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Linking Leadership Style to Firm Performance: The Mediating Effect of Learning Orientation

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Abstract

*Leadership has been subject to so many studies examining the high performing organizations. Besides leadership style, cultural competitiveness is emphasized as another high performing factor in literature. Within the framework of cultural competitiveness, our study focuses on the notion that learning orientation as one of the cultural based elements that effect firm performance mediates the relationship between leadership style and firm performance. To test the propositions, a field survey using questionnaires was conducted on 343 middle and senior managers of 125 high performing firms operating in manufacturing industry in Turkey, between the years of 2008-2010 In this survey we aim to identify the mediating effect of learning orientation on the relationship between leadership style and firm performance. The obtained data from the questionnaires are analyzed through the SPSS statistical packaged software. After the validation of measures a series of regression analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses and to define the direction of relations. Analyses results highlighted the relationship among the leadership style, learning orientation and firm performance. The most striking result to emerge from data is that commitment to learning and shared vision and open-mindedness mediates the effects of task oriented leadership and relations oriented leadership behavior on firm performance. These findings are consistent with the literature on leadership and learning orientation*

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Keywords: Leadership styles, Learning orientation, Firm performance, High performing organizations

1. Introduction

Turkey has undergone a series of recent crises in 1994, 1999 and 2001. These developments have affected heavily not only the economic structure of Turkey but also business firms. Therefore, firms’ executives had to adjust their strategies in order to manage crises (Eren, Zehir and Özşahin, 2004) . Firms that manage the crises successfully survived and become high performing organizations of Turkey. This high performing organization which survived in crises has attracted attention of so many researchers and characteristics of those firms began to be surveyed. In this context this survey is being started to examine and reveal the characteristics of those high performing firms. Peters and Watermans’s study of “In Search of Excellence” focusing on the high performing organizations in different industries, gave arise the concept of “peak performing organization” and became source of inspiration for many studies in strategic management field. In this direction, many surveys examining the source of performance of high performing organizations indicate the importance of leadership style in firm performance (Galbraith and Lawler, 1993; Halal, 1996; Hamel, 1996; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1996; Porter, 1996; Prahalad and Hamel, 1991; Senge 1990; Collins, 2002). Jim Collins’s “Good to Great” is another study examining the characteristics of high performing organizations. Collins maps out three stages, each with two key concepts as the heart of Good to Great. Those concepts are Level 5 Leadership, First Who... Then What, Confront the Brutal Facts, The Hedgehog Concept, A Culture of Discipline, Technology Accelerators (Collins, 2002). Leadership, which is called the premise of the flywheel of “Good to Great” by Collins, has been subject to so many studies examining the high performing organizations in literature. In this survey searching the sources of high performance in high performing organizations of Turkey, leadership style is suggested as main premise that leads to high performance.

Besides leadership style, cultural competitiveness is emphasized as another high performing factor in literature. Firms that manage to be “high performing organizations” rather than “survivor” in a more competitive environment, have the cultural competitiveness. Hult, Snow and Kandemir (2003) define cultural competitiveness as “the degree to which an organization is predisposed to detect and fill gaps between what the market desires and what is currently offered” and argue that four culture-based factors –entrepreneurial orientation, market orientation, learning orientation and innovativeness- collectively give rise to an organization’s cultural competitiveness. The complex constellation of those four factors serves as a guidepost to mangers as they seek to create competitive advantage for their firms in marketplace (Hult et al., 2003). Within the framework of cultural competitiveness, our study focuses on the notion that learning orientation as one of the cultural based elements that effect firm performance mediates the relationship between leadership style and firma performance. In this context, the study begins by a literature review of leadership style, learning orientation and firm performance, then will go on to development of hypotheses. Research methodology, analyses results and research model will take place at second section. The results of the analyses will be discussed and recommendation will be provided for managers and academician at the last section

1. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework
   1. Leadership

Early research on leader behavior conducted by psychologist in 1950s-60s, much of the studies on leadership behavior has been affected by two pioneering school: The Ohio State Leadership Studies and The Michigan Leadership Studies. Researchers at Ohio State University surveyed leaders have identified two major behaviors, called consideration and initiating structure. Consideration falls in to category of people-oriented behavior and is the extent to which leader is mindful of subordinates, respects their ideas and feelings, and establishes mutual trust. Considerate leaders are friendly, provide open communication, develop teamwork, and are oriented toward their subordinates (Daft, 2008). On the other hand initiating structure is the degree of task behavior that is the extent to which the leader is task oriented and directs subordinate work activities toward goal attainment. Leaders with this style typically give instructions, spend time planning, emphasize deadlines, and provide explicit schedules of work activities (Daft, 2008).

In 1980s, companies have begun to operate in a rapidly changing business environment. In order to survive in the new environment, organizations realized that they should change. So to managing change and to lead organizations in that direction become main concern of executives. Also managing the change become the main concern of executives, and most critical responsibility of leadership (Kotter, 1990). In this context, transformational and charismatic leadership theories have been revealed (Bass, 1990; Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Gil, Rico, Alcover, and Barrasa, 2005). In consistent with the behavioral leadership approach, Yukl (2002) also defines the leadership as “the process of influencing others and agree about what needs to be done and how it can be done effectively, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish the shared objectives” and propose a three dimension-leadership model: task-oriented leadership, relations-oriented leadership and change oriented leadership dimensions. The “change oriented leadership” dimension shares more common characteristics with charismatic and transformational leadership behaviors. Parallel to behavioral leadership approach and Yukl’s leadership model, in this study, leadership is examined as a “process” and “shared role” throughout the organization rather than characteristics of a person, and three types of leadership behavior –task oriented leadership behavior, relations oriented leadership behavior, change oriented leadership behavior- are under taken.

Task-Oriented Leadership (TOL): This type of behavior is primarily concerned with accomplishing the task, utilizing personnel and resources efficiently, and maintaining orderly reliable operations. Three specific types of task-oriented behaviors are (1) planning, (2) clarifying, and (3) monitoring (Yukl, 2002).

Relations-Oriented Leadership (ROL): This type of behavior is primarily concerned with improving relationships and helping people, increasing cooperation and teamwork, increasing subordinate job satisfaction, and building identification with the organization. Three specific types of relations-oriented behaviors are (1) supporting, (2) developing, and (3) recognizing .

Change-Oriented Leadership (COL): This type of behavior is primarily concerned with improving strategic decisions; adapting to change in the environment; increasing flexibility and innovation; making major changes in processes, products, or services; and gaining commitment to the changes (Yukl, 2002). Specific types of change-oriented behaviors can be classified as (1) influencing organizational culture, (2), developing a vision, (3) implementing change, (4) increasing innovation and learning (Yukl, 2002).

* 1. Learning Orientation

Learning orientation, as the source of the competitive advantage and a key to future organizational success, has been subject of range of disciplines including psychology (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1996; Schein, 1993; Dickson, 1992), management (Stata, 1989; Huber, 1991; Argyris and Schon, 1978; Senge 1990), sociology and organizational theory (Coopey, 1996; Law, 1994), marketing (Slater and Narver, 1995; Baker and Sinkula, 1999; Franwick, Ward, Hutt, and Reingen, 1994), and strategic management (Hamel and Prahalad, 1993; Dickson, 1992; Pennings, Barkema, and Douma, 1994). The conceptualization of learning orientation exhibits two focuses: some scholars emphasize concrete in formation generation and dissemination systems as mechanism through which learning takes place (Huber, 1991), while others consider firms a “cognitive enterprises” and call for need for a shared mental model, a shared organizational vision, and an open-minded approach to problem solving. By combining two approaches, learning orientation can be conceptualized as the encouragement of organizational values that influence the likelihood of the firm to use and create knowledge (Laverie, Madhavaram, and McDonald, 2008; Baker and Sinkula, 1999; Sinkula, Baker, and Noordewier, 1997). Firms with a strong learning orientation continuously encourage, or even require, employees to question organizational norms, values and practices that guide their actions and organizational activities (Garvin, 1993; Paparoidamis, 2005; Laverie et al., 2008; Sinkula et al., 1997). In this respect, learning orientation affects the degree to which organizational members are encouraged, even challenged, to “think outside the box” (Baker and Sinkula, 1999). Values that are routinely associated with learning orientation revolve around (1) commitment to learning, (2) open-mindedness, and (3) shared vision.

Commitment to Learning: It refers to the extent to which a firm places value on learning (Sackmann, 1991). Commitment to learning concerns the value placed on learning activities within an organization and the extent to which this value is viewed as axiomatic for the firm (Senge, Roberts, Ross, Smith, and Kleiner, 1994; Paparoidamis, 2005). In other words, companies should develop the ability to think and reason (Tobin, 1993), and to value the need to understand the causes and effects of their actions (Shaw, and Perkins, 1991). Organizations that committed to learning value the need to understand the cause and effects of their actions, which is necessary for firms to regularly detect and correct errors in theory in use (Baker and Sinkula, 1999). If an organization places more value on learning, more learning is likely to occur (Sackmann, 1991).

Open-mindedness: It refers to the organization’s willingness to continuously question the firm’s long-held assumptions, routines and beliefs (Senge et al., 1994; Sinkula, 1994). Open-mindedness is linked to the notion of “unlearning” (Wang, 2008; Laverie et al., 2008). Firms learn from their past successes and failures, and such information is processed and embedded in their mental models that influence the way of thinking and practicing of the organizations. These mental models may become invalid since the external environment has continuously changed (Day, 1994). Thus firms must proactively question their mental models and engage in unlearning (Sinkula et al., 1997). At the heart of the organizational learning is the ability to unlearn long-held beliefs and practices; so organizations needs to be open-minded enough to question the way its practices and procedures (Laverie et al., 2008; Paparoidamis, 2005). Otherwise, long held routines and mental models will begin to limit organization (Baker and Sinkula, 1999).

Shared Vision: It refers to the extent to which a firm develops and holds a universally understood organizational focus that foster energy, enthusiasm and purpose in the organization [39]. While Torbin describes such vision as “visible leadership” (Tobin, 1993), Galer and van der Heijden (1992) describes it as “goal convergence”. Shared vision gives organizational members a sense of purpose, direction and provides individuals as learning agents, the organizational expectations, outcomes to be measured, and theories in use (Wang, 2008). Without shared vision, individuals are less likely to share dominant logics (e.g. business mission) or desired outcomes (e.g. sales, market share, return on investment) and less motivated to learn (Galer and van der Heijden, 1992; Day, 1994; Tobin, 1993; Baker and Sinkula, 1999). In other words, individuals are open-minded and committed to learning are motivated to learn, but may find it difficult to know what to learn unless a shared vision is in place (Wang, 2008). This dimension is essential to guarantee learning to occur in the same direction and motivate that it really takes place (Santos-Vijande, Sanzo-Perez, Alvarez-Gonzalez, and Vazquez-Casielles, 2005).

* 1. Firm Performance

Venkatraman and Ramanujam (1986) suggest a two-dimensional classification scheme for assessment of performance. On the one hand, they differentiate financial and operational indicators, and on the other hand, they distinguish between primary and secondary source of information. While financial measures are related to accounting measures and economic performance (e.g. profit, sales), operational measures are related to operational success factors that might lead to financial performance like customer satisfaction, quality, market share or new product development (Venkatraman, and Ramanujam, 1986). From the point of the view of the source of information, data for primary measures is collected from organization while data for secondary measures are collected from external or derivative databases. Another classification distinguishes between objective and subjective measures. Objective measures refer to performance indicators impartially quantified. They are usually financial indicators obtained directly from organizations through secondary sources. On the other hand subjective measures refer to the judgmental assessment of internal or external respondents. They usually cover both financial and operational/commercial indicators (Gonzalez-Benito, and Gonzalez-Benito, 2005). Performance measures used in surveys may differ up to the objective and characteristics of the survey. Subjective measures based on the executives’ evaluations and judgments about firm’s profitability, sales, market share, customer satisfaction and so on are frequently used in management and organizational culture related surveys (Garg, Walters, and Priem, 2003). Gonzalez-Benito and Gonzalez-Benito (2005) suggest subjective measures in marketing and management field because subjective approach facilitates the measurement of complex dimension of performance. Subjective measures also facilitates cross sectional analysis through sectors and markets because performance can be quantified in comparison to objectives or competitors. In the direction of the similar views in literature, subjective measures are used in this survey which examining the effect of leadership (as a managerial factor) and learning orientation (as a cultural factor) on firm performance. Data related to the performance are obtained directly from the executives of the firms through the questionnaires, which means primary source data are used in that survey.

The argument that leadership is the determining factor of firm performance has long been object of interest for management literature (Fiedler, 1996; Hennessey, 1998), a few studies have suggested a correlation between leadership behavior and some measures of organizational performance (Baum, Locke, and Kirkpatrick, 1998; Waldman, Ramirez, House, and Puranam, 2001; Zhu, Chew, and Spangler, 2005). On the other hand many surveys found no direct link between leadership behavior and performance (Waldman et al., 2001; Zhu et al., 2005; Ogbonna and Harris, 2000; Tosi, Misangyi, Fanelli, Waldman, and Yammarino, 2004; Steyrer, Schiffinger, and Lang, 2008; Yousef, 2000). As a result, some authors are skeptical about attempting to establish a direct link between leadership and firm performance have began to seek the factors that mediate the relationship between the leadership behavior and firm performance (Peterson, Smith, Martorana, and Owens, 2003; Steyrer et al., 2008). Following this view, we focused on learning orientation and sought the mediator effect of this factor on the relationship between leadership behavior style and firm performance. Many authors have asserted relationships between leadership and organizational learning (Senge et al., 1994; Senge, 1990). Leaders can directly decide to introduce new ideas in to organization, set specific goals, encourage subordinates for innovation and learning (Harbone and Johne, 2003; McDonough, 2000; Aragon-Correa, Garcia-Moreales, and Cordon-Pozo, 2007). Especially relations-oriented leadership and change oriented leadership by focusing on active promotion of employees’ participation in collective decisions and activities, provide teams with direction, energy, and support for process of change and organizational learning (Aragon-Correa et al., 2007). Coad and Berry (1998) also argue that transformational leadership fuels organizational learning by promoting intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and self-confidence among organization members. Literature about the learning orientation-performance relation indicates that organizations with high levels of learning orientation generally outperform their competitors, especially in turbulent and competitive environment (Farrell, Oczkowski, and Kharabsheh, 2008; Mavondo, Chinhanzi, and Stewart, 2005; DeGeus, 1988). Sinkula et al. (1997) give a support this positive relation by stating that “cultivating a learning culture may indeed become one of the primary means to attain and maintain a competitive advantage”, whilst Baker and Sinkula (1999) found evidence to support a positive relationship between learning orientation and business performance. According to Day (1994) and Sinkula (1994), learning orientation implies that a firm is focused on its customers, and “because it focuses on understanding and effectively satisfying their expressed and latent needs through new products, services and ways of doing business…. this should lead directly to superior outcomes such as greater new product success, superior customer retention, higher customer-defined quality and ultimately, superior growth and/or profitability” (Slater and Narver, 1995). Another evidence of positive relation between learning orientation and firm performance is the basic tenet of the learning/experience curve approach is that with the accumulation of experience, the cost of production decreases. Thus, on this basis it can be deduced that learning can lead to enhanced performance by lowering the cost of production (Mavondo, et al., 2005). In the light of the literature, we argue that leadership style increase the firm performance through the learning orientation and propose the hypotheses following:

*H1: Learning orientation mediates the relationship between change-oriented leadership and firm performance.*

*H2: Learning orientation mediates the relationship between task-oriented leadership and firm performance.*

*H3: Learning orientation mediates the relationship between relations-oriented leadership and firm performance.*

1. Research Method
   1. Sample and Data Collection

The survey of this study is conducted on 343 middle and senior managers of 125 high performing firms operating in manufacturing industry in Turkey, between the years of 2008-2010. Firms fulfilling the criteria that (1) being indicated in the list of “Fortune 1000 of Turkey” between the years of 1997-2007, and (2) not being undergone a loss for those 10 years, are indexed as high performing firms. 435 firms that meet those two requirements were contacted via email or phone and informed about the research. However 127 firms accepted to participate in and fill out the research questionnaire. Questionnaires obtained from two firms are eliminated because they did not meet the requirement that “respondents should be top managers or middle-level managers in their firms”. Data obtained from those 343 questionnaires were analyzed through the SPSS statistical packet program and three proposed relations were tested through regression analyses

* 1. Analyses

To measure leadership style, 33 item-scale of Yukl (2002) is used. Learning orientation scale is adopted from Baker and Sinkula (1999), which uses 15 items to measure three dimensions (open-mindedness, shared vision, commitment to learning) of learning orientation. Firm performance scale is adopted from Khandawalla (1977) which uses 5 criteria to measure the overall performance. However, 14 items are deleted because they showed a weak loading or loaded two different factor. Overall, 39 items using 5 likert-type scale are used to measure leadership style, learning orientation and firm performance. The Cronbach’s Alpha values for each factors exceeds 0,70, which indicates the reliability of scales used in that survey.

1. Findings

In this study, regression analysis is also conducted to test the hypotheses and to define the direction of relations. When we examined the Table 1, it can be seen that the three dimensions of the leadership (Change-oriented leadership, Task oriented leadership and Relations-oriented leadership) have significant effect on both dimensions of learning orientation (Commitment to learning, shared vision and open-mindedness) and firm performance.According to the Table 1, change oriented leadership (β=,367; p= ,000), task oriented leadership (β=,137; p=,014) and relations-oriented leadership (β=,190; p= ,000) have significant relationship to commitment to learning orientation. Moreover, change oriented leadership (β=,406; p= ,000), task oriented leadership (β=,172; p=,000) and relations-oriented leadership (β=,273; p= ,000) have significant relationship to the other dimension of learning orientation, shared vision and open-mindedness. All dimensions of leadership have also significant effects (β=,361; p= ,000 for COL; β=,134; p= ,021 for TOL; β=,132; p=,011 for ROL) on firm performance. The relationships of both dimensions of the learning orientation to firm performance are significant (β=,131; p= ,044 for commitment to learning; β=,442; p= ,000 for shared vision and open-mindedness). As 4A and 4B regression analysis results have showed, when the learning orientation dimensions of commitment to learning and shared vision and open-mindedness are included in regression analyses, the significant effect of task oriented leadership and relations oriented leadership on firm performance has disappeared. So, regression analysis results support H2 and H3 hypotheses. On the other hand H1 hypothesis is not supported.

[Table 1. Regression Analysis Results on the Mediator Effect of Learning Orientation on Leadership –Firm Performance Relationship]

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Regression Model | **Independent Variables** | Depended Variables | Standardized β | Sig. | Adjusted R2 | F Value | Model Sig. |
| 1A | Change-Oriented Leadership | Commitment to Learning | ,367\*\*\* | ,000 | ,319 | 54,517 | ,000 |
| Task Oriented Leadership | ,137\* | ,014 |
| Relations-Oriented Leadership | ,190\*\*\* | ,000 |
| 1B | Change-Oriented Leadership | Shared Vision and Open-mindedness | ,406\*\*\* | ,000 | ,472 | 102,71 | ,000 |
| Task Oriented Leadership | ,172\*\*\* | ,000 |
| Relations-Oriented Leadership | ,273\*\*\* | ,000 |
| 2A | Commitment to Learning | Firm Performance | ,131\* | ,044 | ,290 | 70,982 | ,000 |
| 2B | Shared Vision & Open-mindedness | Firm Performance | ,442\*\*\* | ,000 | ,290 | 70,982 | ,000 |
| 3 | Change-Oriented Leadership | Firm Performance | ,361\*\*\* | ,000 | ,268 | 42,741 | ,000 |
| Task Oriented Leadership | ,134\* | ,021 |
| Relations-Oriented Leadership | ,132\* | ,011 |
| 4A | Change-Oriented Leadership | Firm Performance | ,281\*\*\* | ,000 | ,298 | 37,261 | ,000 |
| Task Oriented Leadership | ,104 | ,068 |
| Relations-Oriented Leadership | ,091 | ,078 |
| Commitment to Learning | ,216\*\*\* | ,000 |
| 4B | Change-Oriented Leadership | Firm Performance | ,224\*\*\* | ,001 | ,326 | 42,374 | ,000 |
| Task Oriented Leadership | ,076 | ,179 |
| Relations-Oriented Leadership | ,040 | ,442 |
| Shared Vision and Open-mindedness | ,337\*\*\* | ,000 |

In accordance with the regression analyses results, research model is being shaped as it has been shown at Figure 1 below:

**Learning Orientation**

Commitment to Learning

Shared Vision/Open-mind

**Change-Oriented Leadership**

**Task-Oriented Leadership**

**Relations-Oriented Leadership**

**Firm**

**Performance**

**Accepted**

**Not Accepted**

H1

H2

H3

[Fig 01. Final Research Model]

1. Conclusion and Discussions

This survey, which is conducted on high performing firms of Turkey survived in series of crises, highlighted the relationship among the leadership style, learning orientation and firm performance. The most striking result to emerge from data is that commitment to learning and shared vision and open-mindedness mediates the effects of task oriented leadership and relations oriented leadership behavior on firm performance. So, H2 (learning orientation mediates the relationship between task-oriented leadership and firm performance) and H3 (learning orientation mediates the relationship between relations-oriented leadership and firm performance) are fully supported. These findings are consistent with the literature on leadership and learning orientation. Although there are so many studies examining the learning orientation-firm performance relation (Farrell et al., 2008; Mavondo et al., 2005; DeGeus, 1988; Sinkula et al., 1997; Dickson, 1992) and leadership and learning orientation relation (Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1994; Harbone and Johne, 2003; McDonough, 2000; Aragon-Correa et al., 2007) in literature; the mediator effect of learning orientation on the relationship between leadership behavior and firm performance is examined and revealed for the first time through that survey, which differentiates this survey from others.

However, this survey is conducted on high performing firms of Turkey; findings might not be transferable to all types of organizations. Thus, it is recommended that further researches can be conducted on small-scale organizations and, also in different countries for the generalizability of findings. Another limitation of this survey is that same respondent answer the all questions related to leadership style, learning orientation culture and firm performance. Further surveys can be designed in a way that firm performance and leadership style related questionnaires are filled out by different respondents, in order to prevent same-source bias.

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