

Transformational Leadership and Employee Attitudes in Chinese Technology Firms: A Conceptual Framework for Huawei Technologies

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper develops an integrative framework explaining how transformational leadership shapes employee attitudes in Chinese technology firms, with particular relevance to the organizational context of Huawei Technologies. Drawing on social exchange theory, job demands-resources theory, and leadership-based role modeling perspectives, the study synthesizes recent literature to theorize how transformational leadership influences key employee attitudes, including work engagement, job satisfaction, affective organizational commitment, and turnover intention. The framework highlights the mediating roles of psychological empowerment, perceived organizational support, and trust in leadership, while acknowledging the moderating influence of high innovation intensity and environmental uncertainty characteristic of China's technology sector. Beyond advancing a coherent conceptualization, the paper critically discusses the limitations inherent in theory-driven models and outlines rigorous directions for future empirical research. Specifically, it proposes survey-based structural equation modeling, multilevel designs, and time-lagged approaches as suitable strategies to validate the framework and strengthen causal inference. By linking leadership behaviors to attitudinal outcomes within a high-performance, innovation-driven context, the study contributes to leadership and organizational behavior literature and offers a foundation for evidence-based leadership development in large Chinese technology firms.

KEYWORDS: leadership; Employee attitudes, Work engagement, Affective commitment

I. INTRODUCTION

China's technology sector operates within an intensely competitive and rapidly evolving environment marked by continuous innovation, market disruption, and dynamic global pressures (Li & Rasiah, 2025). Firms such as Huawei Technologies have responded to these conditions through substantial investments in research and development, enabling them to sustain innovation and maintain competitive advantage in both domestic and international markets (AP News, 2025; Huawei, 2024). In such fast-paced contexts, employees' attitudes including job satisfaction, work engagement, organizational commitment, and intentions to remain with the organization are critical determinants of organisational performance and long-term sustainability (Li & Rasiah, 2025; Zurong, 2024). Positive employee attitudes have been linked to higher retention, greater innovation behaviour, and improved organisational effectiveness, particularly in high-technology firms where human capital is a strategic asset (Li & Rasiah, 2025; Zurong, 2024).

Huawei provides an ideal application context for exploring these dynamics, as over half of its more than 208,000 global workforce is engaged in research and development, supported by comprehensive learning and development systems and a diverse, inclusive organisational climate

(Huawei, 2024; AP News, 2025). Understanding how leadership influences employee attitudes in such settings is therefore essential: transformational leadership has been shown to enhance employees' motivation, sense of purpose, and job satisfaction key precursors to positive attitudes and organisational outcomes (Manar & Salim, 2024; Zurong, 2024). Accordingly, this paper aims to develop an integrative conceptual framework that links transformational leadership with employee attitudes and downstream organisational outcomes in Chinese technology firms, using Huawei as a focal case for theory development.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership (TL) represents a leadership approach through which leaders inspire followers to transcend self-interest for collective goals, stimulate higher-order needs, and foster deep attitudinal and behavioral change. Since its refinement within organizational psychology, TL has been consistently conceptualised as a multidimensional construct comprising four core dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Banks et al., 2022; Breevaart & Zacher, 2023).

Idealized influence refers to leaders' role-modeling behaviors that generate admiration, trust, and identification among followers, thereby strengthening moral commitment and value alignment. Inspirational motivation reflects leaders' ability to articulate an appealing vision, instill meaning in work, and energize employees toward shared objectives. Intellectual stimulation captures leaders' encouragement of creativity, critical thinking, and problem re-framing, which is particularly salient in knowledge-intensive and innovation-driven contexts such as technology firms. Individualized consideration emphasizes leaders' attentiveness to individual employees' needs, development, and well-being, fostering personalized support and long-term relational bonds (Breevaart & Zacher, 2023; Hoch et al., 2022).

Recent leadership scholarship underscores that TL remains especially relevant in environments characterized by rapid technological change, uncertainty, and high performance pressure conditions typical of Chinese high-tech firms. In such contexts, TL not only coordinates task execution but also shapes employees' psychological meaning-making processes and attitudes toward work and the organization (Li et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2022).

B. Employee Attitudes

Employee attitudes represent evaluative psychological states that reflect how employees perceive, feel about, and respond to their work and organizational environment. In this study, four focal employee attitudes are emphasized: job satisfaction, affective organizational commitment, work engagement, and turnover intention. These attitudes are widely regarded as central indicators of

workforce stability, motivation, and long-term organizational sustainability (Albrecht et al., 2023; Meyer & Allen, 2021).

Job satisfaction refers to employees' overall affective evaluation of their job experiences, encompassing perceptions of task characteristics, rewards, and work conditions. Affective organizational commitment captures employees' emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization, distinguishing it from continuance or normative forms of commitment (Meyer & Allen, 2021). Work engagement is defined as a positive, fulfilling work-related state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption, reflecting high-quality motivational investment rather than mere compliance (Albrecht et al., 2023).

Turnover intention, while sometimes classified as a behavioral intention, is conceptually rooted in employees' attitudinal withdrawal from the organization and is therefore treated as an attitudinal-intent outcome. Contemporary research consistently positions turnover intention as a proximal predictor of actual turnover and a critical indicator of employee-organization relationship quality, particularly in competitive labor markets such as China's technology sector (Jiang et al., 2022; Li et al., 2023). Collectively, these attitudes provide a comprehensive lens through which leadership influence on employees' psychological alignment and retention can be understood.

C. Rationale for a Conceptual Approach

Despite a substantial body of empirical research linking transformational leadership to positive employee outcomes, several conceptual gaps remain. First, many existing studies adopt narrow analytical lenses by testing single mediators (e.g., trust or empowerment) or isolated outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction or commitment), thereby limiting understanding of the broader attitudinal system through which leadership exerts influence (Hoch et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2023). Such fragmented approaches often fail to capture the interdependencies among multiple employee attitudes that jointly shape organizational effectiveness.

Second, the majority of transformational leadership research remains context-general, with limited theoretical integration tailored to the unique institutional, cultural, and competitive characteristics of China's high-technology sector. Chinese technology firms operate under conditions of intense innovation pressure, regulatory uncertainty, and global competition, which may amplify or reshape leadership-attitude relationships compared to traditional organizational settings (Li et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2022). Empirical studies alone, particularly cross-sectional designs, are insufficient to theorize these complex, multi-level dynamics.

Accordingly, a conceptual approach is warranted to synthesize dispersed findings, integrate multiple theoretical lenses, and develop a coherent framework that links transformational leadership to a constellation of employee attitudes within firm-specific and systemic contexts. By offering a theoretically grounded and context-sensitive model, this study responds to recent calls for deeper

conceptualization in leadership research and provides a foundation for future empirical testing in Chinese high-tech organizations such as Huawei (Banks et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2023).

III. METHODOLOGY

This study draws on three interrelated theoretical lenses to conceptually explain how transformational leadership (TL) influences employee attitudes in Chinese high-technology firms. First, Social Exchange Theory (SET) posits that leader-follower interactions are reciprocal social processes in which transformational leaders provide support, recognition, and fairness, thereby generating positive psychological obligations among employees (Ehrnrooth et al., 2021). Under SET, employees reciprocate perceived leadership support with favourable attitudes such as increased commitment, satisfaction, and engagement, as demonstrated in multiple leadership and attitude studies (Ehrnrooth, 2021; Jiatong et al., 2022).

Second, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Theory conceptualises transformational leadership as a key job resource that enhances employees' access to meaningful work inputs (e.g., autonomy, feedback, challenges) while mitigating job demands, which in turn fosters motivation and positive attitudes such as work engagement and job satisfaction (Tummers & Bakker, 2021; Kwala, 2025). JD-R theory emphasises that resources help employees achieve work goals and support personal growth, making leadership a mechanism for enriching job resources and shaping engagements (Tummers & Bakker, 2021).

Third, Social Learning Theory (SLT) suggests that employees acquire attitudes and behavioural norms by observing and internalising the behaviours of transformational leaders, who serve as role models that embody organisational values and expected work attitudes. Although research specific to TL and SLT within high-tech contexts remains emergent, scholars have highlighted the relevance of modelling processes in leadership studies, noting that employees tend to emulate leaders' behaviours and attitudes, which strengthens organisational commitment and pro-organisational attitudes (Liden et al., 2025; Karimi, 2023). Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a robust foundation for articulating how transformational leadership enhances employee attitudes through reciprocal exchange, resource enrichment, and observational learning mechanisms.

This study adopts a conceptual research methodology grounded in theory synthesis and integrative reasoning rather than empirical hypothesis testing. Conceptual frameworks are particularly appropriate when existing empirical findings are fragmented and when a phenomenon requires theoretical consolidation across multiple perspectives (Jaakkola, 2020; Gilson et al., 2021). Accordingly, the present study develops a Predictor-Mediator-Criterion (PMC) framework to explain how transformational leadership shapes employee attitudes in Chinese technology firms, with contextual relevance to Huawei Technologies. The PMC approach enables a structured articulation of causal logic by identifying leadership as the primary predictor, psychological and relational

mechanisms as mediators, and employee attitudes as criterion outcomes, while incorporating contextual moderators that reflect institutional and environmental complexity.

Transformational leadership (TL) is positioned as the central independent variable in the framework. TL is widely conceptualized as a leadership style that motivates followers to transcend self-interest through idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Eva et al., 2021; Banks et al., 2022). In technology-intensive environments, where employees face continuous innovation pressure and uncertainty, transformational leaders play a critical role in articulating vision, fostering meaning, and encouraging adaptive learning. Recent leadership scholarship consistently demonstrates that TL is particularly effective in high-demand contexts because it aligns employees' values with organizational goals while strengthening intrinsic motivation and resilience. These characteristics make TL a theoretically robust predictor of employee attitudes in Chinese high-technology firms.

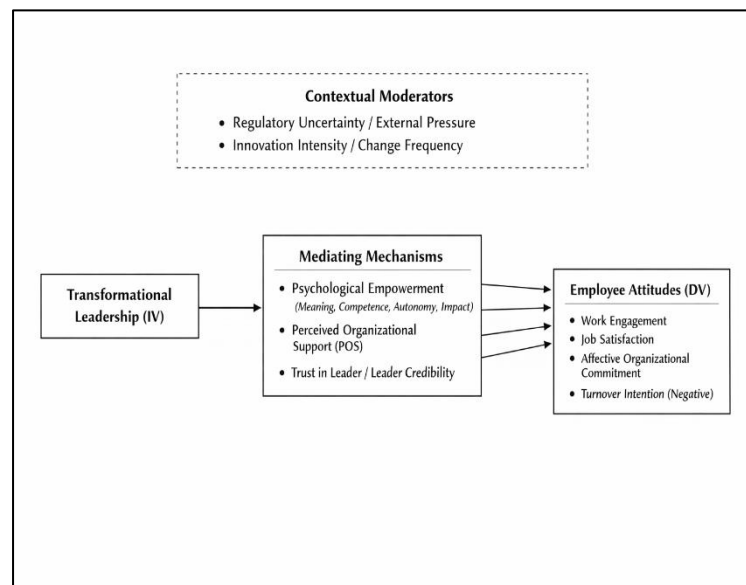


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

To explain the underlying mechanisms through which transformational leadership influences employee attitudes, the framework incorporates three core mediating variables that represent attitude formation pathways. The first mediator is psychological empowerment, defined as a motivational construct comprising meaning, competence, autonomy, and perceived impact. Transformational leaders enhance psychological empowerment by communicating a compelling vision, encouraging creativity, and granting discretion in task execution. Such leadership behaviors strengthen employees' sense of purpose and self-efficacy, which are essential for sustaining motivation and engagement in

dynamic work environments (Kim & Beehr, 2021; Spreitzer et al., 2022). Psychological empowerment therefore functions as a critical conduit linking leadership behaviors to positive attitudinal outcomes.

The second mediating mechanism is perceived organizational support (POS), which reflects employees' beliefs regarding the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being. In organizational settings, leaders are often perceived as agents of the organization; consequently, leadership behaviors are interpreted as signals of organizational intent. Transformational leadership, characterized by individualized consideration and recognition, enhances POS by reinforcing perceptions of fairness, care, and reciprocity (Kurtessis et al., 2021; Eisenberger et al., 2023). From a social exchange perspective, heightened POS strengthens employees' emotional attachment to the organization and increases their willingness to reciprocate through positive attitudes and sustained commitment.

The third mediator, trust in leader or leader credibility, captures employees' confidence in their leaders' integrity, competence, and benevolence. Trust is particularly salient in environments marked by uncertainty and high performance expectations, as it reduces ambiguity and fosters acceptance of organizational goals and change initiatives. Transformational leaders cultivate trust by demonstrating consistency, ethical conduct, and competence, thereby enabling employees to navigate uncertainty with greater psychological safety (Dirks & De Jong, 2021; Lee et al., 2023). Collectively, psychological empowerment, perceived organizational support, and trust in leader are widely employed in contemporary transformational leadership research and provide a theoretically coherent explanation for how leadership behaviors translate into employee attitudes.

The criterion variables in the framework consist of four key employee attitudes that are central to organizational sustainability and performance in technology-driven firms. Work engagement, defined as a positive and fulfilling work-related state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption, is particularly sensitive to leadership-driven empowerment and trust (Schaufeli, 2021; Breevaart & Zacher, 2022). Job satisfaction, representing employees' affective evaluation of their job experiences, is influenced by leadership behaviors that enhance autonomy, support, and meaningfulness at work (Judge et al., 2023). Affective organizational commitment, which reflects emotional attachment and identification with the organization, has been consistently linked to transformational leadership through value congruence and social exchange mechanisms (Banks et al., 2022; Jiatong et al., 2022). Finally, turnover intention, conceptualized as a negative attitudinal outcome, captures employees' conscious inclination to leave the organization and is expected to decrease as engagement, satisfaction, and commitment increase (Hom et al., 2023). Together, these attitudinal outcomes reflect both positive and negative dimensions of employees' psychological relationships with the organization.

To enhance contextual sensitivity while avoiding conceptual overcomplexity, the framework incorporates two contextual moderators that are particularly relevant to Chinese high-technology

firms. The first moderator is regulatory uncertainty and external pressure, which reflects institutional complexity arising from evolving regulations, geopolitical tensions, and compliance demands. Under conditions of heightened uncertainty, employees tend to rely more heavily on leaders for sense-making, reassurance, and direction. As a result, the positive effects of transformational leadership on empowerment, trust, and supportive perceptions are likely to be amplified (Zhang et al., 2022; Wu & Hu, 2023). The second moderator is innovation intensity and change frequency, which captures the pace and scope of technological and organizational change. In environments characterized by continuous innovation, transformational leadership is expected to exert stronger effects on engagement and commitment by promoting adaptability, learning orientation, and identification with organizational vision (Li et al., 2022; Thien & Razak, 2024).

Overall, by integrating transformational leadership, multiple mediating mechanisms, key employee attitudes, and contextual moderators within a unified PMC framework, this study offers a coherent and theoretically grounded conceptual model. The framework advances leadership and organizational behavior scholarship by clarifying the mechanisms and boundary conditions through which transformational leadership shapes employee attitudes in Chinese technology firms. Moreover, it provides a foundation for future empirical research employing structural equation modeling, multi-level analysis, or longitudinal designs to test and refine the proposed relationships.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

D. Theoretical implications and conceptual contribution.

The proposed conceptual framework advances transformational leadership (TL) theory by offering a context-sensitive explanation of how leadership shapes employee attitudes within high-performance, innovation-driven organisations. Rather than treating transformational leadership as a universally effective antecedent of positive employee outcomes, this model explicitly integrates motivational and relational mechanisms—such as psychological empowerment and perceived organizational support—within demanding work environments. In doing so, it aligns with contemporary extensions of Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory, which emphasise that leadership functions as a critical job resource that activates motivational processes and mitigates strain under conditions of elevated job demands (Tummers & Bakker, 2021). By embedding TL within this demand-resource logic, the model conceptually clarifies why leadership effects on engagement, job satisfaction, and affective commitment are contingent rather than uniform.

Furthermore, the framework contributes to leadership and employee-attitude literature by consolidating fragmented findings into a coherent attitudinal pathway. Prior studies have frequently examined single mediators or isolated outcomes, offering limited insight into how multiple attitudes co-evolve in complex organisational settings (Jiatong et al., 2022; Xiong et al., 2023). This

conceptualisation advances theory by positioning employee attitudes as dynamic responses shaped by reciprocal social exchanges and perceived value alignment, rather than as static outcomes of leadership behaviour. The inclusion of innovation intensity as a contextual boundary condition further enhances explanatory depth, responding to recent calls for leadership models that account explicitly for environmental volatility and performance pressure in contemporary work settings (Boccoli et al., 2024).

E. Implications of a Huawei-style high-performance, innovation-driven environment.

Huawei provides a theoretically relevant context for examining these relationships due to its sustained emphasis on innovation, global competitiveness, and intensive research and development activities. In such environments, high performance expectations and continuous technological change can amplify the importance of transformational leadership by increasing employees' reliance on leaders for vision, meaning, and psychological resources. Under conditions of uncertainty and rapid innovation, transformational leadership is likely to strengthen employee engagement and affective commitment by fostering trust, empowerment, and a shared sense of purpose (Tummers & Bakker, 2021; Jiatong et al., 2022).

At the same time, the high-demand nature of innovation-driven organisations may also complicate the effectiveness of transformational leadership. When performance pressures, workload intensity, and time constraints exceed employees' available psychological and organisational resources, even inspirational leadership may be insufficient to prevent strain, disengagement, or turnover intentions. Empirical insights from China's technology-intensive sectors suggest that high-performance systems can simultaneously stimulate innovation and elevate stress, particularly when empowerment and support mechanisms are inconsistently implemented (Li & Rasiah, 2025). Consequently, the model underscores that transformational leadership in Huawei-like settings is most effective when complemented by organisational practices that sustain demand-resource balance, such as developmental support, autonomy-enhancing job design, and psychologically safe learning climates.

From a managerial perspective, this conceptualisation implies that leadership effectiveness in high-tech firms cannot be evaluated solely on inspirational or visionary qualities. Instead, transformational leadership must be embedded within broader organisational systems that translate high expectations into sustainable employee attitudes. By highlighting both the enabling and constraining effects of high-performance contexts, the framework offers a nuanced understanding of how leadership can simultaneously drive engagement and risk exhaustion, thereby contributing to more realistic and contextually grounded leadership theory.

Bringing the arguments together, this conceptual framework positions transformational leadership (TL) as a central capability for shaping employee attitudes (e.g., affective commitment, engagement,

job satisfaction, psychological safety, and change commitment) in large Chinese technology firms such as Huawei, where speed, ambiguity, and coordination demands are structurally high. Conceptually, TL should matter not only because it inspires and aligns employees around vision, but because it also reorganizes meaning and exchange relationships—employees read leaders' behaviors as signals of respect, growth opportunities, and organizational support, which then translate into stronger positive attitudes and discretionary effort. Evidence from China-based studies supports the plausibility of these attitudinal pathways (e.g., TL → engagement/commitment/performance linkages), reinforcing the argument that TL is likely to be especially consequential in high-pressure, innovation-driven contexts.

F. Limitations of the conceptualization

As a conceptual paper, the framework is theory-driven rather than estimate-driven; therefore, it cannot adjudicate effect sizes, boundary conditions, or rival explanations with the same authority as empirical tests. A second limitation is context specificity: Huawei-like firms combine strong performance systems, dense internal labor markets, and culturally embedded relational expectations, so some relationships may not generalize to smaller startups or non-Chinese contexts without adaptation. Third, key variables that often co-travel with TL—such as HR practices, job design, team climate, leader-member exchange, and perceived organizational support—may produce model overlap unless the framework is tested with careful construct definitions and competing models. Finally, much leadership research is vulnerable to common method bias when predictors and outcomes are collected from the same respondents in the same survey wave; conceptual claims therefore require empirical designs that separate sources and/or time to strengthen causal inference.

G. Future research and proposed empirical tests (survey-SEM; multilevel; time-lagged)

1) Survey-SEM (CB-SEM or PLS-SEM) to test the nomological network.

A first empirical step is a large-sample survey that operationalizes TL and multiple employee attitude outcomes, testing mediation (e.g., TL → engagement/psychological safety → commitment/satisfaction) and moderation (e.g., role overload, innovation climate, perceived employability). SEM is appropriate because it supports simultaneous estimation of measurement and structural models, formal mediation, and competing-model comparisons; recent SEM guidance in organizational research also emphasizes design-model alignment and transparency in model evaluation. For prediction-oriented extensions (e.g., when the goal is forecasting attitudinal risk segments), PLS-SEM can be used with contemporary reporting standards and validity diagnostics.

2) Multilevel tests to match how leadership operates (leaders/teams → individuals).

Huawei-like structures often embed employees within project teams and units, making it important to test cross-level effects (e.g., team-level TL climate predicting individual attitudes) and cross-level

mediation (e.g., TL climate → team psychological safety → individual engagement). Multilevel SEM or multilevel regression designs reduce aggregation errors and help clarify whether TL is primarily a leader – follower dyadic phenomenon or also an emergent team climate. Recent work illustrates how TL questions are naturally suited to nested data and multilevel estimation strategies.

3) Time-lagged / multi-wave designs (and multi-source data) to strengthen causal claims.

A rigorous next step is a two-wave or three-wave design (e.g., TL at T1; mediators at T2; attitudes/outcomes at T3) with a theoretically justified lag (weeks/months, depending on construct maturation). This does not “prove” causality, but it improves temporal ordering and reduces same-time reporting artifacts. Where feasible, combining employee self-reports (attitudes) with supervisor ratings or archival metrics (e.g., performance, turnover) further reduces same-source bias. Contemporary reviews highlight that common method bias is complex and cannot be “fixed” by a single statistical trick; rather, it is best handled via design choices (temporal separation, source separation, and careful measurement) complemented by transparent robustness checks

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