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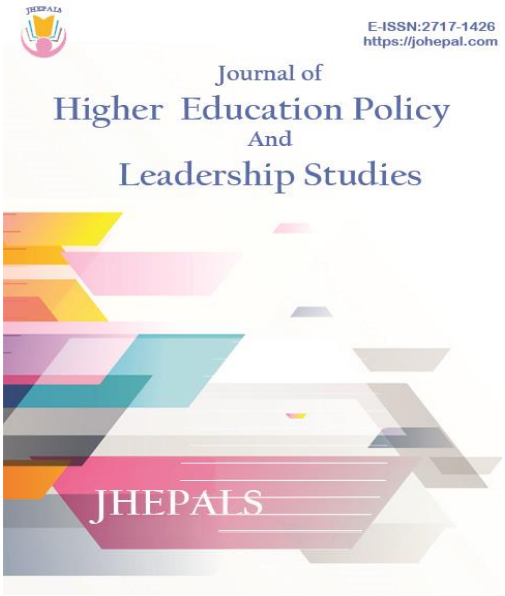

Higher Education in Turbulence: A Need for Transformational Leadership

Thomas G. Henkel
Department of Management, College of Business, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, USA
Email: Thomas.Henkel@erau.edu ; henke900@erau.edu

Ann Marie Ade
Department of Humanities and Communication, College of Arts & Sciences, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, USA
Email: ade017@erau.edu

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Higher Education in Turbulence: A Need for Transformational Leadership

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Thomas G. Henkel *
Ann Marie Ade

Abstract

The performance and effectiveness of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are indispensable sources for an organization's success and are pivotal determinants of organizational success. This study investigates the crucial role of transformational leadership in enhancing the performance and effectiveness of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), which are vital for organizational success. Utilizing a quantitative research approach centered on The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ 5X), this research aimed to assess the impact of transformational leadership on staff and faculty within HEIs. A total of 192 responses from leaders of higher education institutions contributed to the study, revealing significant positive correlations between transformational leadership components and HEI outcomes. The findings of the study assert the importance of transformational styles of leadership in HEIs due to characteristics that are most suitable for the development of the HEIs and its multiple positive effects on the organizational structure of HEIs, the behavior of their employees, their job performance, the quality of academic research, and community service outcomes.

Keywords: Higher Education Institutions; Transformational Leadership; Employees; Success; Turbulence

*Corresponding author's email: Thomas.Henkel@erau.edu ; henke900@erau.edu

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Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) find themselves navigating a dynamic and rapidly evolving educational market. The trajectory of higher education enrollment has shifted noticeably, with some areas experiencing a decline in student enrollment in HEIs (Welding, 2025). This change underscores HEIs' need to adapt and respond strategically to the evolving educational landscape. Another factor influencing prospective students' decisions regarding their educational pursuits is the increasing financial burden associated with higher education. Reports indicate that since 1980, the overall cost of full-time attendance at a four-year college has surged by over 180% (Drozdowski, 2024). This economic pressure extends beyond tuition expenses, encompassing a significant rise in student room and board charges (McGurran, 2023).

In an intriguing turn of events, numerous HEIs have opted for an unorthodox strategy to alleviate financial strains rather than directly confronting the mounting expenses. This strategy involves the implementation of tuition discounts, wherein a portion of each tuition dollar is reallocated through financial aid, thereby indirectly easing the economic burden on students and their families (Drozdowski, 2024). The landscape of higher education is undergoing dynamic and rapid changes. The trajectory of higher education enrollment has notably shifted, leading to declines in student enrollment in certain regions (Welding, 2025). This shift underscores HEIs' need to adapt and respond to the evolving educational milieu strategically. Another significant factor prompting prospective students to reassess their educational pursuits is the escalating financial burden associated with higher education. Reports indicate that since 1980, the overall cost of full-time attendance at a four-year college has surged by more than 180% (Drozdowski, 2024). These economic pressures extend beyond tuition expenses and encompass a considerable rise in student room and board charges (McGurran, 2023).

In an intriguing turn of events, numerous HEIs have opted for an unorthodox strategy to alleviate financial strains rather than directly confronting the mounting expenses. This strategy involves implementing tuition discounts, wherein a portion of each tuition dollar is reallocated through financial aid, thereby indirectly easing the economic burden on students and their families (Drozdowski, 2024). The landscape of higher education is undergoing dynamic and rapid changes.

Graduating and being burdened with substantial student loan debt can significantly impede the progress of HEI students as they endeavor to attain essential milestones in life, such as homeownership, marriage, and starting a family. The financial strain imposed by significant student debt emerges as a formidable barrier, affecting not only individual aspirations but broader societal expectations and goals for the succeeding generation (Palasciano, 2025). Simultaneously, millions of prospective students diligently weigh their options after completing high school (Drozdowski, 2024). It is, therefore, unsurprising that numerous HSIs have announced or are considering mergers with other HSIs (Burris, 2023) in response to these challenges. Compounding the issue is that many full-time faculty members in HEIs are resigning from their positions to pursue careers in other fields (Flaherty, 2022).

The issue of HSIs being influenced by political radicals is a growing concern. The increasing dominance of radical ideologies on campuses is evident as senior professors retire

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and are replaced by individuals with more radical viewpoints. Ellis (2023) states that the enforcement of radical orthodox ideologies has tripled in the past three years, capturing the educational system by a fringe political faction that oppresses constitutional values and traditional ways of life, which is unacceptable. Resignations of prominent university leaders such as Liz Magill from the University of Pennsylvania and Claudine Gay from Harvard University underscore institutions' challenges (Belkin, 2023). These schools have been accused of suppressing ideas that diverge from the progressive worldview of their administrations, faculties, and activist student groups (Arness, 2023). Furthermore, the tenure of leaders in higher education is decreasing, reflecting the increasingly polarized and volatile political climate. According to the ACE survey, leaders across all types of schools held their positions for an average of 5.9 years in 2022, compared to 8.5 years in 2006. This trend may be attributed to the need to navigate an environment marked by political divisiveness (Korn, 2024). Recently, a HEI president admitted that the recent protests on campus have contributed to low enrollment for the upcoming academic year, necessitating possible staffing cuts (Hays, 2024).

To address these challenges effectively, higher education leadership must acknowledge the need for adaptation and understand that critical drivers of change include advancements in technology and internationalization. Adopting a business-oriented approach to motivate faculty may not be sufficient. Instead, leaders should strive to inspire and empower stakeholders to navigate the complexities of the turbulent higher education landscape. While the threats facing higher education are numerous and concerning, the path forward may be more evolutionary than revolutionary. By embracing new realities as they unfold, institutions can strive to emerge more substantial and more resilient in these challenges (O'Brien, 2022). We know that colleges and universities cannot continue to operate the same way and expect their lot to improve. How they reinvent themselves in the coming decade will determine their fate paradigm shift in today's fast-moving market.

Theoretical Background

In accordance with the United Nations (2022), HEIs bear a significant responsibility encompassing the preparation of future professionals, the pursuit of meaningful research endeavors, and active engagement with communities and stakeholders to address challenges at local, national, regional, and global levels. HEI leadership can adopt a strategic approach grounded in the notion of cultivating and leveraging knowledge to effect positive change for their students, as proposed by Marymount University (2021). Consequently, HEI leadership must foster an environment of shared governance that inspires faculty and staff to collectively advance the institution's academic objectives, as underscored by Post University (2021). Through concerted efforts in collaboration and communication, educational leaders within HEIs collaborate and forge partnerships to drive constructive outcomes, setting and attaining transformative goals (Marymount University, 2021).

Leadership can further fulfill this obligation by nurturing an organizational work environment that facilitates faculty and staff deriving genuine value and significance from their roles, fostering full engagement with their work and the organization's overarching goals (Academic Leadership Group, 2023). This can be achieved by implementing organizational-wide rewards and incentive structures such as profit-sharing and job

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enrichment initiatives. Empirical research indicates that heightened engagement among faculty and staff correlates with enhanced organizational performance, resulting in heightened levels of quality and accountability (Canaves & Minelli, 2022). Hence, it is incumbent upon HEI leadership to examine the factors contributing to a work environment that stimulates and motivates faculty and staff toward proactive engagement and action (Academic Leadership Group, 2023).

Effectively communicating the organization's mission and establishing transparent goals constitute foundational elements for driving success ("Strategic Planning," 2009). Moreover, when faculty and staff perceive a sense of alignment with the organization's objectives and experience a collegial organizational culture, they tend to exhibit heightened motivation and dedication toward advancing the mission and success of higher education (Yale, n.d.). Furthermore, when faculty and staff can derive significance from their work, they are more inclined to engage with their roles, contributing to a more robust overall organizational performance (Bailey & Madden, 2016).

Research indicates that transformational leadership offers a framework for shaping the work environment and fostering employee commitment (Steinmann et al., 2018; McGuire & Kennerly, 2006). It is plausible that transformational leadership improves the performance of individuals and teams and mitigates the impact of counterproductive work behaviors. This effect likely stems from the capacity of transformational leaders to cultivate a dedication to collective goals among team members, transcending individual interests and fostering a shared sense of purpose. Transformational leaders advocate collaboration and inspiration, emphasizing teamwork and empowering employees (Post University, 2021). Leveraging excellent communication skills, transformational leaders facilitate employee growth and encourage full engagement with their work (Cherry, 2024).

The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ 5X) serves as a tool for assessing the dimensions of transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Xirasagar, 2008; Batista, Esteve, & van Witteloostuijn, 2021). Originally, transformational leadership comprised three key components: Idealized Influence, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration. Idealized Influence (II) entails leadership behavior characterized by the leader serving as a role model who is respected, admired, and trusted by followers. This behavior encompasses the attributes attributed to the leader by followers and the leader's actions. Intellectual Stimulation (IS) involves leadership behavior to heighten followers' awareness of problems and encourage them to perceive issues from novel perspectives, fostering creativity in devising solutions. Individualized Consideration (IC) entails the leader offering support and encouragement and acting as a mentor or coach to followers. Refining this conceptualization introduced another facet of transformational leadership: Inspirational Motivation (IM). This component encompasses communicating a compelling vision, issuing challenges, and embodying enthusiasm, optimism, and a steadfast commitment to a shared vision (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Xirasagar, 2008; Batista, Esteve, & van Witteloostuijn, 2021).

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Research Methodology

Purpose of the Study

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are grappling with significant challenges in today's competitive environment and the rapidly evolving technological landscape. This quantitative study aimed to explore the presence of transformational leadership styles within a successful HEI. While existing literature highlights the role of transformational leadership in HEI success, identifying specific styles crucial for success is essential for university leaders striving to foster an engaging and motivating work environment conducive to achievement. Our investigation commenced by posing the research question: Which transformational leadership components are key contributors to HEI success?

Hypotheses

To address the research question, the following hypotheses were tested:

- H_1: influential leaders within HEIs demonstrate the Transformational Leadership component of Idealized Influence.
- H_2: influential leaders within HEIs demonstrate the Transformational Leadership component of Inspirational Motivation.
- H_3: influential leaders within HEIs demonstrate the Transformational Leadership component of Intellectual Stimulation.
- H_4: influential leaders within HEIs demonstrate the Transformational Leadership component of intellectual Consideration.

Data Collection and Statistical Measures

Data were gathered using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), developed initially by (Bass & Avolio, 1993), to evaluate transformational leadership styles among HEI academic employees. A shortened version of the questionnaire consisting of twenty (20) items was employed to measure four dimensions of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. Respondents rated their leaders' transformational style using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4 (frequently). This study employed a non-random sampling technique to select HEI academic managers and employees. Invitations were sent out to 225 adult HEI academic managers. Participants were briefed on the study's objectives and assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. They were informed that only authorized personnel would have access to their information. After removing duplicates, outliers, and incomplete responses, 192 valid MLQ responses from the academic employees remained for subsequent data analysis in this research study. The methodological procedure employed in this study was quantitative, involving the selection, analysis, and synthesis of statistical results.

Results

The objective of the present study was to investigate the effect of transformational leadership on the performance of a successful HEI. The findings of the study assert the importance of transformational styles of leadership in HEIs due to characteristics that are

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most suitable for the development of the HEIs and its multiple positive effects on the organizational structure of HEIs, the behavior of their employees, their job performance, the quality of academic research, and community service outcomes. The findings reveal that transformational leadership has a significant positive effect on HEIs. The results strongly support past studies that have found an impactful contribution of transformational leadership on increased performance in many organizations (Xirasagar, 2008; Yukl & Van Fleet, 1982; Hatter & Bass, 1988), including within the higher education sector (Meng, 2022). Therefore, HEIs should endeavor to select and nurture transformational leadership qualities among academic leaders for increased performance throughout the institution. Leadership characteristics should be considered when selecting and appointing academicians to administrative posts. In addition, existing leaders should reflect on, and possibly reconsider, their choice of leadership style since it has such a significant effect on performance.

Table 1.
Transformational Leadership Styles

Idealized Influence	My leader acts as a role model, adhering to high moral and ethical conduct and thereby providing a sense of vision and mission. I trust my leader.	Score 3.3
Inspirational Motivation	My leader creates an appealing vision by showing optimism about my abilities, creates a sense of purpose, and encourages team spirit.	Score 3.2
Intellectual Consideration	My leader acknowledges my needs, provides support and empathy, and considers my talents, background, and situation.	Score 3.0
Intellectual Stimulation	My leader challenges assumptions, takes risks, and helps me think outside the box for creativity and innovation.	Score 3.7

As presented in Table 1, our research findings clearly indicate that all four transformational leadership styles received scores ranging from 3.0 to 3.7 on a four-point scale.

- Hypothesis 1 posits that influential leaders within higher education institutions demonstrate the Transformational Leadership component of Idealized Influence.

In our study, the second highest score recorded was 3.3, achieved by Transformational Leaders (TLs) in HEIs who exemplify integrity (formerly known as Idealized Influence). These leaders set ethical standards for HEI employees and are highly esteemed and trusted by their team members (Allen, 2016; Towler, 2019). TLs who demonstrate idealized influence and charisma lead by example, earning trust through their actions, which is crucial for influencing employees and enhancing organizational performance (McConnell, 2013; Howell & Frost, 1989; Williams Jr. et al., 2018; Conger, 2011; Breevaart & Zacher, 2019). Charismatic TLs are known for their inspiring leadership style that motivates employees to emulate them, thereby significantly contributing to organizational goals (Northouse, 2016). Bastedo et al.

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(2014) also found a positive correlation between college presidents' charisma (Idealized Influence) and the number of student applications received by their institutions.

It is important to note that while transformational and charismatic leadership share similarities, there are also distinct differences. Transformational leaders empower employees and foster independence by delegating significant authority and developing their skills and self-confidence. In contrast, charismatic leaders inspire employees to believe they can achieve goals even in challenging or stressful situations, which proves effective during crises or in stagnant organizations (Yukl, 2013). Discussion of charismatic leaders is often focused on their personalities and not necessarily on their development of transformational skills of others.

- Hypothesis 2 posits that influential leaders within higher education institutions demonstrate the Transformational Leadership component of Inspirational Motivation.

In our study, the third highest score achieved was 3.2, attained by TLs who foster encouragement (formerly known as Inspirational Motivation) (Towler, 2019). This trait underscores the TL's capability to articulate a compelling vision that motivates employees to surpass expectations (Steinmann et al., 2018). TLs who promote inspirational motivation lead their teams by instilling confidence in exceeding expectations (Barth-Farkas & Vera, 2014). These leaders demonstrate optimism towards their team, prioritizing the organization’s mission over personal interests and inspiring additional effort for collective success (McConnell, 2023; Alzoraiki et al., 2018). Such leadership practices reduce employee stress and fatigue by fostering optimism and fairness, cultivating intrinsic motivation and deep engagement (Kim, 2017). Yukl & Van Fleet (1982) identified a positive association between TLs and employees' perceived effectiveness, enhancing motivation levels. Similarly, Hatter & Bass (1988) found that TL-led teams consistently reported high job satisfaction and motivation.

It is vital that TLs recognize each employee's uniqueness and tailor motivational strategies accordingly. It is crucial to customize mentoring and coaching approaches to enable everyone to achieve their full potential (Boomah et al., 2018). Additionally, according to Chen and Wu (2020), leaders who practice individualized consideration value and accommodate the cultural diversity among their employees.

- Hypothesis 3 posits that influential leaders within higher education institutions demonstrate the Transformational Leadership component of Intellectual Stimulation.

In our study, the transformational leadership component of Intellectual Stimulation received the highest rating of 3.3 from HEI employees who assessed their TLs. Successful leaders in higher education institutions exemplify the transformational leadership component of Intellectual Stimulation (Towler, 2019). TLs who emphasize Intellectual Stimulation collaborate closely with employees to foster creativity and challenge conventional organizational methods to drive positive change. Instead of making decisions unilaterally, these leaders engage team members, motivating them with both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards to tackle challenges and maintain competitiveness in the educational

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sector (McConnell, 2023). According to Bass (1985), TLs encourage followers to think critically and explore innovative approaches in their roles.

Correspondingly, research conducted by Gaganmale et al. (2023) highlighted a strong positive relationship between Intellectual Stimulation in transformational leadership and employees' job satisfaction. They argue that higher job satisfaction leads to improved performance, thereby enhancing organizational productivity, efficiency, and overall success. Furthermore, Steinmann, et al. (2018) found that these TLs possess a unique ability to inspire employees to commit to organizational goals through proactive behaviors. Moreover, TLs support employees in pursuing organizational objectives by reinforcing their belief in the significance and achievability of these goals. This support fosters a sense of purpose and alignment among employees, thereby boosting overall organizational effectiveness and success. TLs play a pivotal role in aligning individual efforts with collective goals, contributing to a cohesive and motivated workforce.

- Hypothesis 4 posits that influential leaders within higher education institutions demonstrate the Transformational Leadership component of intellectual Consideration.

In our study, the fourth highest score, achieving 3.0, was attained by TLs who prioritize coaching and developing employees, a concept formerly referred to as Individualized Consideration (Towler, 2019). Individualized Consideration encompasses the role of transformational leaders as mentors and coaches for their employees (Northouse, 2016). These leaders actively listen to their team members' concerns and needs, offering support and demonstrating empathy toward each employee's unique circumstances and background. Research by (Ogola et al., 2017) also indicated that effective task performance was facilitated when TLs provided mentorship and coaching. Similarly, Wright (1998) observed that TLs' coaching empowers employees to exceed their current performance levels.

By practicing individualized consideration, TLs recognize and nurture the distinct talents that each employee brings to the workplace, facilitating the development and demonstration of these critical skills and behaviors (Towler, 2019). This approach, reinforced by targeted recognition, motivates employees to strive for further growth and reinforces their significance within the team (McConnell, 2023). Leaders who embody individualized consideration understand the importance of treating employees as individuals. Moreover, by linking rewards to performance, leaders who practice individualized consideration help employees understand the impact of their actions on organizational values (Ogola et al., 2017).

Discussion

Due to the rapid changes in the environment, the agility and adaptability of HEIs are crucial for achieving success. Consequently, Transformational Leadership (TL) has emerged as the predominant leadership style in the 21st century, primarily driven by rapid technological advancements worldwide. TL is also highly valued in corporate environments (McConnell, 2023). For TLs to achieve optimal success within their organizations, it is essential to secure the complete commitment of team members and employees (McConnell, 2023).

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Transformational leadership enhances employee relationships by cultivating a work environment characterized by fairness, respect, and support (Turnnidge & Cote, 2017). Previous literature consistently supports the notion that transformational leadership fosters employee motivation and cultivates positive psychological states such as a sense of meaningfulness in work, ownership of outcomes, and awareness of work results (Khan et al., 2020; Iqbal et al., 2020; Givens, 2008).

To maximize organizational success, TLs must understand the importance of garnering total commitment from their employees to ensure full work engagement in achieving organizational goals (Steinmann et al., 2018). TLs achieve this by establishing personal connections with employees, understanding their motivations and challenges, and addressing individual needs to foster a positive and inclusive work environment where team members receive recognition for their contributions to organizational achievements (McConnell, 2023; Gomez, 2024). Likewise, TLs significantly contribute to employees' intrinsic motivation (Khan et al., 2020; Thompson, n.d.).

Leaders in HEIs should thoroughly grasp the components of TL and recognize that implementing these styles can motivate, encourage, and demonstrate consideration, thereby eliciting additional effort from employees to advance organizational objectives. We propose that HEI TLs motivate employees to satisfy self-actualization needs rather than the lower needs in Maslow's (1954) need hierarchy. Bass (1985) further extended Burn's theory and "suggested that transformational leaders expand their followers 'need portfolios' by raising them towards higher levels of Maslow's hierarchy, focusing on self-actualization needs hierarchy" (Dvir et al., 2002, p. 20). Our study illustrates that HEI TLs inspire their employees to leverage their strengths and proactively contribute to the workplace.

Summary

Studies similar to ours have shown that the transformational leadership individualized consideration component positively correlates with organizational success, including employee satisfaction with their jobs and managers and supervisors (Steinmann et al., 2018). In addition to the present study, empirical research by Bruch and Walter (2007) revealed that managers who display the transformational leadership component of individual consideration treat employees with personal attention, support, trust, and respect. Such findings show that managers who exhibit transformational leadership behaviors that are relationship-oriented can motivate and inspire employees to achieve productivity more extraordinarily (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The present study findings also support the concept that when managers use the transformational leadership component of individualized consideration, they take a genuine interest in team members' personal development, which, in turn, encourages employees to achieve higher levels of team effectiveness (Ogola et al., 2017; Bass & Riggio, 2006). It is important to note that being aware of employees' needs for self-development is consistent with the need for self-actualization at the pinnacle of Maslow's needs hierarchy (Cherry, 2023).

Furthermore, as mentioned in the literature review, employees who feel they are a part of the workplace fabric have the potential to achieve more extraordinary performance; thus, a HEI should take measures to identify the level of employee performance within the organization and implement a strategy to create a work environment that promotes

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outstanding (Olmstead, 2025). Moreover, Gallup (n.d.) studies showed that when organizational leadership adopts this strategy, the results are reduced employee disengagement and turnover and increased employee work engagement.

Implications

We believe that our study is of great importance in that HEIs face a unique challenge in engaging a staff and faculty workforce with increasing numbers of adjunct faculty, thus adding another layer of complexity to the issue performance (Bradley, 2021). However, the right leadership style may bring about such change and result in staff and faculty who can produce successful 21st-century students (Magbool et al., 2022). In sum, TL has been shown to be related to needed organizational change, which elicits commitment and increased work efforts from organization employees (Gathungu et al., 2015; Lancefield & Rangen, 2021). Promoting transformational thinking among leaders in a HEI sets a positive example and inspires others to adopt new perspectives.

In summary, effective TL in HEIs demands the ability to adeptly navigate complex challenges, particularly amidst periods of change and uncertainty (Bourgeois, 2016). Successful leaders in this context respond effectively to unexpected opportunities and obstacles and possess a visionary outlook that enables them to develop strategic plans and bring their vision to fruition. Likewise, TL visionary leadership necessitates a combination of long-term foresight and short-term tactics to propel institutions forward. Moreover, these leaders prioritize creating a conducive environment characterized by robust relationship-building efforts (Hagan, 2021). Given the diverse skill set required of HEI leaders, establishing an ongoing development process becomes imperative. This process should focus on continuous improvement, addressing evolving challenges, and equipping leaders with the necessary tools to navigate dynamic educational landscapes (Sawant et al., 2023). Such proactive leadership development initiatives are fundamental in ensuring the sustained success and relevance of HEIs in today's competitive and rapidly changing academic environment.

Future studies

The present study has original findings and essential implications, yet some limitations are associated with qualitative studies. However, our study sets a benchmark for future studies focusing on transformational leadership, including a quantitative statistics component approach, such as surveys, to confirm conclusions drawn from this study, allowing organizations to rely on concrete numbers based on obtaining a larger sample size. Also, based on the results of our research, future studies might look at mindfulness. A study of mindfulness as an antecedent of organizational resilience will provide insight into how managers who are not transformational leaders may adversely impact an organization or business to respond to turbulence and compete with rivals in an ever-so-competitive global market.

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Human Participants

The study involved human participants, all of whom provided informed consent to participate. All other ethical considerations are observed in alignment with the author's institutional policies and the journal's guidelines.

Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

The authors claim that [Grammarly] was used in this research to improve the language of the manuscript. The authors also confirm that no further use of these technologies were made in the writing of different parts of the research.

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Prof. Thomas G. Henkel's career with ERAU began in 1992 as an adjunct faculty member. In 1995, he was hired as Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University's Resident Campus Director for the Savannah, Ga., Campus. In 1997, he was promoted to Embry-Riddle's Southeast Regional Manager, and was responsible for 21 resident campuses and 10 teaching sites. In 2004, he was assigned as an Embry-Riddle Worldwide Regional Associate Dean for Academics. In this position, he was responsible for all faculty and academic matters and provided leadership for 30 full-time faculty and more than 700 part-time faculty. Currently, he is a Professor of the Practice with the Worldwide College of Business Department of Management. He also served as the ERAU WWC Senate Speaker.

Prof. Ann Marie Ade has been with Embry-Riddle since 1992. She serves on the Worldwide Faculty Senate, currently Speaker, COAS Faculty Council, and several committees. She is also the Worldwide's Quality Enhancement Plan Champion for *Writing Matters* and serves as course monitor/developer for GNED 104, ENGL 106, and ENGL 123. Ms. Ade has held various positions with Embry-Riddle Worldwide at Patuxent River and Joint Base Andrews, MD campuses including Academic Advisor, Assistant Center Director, Center Director and Director of Academics. She previously taught high school English in Ilion, NY; writing, English, and communication courses at University Maryland University College; and English courses at College of Southern Maryland. Currently, she is an Associate Professor of the Practice with the Worldwide's College of Arts & Sciences.

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