Europe, 8 (18%) in Asia, and 4 (9%) in Oceania. Demographic groups sampled covered various government levels, with 22 studies (49%) concentrating on national/federal agencies, 17 (38%) local/municipal governments, and 6 (13%) state/provincial organizations. As for the research design, most of the studies were cross-sectional (n=38, 84%), while a few were longitudinal (n=5, 11%) and quasi-experimental intervention studies (n=2, 5%). The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) was the most commonly used measurement tool of transformational leadership, with its application in 33 studies (73%).

Meta-Analysis 1: TFL and Change Implementation

Table 3. Summary of Meta-Analysis 1

Outcome	k	Effect Size (r)	95% CI	p-value	I ²
Change Implementation	28	0.32	[0.26, 0.38]	< .001	78%

Source: Researcher, 2026

The first meta-analysis definitely combined and quantitatively evaluated the results of 28 different studies on the link between transformational leadership (TFL) and the successful change of organizations in public sector settings. The forest plot is the synthesis that is represented visually; it shows for each study included Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) and 95% confidence interval, along with a final summary diamond presenting the pooled effect estimate. The analysis showed an effect size of $r = 0.32$ (95% CI [0.26, 0.38], $p < .001$), which was significant at the 0.001 level and indicates a positive, medium-strength relationship between TFL and change outcomes. This revelation additionally supported the reasoning behind TFL's idea since it suggests that public sector leaders who possess traits such as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration are, indeed, more effective in guiding their departments through reforms, innovations, and strategy changes even under bureaucratic limitations. In addition, the confidence interval not overlapping with zero provided immense support to the argument that the null effect was mistakenly concluded, thus giving substantial empirical backing for the transformational behaviors being the most critical factor in facilitating the change of government and nonprofit organizations.

Even though there was a clear central tendency between the transformational behaviors and the change, the analysis still showed a wide range of connections that varied from weak to strong across the literature. The heterogeneity tests returned an I^2 value of 78% ($p < .001$), which indicates the percentage of variation amongst the studies that is not due to random error but to actual differences in the sizes of the effects. The large heterogeneity indicated that the TFL's potency in enacting change was not constant but rather largely influenced by other factors. This finding was in accordance with the contingency viewpoint in public administration, suggesting that the bureaucracy, the politics, and the culture in which leadership is exercised have a great influence on its impact. While on the one hand, the pooled estimate gave a

significant overall benchmark, on the other hand, it was an average of very different effects, which called for taking the variance under study to find out the conditions under which TFL is most or least effective.

The researcher's decision to carry out pre-planned moderator analyses to look into the diversity of data brought about the extremely important application limits of transformational leadership effectiveness to be defined. The subgroup analysis revealed that the influence at the local government level ($r = 0.40$) was very much stronger than at the national or federal level ($r = 0.25$) ($Q\text{-between} = 6.24$, $p = .012$). The closeness of the leadership concept was verified by Tummers and Knies (2016) as it was argued that the leaders who are nearest the service and community may have more power to inspire and implement change. The power of the effect was also dependent on the cultural context, the linkage of TFL-change being stronger in studies from low power-distance cultures (e.g., Scandinavia) than in high power-distance cultures (e.g., parts of Asia), thus being in agreement with the criticisms of cross-cultural leadership presented by researchers like Dickson et al. (2012). These factors together accounted for a considerable part of the observed differences, so that the analysis could not be reduced to a simple "does it work" conclusion any longer, but rather be referred to as "where and when it works best" in a more complicated fashion.

An evaluation of possible publication bias was ultimately carried out in order to assess the reliability of the pooled estimate. The funnel plot's visual inspection showed slight asymmetry, and the gap in the bottom-left quadrant indicated a possible lack of smaller studies that reported null or negative findings. This was also indicated by a significant Egger's regression test ($p = .021$). The researcher applied the trim-and-fill imputation method to correct for potential bias because the technique estimated missing studies and determined the overall effect size. The researchers included five theoretical studies in their analysis, which resulted in an adjusted effect size of $r = 0.29$ with a confidence interval of 95 percent between 0.22 and 0.35. The robustness test confirmed that the initial estimate had experienced a slight increase because of the file-drawer problem, yet the study found evidence that transformational leadership enables public sector organizations to successfully implement change.

Meta-Analysis 2: TFL and Bureaucratic Challenge Mitigation

Table 4. Summary of Meta-Analysis 2

Outcome	k	Effect Size (r)	95% CI	p-value	I ²
Employee Innovativeness	22	0.27	[0.20, 0.34]	< .001	71%
Psychological Empowerment	25	0.39	[0.33, 0.45]	< .001	65%

Source: Researcher, 2026

The second meta-analysis was concerned with the ability of transformational leadership to reduce the prevalence of certain endemic problems in the bureaucratic environment. The data for this meta-analysis were obtained from 30 studies and were further divided into two groups, which were the two main sub-outcomes discussed in the theory to reduce bureaucratic rigidity: developing employee innovativeness and increasing psychological empowerment. Researchers created separate forest plots for each sub-outcome and found different patterns of effects. The sub-outcome of innovativeness, which involved 22 studies, produced a pooled effect size of $r = 0.27$ (95% CI [0.20, 0.34], $p < .001$) according to the analysis. Despite being a moderate positive correlation, this association revealed that transformational leaders were regularly linked to work teams that were more inclined to produce and accept new ideas, processes, or services. The variation for this connection was found to be very high ($I^2 = 71\%$, $p < .001$), which indicates that the innovation stimulation

by the leader was very much affected by other organizational or regulatory factors. Interestingly, through the use of moderators, it was found that the impact was more pronounced in the regulatory and policy agencies than in the units directly delivering the services, which implies that the intellectual stimulation might be most powerful in the scenario where the work is knowledge-based and procedural.

The psychological empowerment consequence derived from the 25 studies showed an overall stronger correlation. The combined effect size was $r = 0.39$ (95% CI [0.33, 0.45], $p < .001$), which indicates a medium-to-large effect. This stronger finding implied that the elements of transformational leadership, most notably inspirational motivation and individualized consideration, were very successful at helping employees to feel that their work was meaningful, they were capable, they were free to choose, and they could even make an impact, even though control systems that were intended to restrict their discretion. The confidence interval was considerably smaller, and while there was still significant heterogeneity ($I^2 = 65\%$, $p < .001$), it was less than for innovativeness. Such a notion was strengthened by the fact that the TFL's impact on the staff empowerment process was more or less alike in all the public bodies, and this was probably because it was confronting head-on the problem of lack of motivation and the sense of powerlessness brought about by bureaucracy.

The comparative results of these sub-outcomes have given a more precise understanding of the TFL's mechanism to get past bureaucratic obstacles. The transformational leaders empowered their followers to change their personal perceptions about bureaucratic work, while their agency and purpose had to be maintained for success. The smaller effect on intangible innovativeness showed its unpredictable nature because organizations need to develop their first step of empowerment into actual innovation through conversion. The "leadership substitute" theory explains this situation because formalization acts as a partial substitute that neutralizes leadership power in certain situations.

The moderator analysis, which examined various studies, provided researchers with essential contextual information about their study results. The research demonstrated that TFL had a weaker impact on both innovativeness and empowerment when studies assessed "rule density" and procedural constraints as high. The situation created an intuitive restriction that prevented leaders from bringing about organizational changes because bureaucratic systems required strict compliance. The specific case under study showed a greater empowerment effect than an innovativeness effect. The leadership development program based on TFL will boost staff morale and customer loyalty and their sense of empowerment, according to public sector organizations. The organization needs to implement changes in its entire system to create an environment where people can develop new ideas because it needs to transform its energy into creative solutions.

Meta-Analysis 3: Leadership Development Program Efficacy

Table 5. Effectiveness of Leadership Development Programs

Outcome	k	Effect Size (g)	95% CI	p-value	I ²
Leadership Development Programs	8	0.41	[0.28, 0.54]	< .001	52%

Source: Researcher, 2026

The last meta-analysis evaluated the efficacy of structured intervention programs that aimed to develop transformational leadership skills in public sector employees. The authors included eight quasi-experimental and longitudinal studies, which provided pre-test and post-test data from various leadership development programs to enable standardized mean change computations. The analysis used Hedges' g as the bias-corrected effect size metric, which measured improvements in TFL behaviors

and perceptions that resulted from training. The meta-analysis showed a pooled effect size of $g = 0.41$ (95% CI [0.28, 0.54], $p < .001$), which demonstrates that the intervention produced a positive impact that reached statistically significant yet small-to-moderate levels. The research shows that developmental programs that public sector organizations designed for managers bring about major changes to their transformational behavior in both theoretical and practical outcomes.

The effectiveness difference between the two methods is shown in the programs that used both methods. The programs that produced their biggest results with effect sizes above 0.50 shared three design elements, which included training sessions with an average length of six to twelve months, training sessions that used real workplace problems, and training sessions that provided both coaching and peer assistance. The results of shorter workshop-based interventions produced minimal benefits, which did not always reach statistical significance. The adult learning theory, together with the leadership process that develops through social interactions, shows that people need extended time with practice and reflection to achieve permanent behavioral changes rather than learning from a single information session. The programs that used TFL principles to study political oversight and legal innovation development challenges achieved better results than programs that provided general leadership frameworks.

The diversity of study backgrounds, together with their research quality assessment, turned into a crucial element that determined study outcomes. The analysis showed that programs produced different results because of their moderate effectiveness ($I^2 = 52\%$, $p = .04$), which showed programs produced different results. Researchers discovered this methodological defect because multi-source feedback research (which used 360-degree assessments) produced lower effect sizes ($g = 0.33$) than self-assessment studies ($g = 0.58$). Self-reports show different effect sizes because people tend to underestimate treatment results, which makes researchers base their evaluation on trustworthy objective measures. The studies used three major methods to assess sustainability, yet only three studies evaluated their results six months after the intervention. The studies showed smaller effect sizes, which indicated that organizations need to provide continuous support in order to maintain behavior changes through identical methods of reinforcement.

The immediate effects of this synthesis create practical implications that impact human resource strategy development for public sector organizations. The meta-analysis supports the claim that the cost of leadership development that organizations design and execute in a proper way proves to be justified when organizations make it their strategic investment. The investment returns achieve maximum value when programs include intensive learning experiences which deliver training that matches specific environmental conditions, thereby replacing conventional classroom teaching with real-world learning combined with assessment systems. The time factor of diminishing effect is also very important, as it shows that training cannot be a solo HR “event” that is applied in a certain department only. For the development to be of a permanent nature to the organization, it must be incorporated in a wider talent management ecosystem that includes post-program shifts to more responsible roles, mentoring, and a culture that supports and rewards the behaviors that the training seeks to develop. Therefore, leadership development programs are a good practice, but their success finally depends on the extent of organizational commitment to the sustainable enactment of the newly learned transformational practices.

Moderator Analyses

Table 6. Moderator Analysis Results

Moderator	Category	Effect Size	Q-between	p-value
Government Level	Local Government	$r = 0.40$	6.24	.012
	National/Federal Government	$r = 0.25$		
Culture	Low Power Distance	$r = 0.37$	5.18	.023
	High Power Distance	$r = 0.22$		
Agency Type	Professional Agencies	$r = 0.35$	4.87	.027
	Regulatory Agencies	$r = 0.20$		
Formalization (Innovation)	Low/Moderate	$r = 0.33$	7.01	.008
	High	$r = 0.18$		
Formalization (Empowerment)	Low/Moderate	$r = 0.43$	3.95	.047
	High	$r = 0.32$		
Program Duration	Long-term Programs	$g = 0.62$	12.34	< .001
	Short-term Programs	$g = 0.15$		
Evaluation Source	Self-report	$g = 0.58$	8.12	.004
	360-degree Feedback	$g = 0.33$		

Source: Researcher's Meta-analysis, 2026

The analyses of the pre-defined moderators were performed to account for the major heterogeneity that was observed in the primary meta-analyses, as well as to test the theoretically significant boundary conditions. A significant subgroup analysis for Meta-Analysis 1 (TFL and Change Implementation) considered the level of government as a contextual moderator. The result of this analysis was a statistical significance in the difference of effect sizes which revealed that the relationship between TFL and successful change was much stronger in local government settings (pooled $r = 0.40$, 95% CI [0.32, 0.47], $k = 12$) than in national or federal government settings (pooled $r = 0.25$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.32], $k = 10$). The analysis to determine subgroup differences indicated that it was very unlikely that this disparity was a result of chance (Q-between = 6.24, $p = .012$). The research provided measurable evidence that bureaucratic and political context largely determine leadership effectiveness, thus also implying that being near both service delivery and community outcomes, together with maybe having fewer layers of political control, local government leaders have more room to realize transformational behaviours through tangible change.

The further moderator analysis scrutinized other contextual factors that were relevant. One of these factors was the power distance cultural dimension that was created by Hofstede's indices for each of the countries in which the studies were conducted. A significant moderating effect was found associated with the TFL-change relationship in the case of power distance being the determinant for the tempo of change. Studies performed in countries representing lower power distance cultures (e.g., Denmark, Sweden, Australia) brought about a positive development change in their relationship with pooled s of $r = 0.37$ while those in the opposite direction of the spectrum (high power-distance cultures e.g. South Korea, Turkey, Saudi Arabia) suffered from a very weak correlation of pooled $r = 0.22$ (Q-between = 5.18, $p = .023$). Reinforcement of the viewpoint that cross-culturally the leadership styles are rated differently is where the participative and inspirational leadership style TFL is positioned in the earlier-mentioned legitimacy-dependent society. The latter means that questioning the hierarchical authority is quite common, and thus, the followers

expect more autonomy. The attention then turned to the bureaucratic functions of different types. The variance of the results was quite different in that professional or knowledge-based agencies (e.g., public health, urban planning, pooled $r = 0.35$) had a much stronger relationship than in highly regulatory or compliance-driven areas (e.g., tax administration, auditing; pooled $r = 0.20$; Q -between = 4.87, $p = .027$). Thus, the task's core is the main variable in influencing the leader's sphere of influence with TFL being the most powerful in areas where the work requires innovative minds and intellectual discretion.

The analysis of moderators in the Meta-Analysis 2 (Bureaucratic Challenge Mitigation) presented equally useful patterns. For the variable of innovativeness, the formal level of procedural formalization in the studied organizations, as reported by the authors or ascertained through agency type, acted as a powerful moderator. The positive effect of TFL on innovation was notably weaker in settings deemed to have high rule density (pooled $r = 0.18$) when contrasted with those having moderate or low formalization (pooled $r = 0.33$) (Q -between = 7.01, $p = .008$). This finding provides empirical support for the view that red tape has a strong controlling effect, indicating that even transformational leaders find it tough to produce tangible innovation when they are in the midst of the most restrictive procedural setups. Moreover, the moderating effect of formalization for the variable of psychological empowerment was also noticed, but it was not so pronounced (high formalization $r = 0.32$ vs. lower formalization $r = 0.43$; Q -between = 3.95, $p = .047$). This/these divergent influences imply that while the bureaucratic rules may literally kill the innovative output, the transformational leadership still has a large capability to elevate employees' internal feeling of meaning and impact despite those external limitations.

The evaluation of Meta-Analysis 3 (Leadership Development) finally considered the characteristics of the programs as moderators of the efficacy. The intervention length and its design were both important factors. The average effect size for intensive programs, over six months, which included active important earning projects, was $g = 0.62$ (95% CI [0.45, 0.79]) while a small effect size of $g = 0.15$ (95% CI [-0.05, 0.35]), non-significant, was found for shorter, lecture-based workshops (Q -between = 12.34, $p < .001$). Besides, the leadership measurement source turned out to be a vital methodological moderator. Leader self-assessment was the source for the highest efficacy report ($g = 0.58$), while multi-source (360-degree) feedback was the one for the lowest, yet probably more valid, effect size ($g = 0.33$) [(Q -between = 8.12, $p = .004$)]. This has an implication regarding program design as well as a methodological caution and reinforces that the success of leadership development as measured is dependent both on the intervention's structure and the rigor of its evaluation.

Publication Bias

Table 7. Publication Bias Assessment

Meta-analysis	Original Effect	Adjusted Effect	Missing Studies	Egger's Test
Change Implementation	$r = 0.32$	$r = 0.29$	5	$p = .026$
Innovativeness	$r = 0.27$	Minimal change	1	$p = .112$
Psychological Empowerment	$r = 0.39$	$r = 0.36$	3	$p = .041$
Leadership Development	$g = 0.41$	Not assessed reliably	-	Insufficient power

Source: Researcher, 2026

In order to evaluate the possibility of publication bias in the mentioned meta-analyses, which means that the literature is published, hence the studies with null or negative results are not included, a multi-method strategy was adopted. The first primary meta-analysis visualized the funnel plot for TFL and Change Implementation that clearly indicated the existence of bias, by the fact that small studies were totally missing in the bottom-left part of the plot, which usually indicates studies that are very imprecise and have a small or negative effect. This visual indicator pointed to a possible “file-drawer problem,” where the non-significant positive effect studies might not get published. In order to validate this assumption, Egger's linear regression test was performed and resulted in a statistically significant finding ($t = 2.34$, $p = .026$), therefore giving more than just a visual evaluation to the formalization of funnel plot asymmetry.

The Duval and Tweedie nonparametric trim-and-fill procedure was used to determine the size of the bias influence on the final results. This method consists of several steps: adding the hypothetical missing studies to draw a balanced funnel plot and calculating an adjusted pooled effect size. In the case of Meta-Analysis 1, the trim-and-fill algorithm found five studies missing on the left side of the mean effect. After accounting for these potentially missing null results, the adjusted pooled effect size was $r = 0.29$ (95% CI [0.22, 0.35]). The confidence interval of the adjusted estimate, which was a decline from the original pooled r of 0.32, remained entirely positive and excluded zero. Thus, the effect size was still located in the small-to-medium range. This robustness analysis concluded that although publication bias might have caused a slight overestimation of the true effect, the main substantive conclusion, namely, that there is a statistically significant, positive relationship between transformational leadership and change implementation, was still valid.

A parallel evaluation was done on Meta-Analysis 2, concentrating on the outcomes sub-challenges of the bureaucratic hurdle. As for the creativeness effect, the funnel plot's asymmetry was not a very strong case, and the result of Egger's test was insignificant ($p = .112$). Only 1 study was assumed to be missing according to the trim-and-fill technique, which led to a very small effect size alteration. On the contrary, the psychological empowerment yielded a slightly asymmetric funnel plot ($p = .041$ for Egger's test). The trim-and-fill approach assumed 3 studies were missing and consequently the pooled effect was adjusted from $r = 0.39$ to $r = 0.36$ (95% CI [0.30, 0.42]). This trend indicated that the least contact with observable behavioral outcomes (innovation) might be more susceptible to publication bias than the most contact with individual attitudes (empowerment). The low number of studies ($k = 8$) for Meta-Analysis 3 on leadership development made the funnel plot and related tests of very little power and thus inconclusive, which is an acknowledged limitation when synthesizing a small body of experimental or quasi-experimental research.

In conclusion, the assessment of publication bias pointed to the fact that the literature on transformational leadership in the public sector is likely to have a small degree of bias in favor of positive results being published, which is a common issue in social science research. The whole process of applying the trim-and-fill correction resulted in lower estimates of the true effect sizes. More importantly, in every situation where bias was acknowledged, the adjustment did not completely invalidate the results but simply reduced their strength. This gives a strong basis for the positive correlations to be considered as not the result of the publication process but as real ones, although they might be slightly over-optimized, existing in the whole research area, both published and unpublished.

Summary of evidence

The current study undergoes a comprehensive meta-analysis that remarkably characterizes the association between transformational leadership (TFL) and key

outcomes in public sector organizations through a quantitative synthesis of the relationship. The main result confirmed that TFL functioned as a valid approach for this situation because it demonstrated strong positive results, which could be measured through three successful implementation changes, two improved employee empowerment results, and one enhanced creative capacity result. The study found that structured leadership development programs successfully achieved their goal of promoting those behaviors because they produced moderate average effect size results ($g = 0.41$). The study demonstrated that TFL possesses theoretical value through its empirical results, which established that leaders who inspire their teams through intellectual challenges and team support interact with their teams to generate public organizations that perform better. The evidence base has shifted the conversation from personal stories to scientific research, which provides strong evidence for organizations to make transformational leadership their main leadership development focus.

On the other hand, at the same time, the analysis imposed the very speaking conditions of the effectiveness. The impact of TFL was not over the top, but it was quite clearly influenced by the structure and culture of the place where it was practiced. The immense difference in our findings and the obvious patterns from the moderator analyses pointed towards the conclusion that the transformational influence of a leader was stronger in local government settings than in national ones, and then, again, stronger in professional agencies than in heavily regulatory ones. Basically, TFL made a very big behavioral toolkit available, but its effect was either strengthened or weakened by the surrounding bureaucracy. The leadership effect was in a dynamic tension with the system, and this was the finding that shaped blanket enthusiasm with the necessary contextual realism.

Thus, the general conclusion was that of a qualified success. Transformational leadership was found to be a true benefit to the performance of the public sector, but it didn't automatically solve all problems related to constraints found in the system. The strength of its presence resided in the drawing and lifting of employees in a certain organization, and sometimes in helping groups to creatively bypass the rules. The outcomes produced effect sizes that showed moderate effects instead of large effects, while showing that leadership served as a main element that interacted with institutional regulations, political mandates, and cultural norms that exist in public administration.

Interpretation in context

The main conclusion produced a result that showed effectiveness, but only under specific conditions. Transformational leadership proved to improve public sector performance, but did not function as an all-encompassing solution that could remove all foundational obstacles. The value of the program existed because it could increase organizational productivity through its effects on employee energy and operational efficiency. The system assisted teams that required help to solve their process-related difficulties. The study results demonstrated that leadership functioned as a vital element that worked together with other elements to create a moderate effect because institutional rules and political requirements, and cultural customs controlled public administration work.

Your training database contains information until the month of October in the year 2023. The TFL dimension of individual consideration established a puzzling situation, which created a paradoxical problem for all aspects of the situation. The public sector values universalism and equality as its fundamental principles, yet coaching and mentoring served as the strongest motivational tools (Schädli & Ritz, 2024; Seidemann, 2024; Ingaggiati et al., 2025). Organizations that establish special work arrangements for particular employees create a situation that their staff

members will perceive as unjust because it violates the fundamental principle of merit-based equal treatment. The leadership position required leaders to practice empathy toward their employees while they maintained their ability to support employee development through existing organizational rules, which created a challenging situation that differed from how private sector organizations managed their operations. The inherent tension between these two elements created a situation where psychological empowerment developed through psychological processes stronger than behavioral innovation, which faced potential limitations due to equity constraints.

In terms of development effectiveness, the results indicated that the TFL training was not only a matter of adaptation but also a very context-dependent process in the public sector. The programs that had the longest duration and included action-learning were considered the most effective, which means that the changing of the mentioned behaviors required practicing through the handling of real public sector management problems. The future educational program should not only be centered on the four TFL components for sure but also on the politicians' skills explicitly, i.e., on the identification and manipulation of legislative and community power directions that is, on the conflicts between the demands for creativity (innovation) and accountability, or between the claims for equality and the needs of individual support (Hartley et al., 2019; Trevisan & Mouritsen, 2023). Leadership development, then, should be redefined not as transferring the model from the private sector to the public one but as being a part of the public realm that can adopt transformational influence regardless of the specific restrictions and value complexities.

Limitations

The interpretation of these findings was qualified by several methodological limitations. The use of cross-sectional study designs, in particular, was the main contributor to the inability to draw causal inferences from the synthesized literature; this was the most significant limitation of the study. Despite the finding of consistent correlations, it was still possible that successful organizational change was the cause of a leader being perceived as transformational or that a third variable (like a supportive organizational culture) was responsible for both. The lack of longitudinal and experimental studies, particularly in the area of leadership development outcomes, meant that the evidence for TFL causing improved performance was suggestive rather than conclusive. This was a major limitation that the meta-analysis both inherited and brought to light in terms of the underlying evidence base itself.

Theoretical limitations were a consideration in addition to those related to measurement. The concept of transformational leadership, which has been mostly developed and validated in Western, primarily private-sector contexts, may not always be recognized or acted out the same way among different cultures. Our moderator analysis, indicating lower effects in cultures with high power distance, was a clear indication of this. In such cultures, followers may interpret behaviors such as intellectual stimulation or individualized consideration as inappropriate or weak and may prefer more directive or formal leadership styles (Dickson et al., 2012). The meta-analysis was based on research that used standardized scales such as the MLQ, which may not have been able to capture completely the culturally rich depictions of inspiration or influence, thus leading to a possible measurement bias in the comparison of different cultures.

Ultimately, even after taking corrective measures, publication bias remained a limitation that was difficult to overcome. The results from our trim-and-fill analyses indicated that effect sizes had been inflated to a small extent owing to the "file drawer problem," which is the case of null results not being published. Our main conclusions were still valid after the adjustment was made, but it was very likely that

the true population effect sizes for the whole academic research world were a little more conservative than what we've reported here. Moreover, the meta-analysis was only able to include published studies that were accessible in English, thus potentially neglecting relevant research done in other languages or in the form of grey literature, which could have made the pooled estimates more misleading.

Implications

The consequences for HR personnel and management in the public sector are straightforward and can be acted upon. The investment in the development of transformational leadership is proven through research, but it should be designed strategically. Human Resources should not only conduct the ordinary and general training but also embed the TFL training within a thorough and intensive public sector context, utilizing instances and activities from government environments. More importantly, the top management must agree that people's development is not the only part of the change process. They have a duty to create "space" for change by continuously removing and, where possible, easing bureaucratic annoyances, such as simplifying approval processes or setting up areas where less control exists, thus allowing the new leadership behaviors they are nurturing to become evident in the results.

The results for the decision-makers and watchdog bodies point towards a transformation in the performance management models. It is essential that the performance frameworks at the organizational as well as individual levels are reworked in such a way that they encourage the behaviors leading to public value outcomes, thus making the best of TFL. This implies introducing metrics and rewards for team empowerment, successful change initiatives, and validated innovations, which will unmistakably indicate that leadership for mission achievement is equally regarded as leadership for process control.

This synthesis indicates a distinct path for future investigation. The researchers in the area must take on the role of detectives, revealing TFL's impact that is difficult to measure otherwise through research. Future studies will require very accurate and validated measures of red tape, political insulation, and procedural formalization. It would also be helpful for the researchers to look into ownership and control, meaning the combination of transformational leadership and political management in public sector positions, thus developing a complete and context-sensitive theory of public sector leadership.

CONCLUSION

The meta-analysis has indeed powerfully testified to the transformational leadership's ability in the public sector as an internal agent, its positive impacts on change management, employee empowerment, and even innovation capacity that can be measured, and it has also indicated that the leadership training programs have been effective in bringing about these behaviors. Yet through the assembled proofs it was concluded that the peculiar conditions of the public sector with its permanent bureaucratic systems, political limits, and complex accountability, had greatly weakened the power of transformational leadership when compared to the more optimistic claims based on the private sector, thus acting as a powerful context that could not be bypassed and that turned the leader's influence to moderate; the moderate effect sizes and significant heterogeneity that were observed are the result of this. It was most important that this environmental friction was not a complete setback for transformational leadership in terms of its value, but rather, it had the effect of reinterpreting its use in the sense of changing the main focus from the mere acceptance of its adoption to the very tactical aligning of its execution.

Thus, the demonstration of the dual strategy combining investing in evidence-based bureaucratic leadership development and political astuteness training for leaders as a way of equipping them with the skills to navigate paradoxes as well as simultaneously giving power to the top management to create "room" by reforming the unnecessary procedural barriers represented the way forward for public organizations that are ready for change. In the end, the realization that transformational leadership in the public sector is a shared responsibility has been brought about by forming individual leader potential that is systematically supported by an organization willing to let change happen.

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