



## A Study of Burnout in Relation to Leadership Styles of Thai Employees

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### Abstract

With the onset of globalization employee's life styles and work environments have changed leading to more stressful conditions at work and in the long run a break down in daily functioning. The present study investigated if, burnout, a pathogenic construct can be impacted by utilization of different leadership styles in different organizations in Bangkok, Thailand.

A sample size of 400 employees in executive and administrative positions was selected randomly, from different organizations. To measure burnout levels, the Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter (1996) burnout inventory (MBI) scale was utilized. To measure transformational and transactional leadership, the multifactor leadership questionnaire (MLQ) namely "Leadership dimension instrument" by Den Hartog, Muijen, and Koopman (1997) and Bass and Avolio (1995; 2004) were used.

The data was tested using quantitative methods of descriptive and inferential analyses. The Structural equation modeling tested hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. Hypothesis 1 was partly supported by the data and indicated that when a leader is transformational lower levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization are experienced. Hypothesis 2 was partly supported by the data and indicated that when a leader is transactional, the higher will be his personal accomplishment. Finally, Hypothesis 3 was partly supported by the data since employees who displayed transformational leadership styles in management position had higher levels of depersonalization dimension of burnout.

This study can be extended to other cultures and the knowledge gained can be used to provide managers and administrators with an idea of what could elevate their burnout levels and suggestions for alleviating burnout levels are recommended.

**Keywords:** Burnout, Leadership Styles, Thai Employees

### Introduction

**"Leadership is an active role; 'lead' is a verb. But the leader who tries to do it all is headed for burnout, and in a powerful hurry." (Owens, n.d.)**

Many professionals at an operational and management level, in the present globalised society are finding themselves under increasing amount of pressure because of exposure to so many stressors in their family life and work life. A stressor can be defined as any factor in the environment that causes stress. The person's reaction to the stressor is referred to as stress. The long term impact of stress can lead to burnout, depression, disillusionment, demoralization and alienation which have all often been used as synonyms to refer to similar kinds of work-

related outcomes' and to distinguish these terms is arduous.

The word burnout became popular with Freudenberg (1974) after 1960 According to Maslach and Jackson (1981), pioneers in research on burnout, burnout usually occurs with those who work in human service industry like health care, teaching and social work, Today burnout is not confined to only persons who take care of others but to others like students, teachers and employees in an organization because of situational and contextual factors. Most researchers agree that burnout occurs when a person feels unable to control any more stressors and is depleted of all energy and experiences a complete state of inadequacy. Rothmann (2008) claimed that burnout is more concerned with the fatigue part of the vigor-fatigue continuum and can cause decline in



well-being. **If this is true, do employees who “give their all” to an organization and display different leadership styles experience more burnout?**

The meaning of leadership has different connotations for different researchers but many different definitions of leadership revolve around the central idea that leaders may have a perceived influence on organizational members (Bohn & Grafton, 2002; Rost, 1991). In recent years and Bass's theory is considered as the most appropriate to analyze leadership (Eisenbach, Watson, & Pillai, 1999; Parry, 2002) and includes the contemporary styles of leadership these days are which are, transformational, transactional and laissez-faire

Transactional leadership is concerned with a give and take relationship and includes behavioral dimensions like **contingent reward** which offers rewards for achieving the standards of performance, **management-by-exception (active)**, where the leaders pay attention to mistakes committed by followers and **management-by-exception (passive)** in the leader reacts to situations only when it is necessary (Bass, 1985).

Transformational leaders increase self-esteem and sense of purpose as they explain the vision to followers (Bass, 1985). Transformational leaders portray five behaviors; firstly, **idealized influence (attributed)** which is much the leaders are trusted, admired and revered because the leader possesses charisma and is a role model for followers. Secondly, **idealized influence (behavior)** which means that the leader is driven by the mission and goals and has high moral and ethical standards. Thirdly, **inspirational motivation** is when the leader expresses the significance of the goal and provides meaning to work. Fourthly, **intellectual stimulation** in which the leader promotes the followers to increase creativity and innovation. Finally, **individual consideration** is the extent to which leaders promote growth and on the basis of the individual specific needs

and developing followers into leaders themselves (Bass, 1990).

Laissez-faire leaders are popular for their avoidance of acting like a leader and have little or no impact on the organizational events and outcomes. It means that the leader waits for problems to get out of control before interfering. This amounts to no real leadership (Bass & Avolio, 2004a; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Van Engen, 2003).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between leadership styles and burnout among employees currently working in trading or import-export firms. This study provides researchers with an idea burnout levels of employees' who work in different sectors of an organization and leadership styles that could ameliorate or accentuate burnout levels. The results could provide feedback as to how employees' can be trained to develop a particular style of leadership which can benefit organizations in the future.

### Review of Related Literature

Burnout has been defined as “**a state of vital exhaustion**” according to the World Health Organization International Classification of Diseases (World Health Organization, 2004) In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, there is no diagnosis of burnout stated but today burnout is definitely a syndrome with large consequences (American Psychiatric Publishing 2000). Cross-cultural studies also indicate evidence of the three factor structure of Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization and Reduced Personal accomplishment (Hwang, Scherer, & Ainina, 2003).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is not only the nature of the work-life but the large cultural-context in which the work is being conducted that make employees vulnerable to burnout (Leiter, Jackson, & Shaughnessy, 2009). Research studies also indicate that burnout may be



culturally oriented and countries growing at a faster pace may experience more burnout because of a demand for higher productivity, learning of new knowledge and skills and time pressures, type of work and hectic and fast paced job (Kulkarni, 2006).

Some researchers have treated burnout as a mediating factor between the causes and the outcomes (Siegall & McDonald, 2004). Furthermore, individual differences in personality can influence the environment–burnout relationship (Semmer, 1996; Witt, Andrews, & Carlson, 2004). Studies have stressed the importance of leadership styles and leadership effectiveness (Bass & Bass, 2008; Yukl, 2006), but few have examined if a particular leadership style has a greater impact on burnout (Hartog, 2011) although, leadership style could impact burnout (Arnold, Connelly, Walsh, & Martin Ginis, 2015).

Behavioral dimensions like, contingent reward, management–by–exception (active), and management–by–exception (passive) are an important part of being transactional (Bass, 1985). Evidence indicates that managers with passive avoidance, which is a characteristic of transactional leaders, displayed higher burnout in that, the higher the passive avoidance the higher the levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Zopiatis & Constanti, 2010). On the other hand, transformational leaders are defined as “**one who is attentive to the needs and motives of followers and tries to help followers reach their full potential**” (Northouse, 2013, p. 186). Transformational leaders motivate followers to strive for more than their own interests in order to reach better standards of performance. These leaders are considered better and more superior than transactional leaders (Bass & Bass, 2008; Emery & Barker, 2007). Zopiatis and Constanti (2010) found that transformational leadership had a positive relationship with personal accomplishment but negative

relationship with depersonalization and emotional exhaustion. Moreover, Zopiatis and Constanti (2010) found positive relationship between transformational leadership and employees’ accomplishment as well as the negative relationship between this leadership style and emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

Laissez–faire leaders are popular for their avoidance of acting like a leader and have little or no impact on the organizational events and outcomes. It means that the leader waits for problems to get out of control before interfering. This amounts to no real leadership (Bass & Avolio, 2004a; Eagly, Johannesen–Schmidt, & Van Engen, 2003). When a leader displayed little or no concern and avoidance, the levels of burnout were exceptionally higher for emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Zopiatis & Constanti, 2010). Eid et al. (2008) also agreed with these findings and suggested that those who used this passive style had more symptoms of burnout especially when they possess lower hardiness levels. Therefore managers who are passive not only experience higher burnout but are unhealthy for subordinates (Skogstad et al., 2007)

### Hypotheses

#### H1

Transformational leadership is negatively related to burnout.

*H1a Transformational leadership is negatively related to emotional exhaustion*

*H1b Transformational leadership is negatively related to depersonalization*

*H1c Transformational leadership is positively related to personal accomplishment*

#### H2

Transactional leadership is negatively related to burnout.

*H2a Transactional leadership is negatively related to emotional exhaustion*



*H2b Transactional leadership is negatively related to depersonalization*

*H2c Transactional leadership is positively related to personal accomplishment*

### H3

Transformational and transactional leadership styles have different influences on burnout for employees in management and operational/ administrative positions

### Methodology and Data Analysis

A sample size of 400 employees was chosen using the convenient sampling technique since the population was infinite by nature. Individuals who are working as full time employees with over a year of experience, in organizations were targeted as the population for the survey. Two work positions, operation/ administrative positions and management level were selected. The management level included the entry-level supervisors, mid-level and upper level managers as well as business owners who perform a leadership tasks.

Data were collected via in-person drop-off technique at the public areas. Customers who were shopping at eight shopping malls i.e. the Siam Paragon, the Emporium, The Mall Department Store- Bangkok Branch, The Mall Department Store- Ngamwongwan Branch, Central World, Central Department store- Chidlom Branch, Central Department store- Bangna Branch, and Mega Bangna were approached. Fifty data sets were targeted for each place.

To measure burnout levels, the Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter (1996) burnout inventory (MBI) scale was utilized. The MBI consists of 22 statements that measure three dimensions of burnout: 1) emotional exhaustion, 2) depersonalization, and 3) personal accomplishment. Six rating scales varying from 1 (Never Occur) to 6 (Occur every day) were assigned to measure three dimensions of the burnout construct. Seven items were used to measure emotional exhaustion.

The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the pre-test was 0.80.

To measure the transformational and transactional leadership, the well-known multifactor leadership questionnaire (MLQ) namely "Leadership dimension instrument" by Den Hartog, Van Muijen, and Koopman (1997) and Bass and Avolio (1995, 2004b) were used to measure the perceived leadership style. The scale contains 16 items that identifies and measures transformational and transactional leadership behaviors. Transformational leadership is measured by the factors of 1) Idealized influence (attributes) which is related to leaders' socialized charisma and mission, 2) Inspirational motivation 3) Intellectual stimulation, and 4) Individual consideration in that the leaders pay attention to the individual needs of the followers i.e. employees for achievement and growth. Transactional leadership is measured by two factors which are Contingent rewards and Management by exception. Seven Likert scales varying from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree) were used. The scores of each leadership style were summed. High score indicates high level of that leadership style. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the pre-test was 0.93.

### Data Analysis, Findings and Conclusions

The data was analyzed descriptively initially. Then, the reliability of the questionnaires was determined using Cronbach's alpha coefficients and both burnout and leadership styles were above the cutoff point of 0.7. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to verify the construct validity of the survey data and to ensure that the measurement model was qualified enough for the analysis with the structural equation modeling

Good fits of the model were illustrated. The  $\chi^2/df$  was 2.851 which was less than the maximum allowed of 3.00. The goodness of fit index (GFI) was 0.981,



incremental fit index (IFI) was 0.976, and the comparative fit Index (CFI) was 0.976. All exceeded the requirement of 0.90. The RMSEA was 0.32 which was less than the cutoff point 0.05. Thus, the structural relationships among constructs were valid. The

hypotheses could be tested from the SEM analysis results.

Multiple group analyses were performed to test Hypothesis 3.

**Table 1** Means and Standard Deviations of Major Constructs

	Mean of Sum Score	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Transactional Leadership	31.643	6.388	10.00	49.00
Transformational Leadership	36.210	7.688	13.00	56.00
Emotional exhaustion	25.722	6.191	8.00	41.00
Depersonalization	22.585	7.395	7.00	40.00
Personal Accomplishment	32.041	5.238	17.00	45.00

**Notes:** Each item is measured based on 6-point Rating scale for BURNOUT and 7-point Rating scale for leadership  
Sum score of each construct is presented; Standard Deviation is shown in parentheses

**Table 2** Structural Relationship Estimated

Hypotheses and Paths in the Model			Estimated Relationship Coefficients	t-value	p-value
H1a	Transformation	→ Emotional Exhaustion	-0.17 (-0.215)	-2.475	0.013
H1b	Transformation	→ Depersonalization	-0.242 (-0.252)	-2.92	0.003
H1c	Transformation	→ Accomplishment	0.104 (0.152)	1.819	0.069
H2a	Transactional	→ Emotional Exhaustion	0.297 (0.313)	3.598	***
H2b	Transactional	→ Depersonalization	0.380 (0.329)	3.802	***
H2c	Transactional	→ Accomplishment	0.156 (0.190)	2.272	0.023

**Notes:** For the Estimated Relationship Coefficient, figures shown in each cell indicate the unstandardized coefficients where that shown in the brackets are standardized coefficients; \*\*\* t-values are significant at  $p < 0.001$ . Squared Multiple Correlations of Emotional Exhaustion = 0.041; Depersonalization = 0.054; and Accomplishment = 0.113

Hypothesis 1, transformational leadership is negatively related to emotional exhaustion (a) and depersonalization (b) and positively related to personal accomplishment (c) was partially supported by the data. As indicated in Table 2, significant negative relationships between transformational leadership and emotional exhaustion ( $\beta = -0.17$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and depersonalization ( $\beta = -0.242$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) were found. Hypothesis 1a and Hypothesis 1b were supported by the data. Significant relationship between transformational leadership and personal accomplishment ( $\beta = 0.104$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) was not found.

Therefore, Hypothesis 1c was not supported by the data. This indicates that when a leader is transformational lower levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization are experienced.

Transformational leaders provide **idealized influence (attributed and behavior)** (Bass, 1990). These kinds of leaders “walk the talk” and need to possess not only good interpersonal skills and charisma to inspire people to achieve the mission using high moral and ethical standards but also take charge of their emotions in order to deal with ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity.



Transformational leaders are **intellectually stimulating** (Bass, 1990) since they motivate followers to go much further than their own interests in order to attain new performance levels. Transformational leaders have a proactive style of managing encourages followers to share ideas collectively and trust them (Lo, Ramayah, Min, & Songan, 2010; Lyons & Schneider, 2009). Transformational leaders are **inspirational** (Bass, 1990) and have the ability to motivate followers by requesting them to participate in activities that can stimulate new ideas and different ways of thinking; it was found that transformation leaders are less prone to experience emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Huang & Liao, 2011). Transformational leaders have **individual consideration** (Bass, 1990). Paying attention to each follower individually and expressing the goals of the organization is a priority, making it arduous for the leader to be detached or manifest callous or indifferent behaviors with followers who need to be constantly mentored.

Previous studies support the findings above and Harjinder (2008) found the negative relationship between transformational leadership and employees' stress and burnout in service sectors. Moreover, Zopiatis and Constanti (2010) found positive relationship between transformational leadership and employees' accomplishment as well as the negative relationship between this leadership style and emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Zopiatis and Constanti, (2010), found that hospitality managers in Cyprus who were transformational leaders had lower levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. A recent study on doctorate students by Stokes (2013) in Liberty University, Lynchburg found that students who had attributes of being transformational had lower levels of burnout. It is the characteristics of transformational leaders that make them less susceptible to burnout.

Hypothesis 2, transactional leadership is negatively related to emotional exhaustion (a) and depersonalization (b) and positively related to personal accomplishment (c) was partially supported by the data. As indicated in Table 2, significant positive relationships between transactional leadership and all three dimensions of burnout were found ( $\beta = 0.297$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) for emotional exhaustion and ( $\beta = 0.038$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) for depersonalization ( $\beta = 0.156$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) for personal accomplishment). However, as the relationships between transactional leadership and emotional exhaustion and depersonalization were proposed to be negative, the positive relationship found in the model appear to be opposite in direction. As such, it could be concluded that Hypothesis 2a and 2b were not supported by the data while Hypothesis 2c was supported. This indicates that when a leader is transactional, the higher will be his personal accomplishment.

Transactional leaders are more concerned with "give and take"/ exchange relationships and seem more focused on accomplishment of the goals and contingent rewards, assuming that if followers achieve the goals, they are rewarded for good performance in a timely way (Bass, 1985). Secondly, transactional leaders are concerned with the present and increase efficacy by following existing organizational rules and paying attention to the existing structure (Tucker & Robert, 2004) that appeals to the self-interest of the employees rather than the group. Thirdly, for the transactional leader extrinsic rewards are more appealing and emphasis on manipulating employees to achieve the tasks is more important than motivating them (Tucker & Robert, 2004).

Scrutinizing the characteristics of transactional leaders, it is obvious that these leaders are very resourceful when the task demands time and resource restraints. These leaders will pay careful attention to on lower level needs and how employees are performing



the task (Hargis et al., 2001). Transactional leaders are beneficial for getting specific task completed by managing each portion individually. Wang (2011) agreed that although transformational leaders predicted better contextual performance, where workers go beyond the call of duty, transactional leaders predicted better individual task performance, where workers stayed within the boundaries of the job role because of the contingent rewards, a dimension linked to positive

organization rewards. Schimmoeller and D'souza (2010) agreed that Thai managers utilize contingent rewards and employees like to receive good rewards in an organization. Besides, contingent rewards had the highest correlation (0.80) correlation with extra effort, much more than any aspects of transformational leadership Transactional leaders could experience a sense of worthiness and fulfillment at work.

**Table 3** Comparisons of the Structural Relationships between Constructs across Employees who work as the officers/operators and Management Positions

Path	Unstandardized Coefficients		Critical Ratio for the Difference (z-score)
	Operator	Management	
Transformation → Emotional Exhaustion	-0.281	0.004	2.112*
<b>Transformation → Depersonalization</b>	<b>-0.148</b>	<b>-0.253</b>	<b>-0.649</b>
Transformation → Accomplishment	0.119	0.138	0.173
Transactional → Emotional Exhaustion	0.298	0.259	-0.243
Transactional → Depersonalization	0.182	0.444	1.347
Transactional → Accomplishment	0.072	0.187	0.85
R-Square	Emotional Exhaustion	0.071	0.061
	Depersonalization	0.070	0.058
	Accomplishment	0.084	0.160

**Remarks:** \* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01; \*\*\* p < 0.001

Significant difference of the structural relationships between constructs is tested by the z-score

EXP = Experienced customers; Non-EXP = Non-experienced customers

Hypothesis 3, transformational and transactional leadership styles have different influences on burnout for employees in management and operational (administrative) positions was partially supported by the data as indicated in Table 3. Structural relations of each relationship of the employees in management and administrative / operating level were compared, one by one. The multiple group analysis results were considered. The difference of the strength of the relationship between transformational leadership and depersonalization between the two groups was found. Higher strength of this relationship of the employees who worked in

management level than those who work in administrative / operating level was found ( $\beta_{\text{management}} = -0.253$ ;  $\beta_{\text{administration}} = -0.148$ ; CR difference = 2.112; p < 0.05). However, other differences were not illustrated. Therefore it can be said that employees who displayed transformational leadership styles in management position had higher levels of depersonalization dimension of burnout than employees who worked administrative operating levels.

Transformational leaders portray five behaviors; firstly, **idealized influence (attributed)** which is much the leaders are trusted, admired and revered because the



leader possesses charisma and is a role model for followers. Secondly, **idealized influence (behavior)** which means that the leader is driven by the mission and goals and has high moral and ethical standards. Thirdly, **inspirational motivation** is when the leader expresses the significance of the goal and provides meaning to work. Fourthly, **intellectual stimulation** in which the leader promotes the followers to increase creativity and innovation. Finally, **individual consideration** is the extent to which leaders promote growth and on the basis of the individual specific needs and developing followers into leaders themselves (Bass, 1990).

Most prior studies have stated the positive outcomes of transformational leadership style and under researched the psychological impact of being transformational. Transformational leaders in managerial positions may encounter more stress since they need to play an active rather than a passive role in aiding followers to achieve their goals by increasing the intrinsic motivation of followers with the view that the organization's success is as important as their own success (Kalar & Wright, 2007). Transformational leaders focus on long-term rather than short term goals which are related to higher order needs of self-esteem, self-actualization and best-interest of followers (Judge and Piccolo, 2004). The very fact of being in a senior position and being responsible for what the subordinate delivers may cause disillusionment for managers which can lead to stress (Strydom & Meyer, 2002). Senior managers could be more vulnerable to burnout because of their constant exposure of organizational stressors. Transformational leadership is concerned with **"People Work"** and preoccupation with task can also cause managers to be callous and them to separate themselves from employees or treat employees in an inferior manner. Thus establishing a direct relationship between transformational leaders in management positions and burnout in isolation, without regard for levels of self-

efficacy and internal work environment is questionable Yaroslava (2011) in a recent study found that when self-efficacy is higher, the negative relationship between transformational leadership and burnout is higher. Beauchamp, Welch, and Hulley (2007) agreed that higher self-efficacy could be increased by enriched environments. Kumar and Bakhshi (2010, p. 173) also agreed that lack of management support and aggressive administrative systems were the topmost variables that could lead to burnout. Keeping this in mind transformational leaders may also have limited thresholds which could limit their ability to deal with stressors, which eventually results in burnout.

#### Significance and Implications for Future Research

The onset of globalization and the formation of several economic communities like the European Union and the Asean Economic Community can impact stress and burnout levels because of the war for talent and competition. The impact of globalization can be beneficial as well as detrimental. Without doubt, globalization has affected not only education (Kulkarni, 2006; Nayyar, 2008; Vaezi & Ghorouneh, 2010) and educational leadership but also how leaders deal with burnout (Alon & Higgins, 2005; Farber, 2000; Idris, Dollard, & Winefield, 2011). Burnout can be perceived as a social or a medical problem depending on the situation. It is evident that educators/ employees could suffer from higher levels of burnout since they interact more with others and thus burnout could be a social issue (Maslach, 2003).

The present study is expected to provide feedback to larger society since, society has the right and also duty to know the impact that burnout and leadership styles could have on institutional or organizational effectiveness. This would provide not only theoretical contribution to expand the body of knowledge on burnout and its relation with some individual factors, i.e. leadership



style but also help the practitioners to strategically design some activities to protect their employees from burnout. If certain personality traits or leadership styles are less prone to experience burnout the organization can take steps to train employees in order to enhance those factors so as to prevent burnout in the long run.

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