



## **The Relationship between Supervisor's Leadership Skills and Student Learning through Internship Experiences**

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According to National Center for Education Statistics (2015), the number of students who attended college in 2015 was 20.2 million, a drastic increase of 4.9 million students since 2000. College degrees are important, of course, but according to *U.S. News and World Report*, internships make a greater difference in graduate employment success rates (Burnsed, 2010). That is because internships offer unique experiential learning opportunities where students can learn independently under the supervision of their employers in real-life business settings. In this light, textile and apparel researchers have also echoed the need for educating students in teamwork, leadership, and communication skills (Frazier & Cheek, 2015), all of which internship opportunities could provide. However, not all internships help students' learning, and there is very little extant research that specifically examines the relationship between the leadership style of immediate supervisors and the knowledge creation process during the internship experience.

In the knowledge creation literature, organizational knowledge creation theory (OKC) (Nonaka, 1994) explains how organizational members create and acquire new knowledge within the organization—via socialization (e.g., brainstorming, cooperative projects, or employee rotation across areas), externalization (i.e., explaining through analogy or examples), internalization (i.e., conducting simulation or experiments to embody knowledge), and combination (i.e., researching ideas from existing materials, database, or websites). As an organizational member, an intern will have access to all four modes of the knowledge creation processes, and the supervisors' direct and indirect interactions with students through these processes affect the overall learning outcomes. Specifically, if the supervisors have transformational leadership (i.e., they lead a group by focusing on common goals and by leveraging common motivations, beliefs, and aspirations skill) (Nguyen, 2009), students are expected to experience more socialization (H1a) and internalization (H1b) than the others, because transformational leadership focuses on strong interpersonal communication and teamwork skills. If the supervisors have transactional leadership (i.e., they lead by focusing on employee effort/commitment and improvement through strict rules and rewards) (Nguyen, 2009), students are expected to be exposed more to externalization (H2a) and combination (H2b) than others, because transactional leaders tend to use direct communication without euphemism and websites for faster knowledge transfer.

For this study, an online survey was designed to measure the four modes of knowledge creation using Sabherwal and Becerra-Fernandez's (2003) 24 items (Cronbach alpha = .886). Transformational and transactional leadership were measured by Nguyen's (2009) 19 items (Cronbach alpha = .925) and 15 items (Cronbach alpha = .799), respectively. After the approval of the Institutional Review Board, the surveys were distributed to students at a large university

through mass email systems and social media outlets. Ninety-two usable responses from students who had previous internship experiences were collected in spring 2016. SPSS was used for statistical analyses.

Results showed that, overall, students indicated that their supervisors were more transformational leaders ( $M=3.842$ ;  $S.D.=.658$ ) than transactional leaders ( $M=2.661$ ;  $S.D.=.2493$ ). Correlations between transformational leaderships and socialization was the highest ( $r=.425$ ;  $p=.000$ ), supporting H1a, and that between transformational leadership and internalization was the second highest ( $r=.428$ ;  $p=.000$ ), supporting H1b. Correlations between transformational leadership and externalization and combination were lower than the first two. Correlations between transactional leaderships and externalization was the highest ( $r=.302$ ;  $p=.003$ ), supporting H2a. Combination also showed higher correlation with transactional leadership ( $r=.235$ ,  $p=.024$ ) than with socialization and internalization, supporting H2b.

The findings have many implications. First, the study fills a gap in the literature, which focuses mostly on the types of soft skills that the future workforce needs, by showing the importance of the leadership style of the immediate supervisor on students' knowledge creation experience. Second, the overall results of the study indicate that students are learning via socialization and internalization when their supervisors exhibit transformational leadership. At the same time, students experience externalization and combination when their supervisors show transactional leadership. Therefore, by understanding the leadership style of the supervisors, students could seek opportunities better suited to their learning styles. Future research could be done to assess the impact of supervisors' leadership styles on student learning outcomes to analyze their relationships, which would contribute to theory and the understanding of students' transition from college to work life.

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