



Transformational Leadership

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One of the stand-out elements of great leadership — and great safety leadership — is the ability to inspire followers to a higher level of performance. What you need to know about transformational leadership style and how it works.

What are the characteristics that allow some leaders to motivate their teams to high levels of performance, while others, despite their best efforts, achieve mediocre results? This is the question that has been asked of leadership since before the time of Alexander the Great. This article explores the concept of transformational leadership, a leadership style that increasingly has been associ-

ated with maximizing organizational performance. The article begins with a review of the origins of the concept and moves toward the application of transformational leadership in everyday organizations. It attempts to identify the benefits of the transformational style and the characteristics associated with the transformational leader. It concludes by answering the question: “Are transformational leaders born or made?”

What Makes a Leader Great?

The concept of leadership has been of interest since the beginning of history — Homer, Plato, and Plutarch all describe characteristics to be admired of leaders, as did Machiavelli. The latter, by today’s standards, is the diametric opposite of the transformational leader — for Machiavelli the ends justify the means.

For purposes of this article, the term ‘leadership’ is defined as the interactive process of motivating and affecting the behavior of other group members toward an objective.

In the ongoing search to identify the secrets of leaders who truly achieve, academic James McGregor Burns sought to define those processes and behaviors that they apply to motivate, stimulate, and influence followers. In his 1978 seminal work *Leadership*, Burns described leadership behavior as falling within two broad categories of influence. The first, he termed transactional leadership; the second, transformational leadership. The following will focus on some of the characteristics of the transformational model.

The Transformational Leader

Transformational leadership is the idea that leaders can help transform organizations as well as individuals — from one level to another — to produce significant and positive change. There is an implied appeal to values and morals. Transactional leadership, on the other hand, does not attempt to stimulate positive change in individuals. Instead, it views leadership as a “transaction” between leader and follower. In the business world, traditionally the relationship between the leader and the worker consisted of a transaction: pay for work. Often additional work is rewarded with additional pay. Transactional leadership is closely correlated with the control functions of management. Transformational leaders, on the other hand, “trust their subordinates and leave them space to breathe and grow.”

In reality, a leader uses a mix of transactional and transformational styles. The styles and the dimensions that comprise them represent what Plato called Forms, or Ideas — they don’t exist in the pure form; the best a leader can do is approximate

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them. This is similar to what the German social scientist Max Weber termed “ideal types,” which represent the characterization in its pure form – it probably never exists in the day-to-day world. Rather, leaders deviate to a greater or lesser extent from the ideal type.

In the terms of Abraham Maslow’s needs hierarchy (1948), transformational leaders seek to satisfy higher order needs, to fully engage the follower. The leader raises the consciousness of his or her followers by getting them to reach beyond such dishonorable emotions as jealousy, fear, and greed, to principles that revolve around freedom, justice, and humanitarianism. Followers are thus transformed into better selves, adding value to the individuals as well as to their organizations.

Dimensions of Transformational Leadership

There are many ways to characterize the elements that constitute transformational leadership. The research literature generally agrees that transformational leaders exhibit the four following dimensions, or clusters of characteristics: influencing, inspiring, engaging, and challenging.

Influencing • The influencing dimension is closely associated with what Ann Ruth Willner terms charismatic leadership (*The Spellbinders*, 1984). In contrast to traditional forms of leadership (transactional), she writes “Charismatic... (leadership) is distinctly personal... it is a patterned relationship of influence between one member of a group and its other members. Those who receive and respond to the influence, the followers, are crucial to the relationship.”

Unlike purely charismatic leaders, a transformational leader is not narcissistic: the charismatic leader’s strength lies in a belief in the self, the transformational leader’s belief is in his or her followers.

The influencing characteristic of a leader creates a sense of mission, stimulates, persuades, and motivates followers to perform more than they otherwise would, or believed they were

safety process to get workers really engaged in caring for their own safety. The problem was, when he first surfaced the idea, he was alone. “I felt like Don Quixote tilting at windmills,” he later said. He had perseverance, defended his ideas, fought for them – and eventually influenced the key operational people to agree to try his idea. The rest is history – the company installed the process at his complex. It was so successful that it was rolled out to other company sites.

Inspiring • The second element of transformational leadership is the inspiring dimension (also often called inspirational motivation). An inspiring leader begins with a vision and finds ways to communicate that vision to followers in a compelling fashion, in a manner that will cause them to achieve it. The inspiring leader ensures followers are clear about their roles and how they contribute to the achievement of the vision. They establish high standards and encourage followers to achieve beyond the expected, for their benefit as well as the organization. Commitment to the vision and drawing out the best in followers, encouraging initiative and appropriately supporting direct reports are key characteristics of transformational leadership.

“Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” “I have a dream.” President John F. Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. clearly inspired their audiences with these statements and helped visualize a future state and one’s role in it.

Engaging • The engaging element of transformational leadership (also referred to as individualized consideration) incorporates the leader’s efforts at teaching, mentoring, coaching, and promoting the strengths of followers as well as providing an environment in which that development can prosper. The focus is on the developmental needs of the follower as an individual, not as a group of persons. The approach is consultative and personalized, one-on-one.

“I used to be a very directive line manager,” said a former operations director, “I told people what I expected, but never

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able to. In order to be able to achieve this, the leader must be respected and trusted by others. An influencing leader takes a position and defends it in the face of adversity and places emphasis on the ethics of his or her stance. Influencing leaders believe in their vision and in their ability to achieve it. The research literature often refers to this as influencing behavior.

One EHS director in a large manufacturing complex exemplifies this principle. He had a vision: to implement a behavioral

got the results I wanted. I then changed my strategy and began to work with my reports one-on-one, showing them what I wanted and providing them with support. I kick myself thinking about what we could have accomplished if I’d learned to coach them earlier!”

Challenging • The final dimension of transformational leadership is the challenging dimension (sometimes called intellectual stimulation). This dimension bases itself on intellectual

processes. The challenging leader encourages followers to question their models and paradigms, to seek out different perspectives, to look at the world through different lenses, while allowing them to make mistakes. This stimulates creativity and innovation.

In 2001, a new manager was appointed to oversee the refinery of a multinational petroleum company. In an earlier life, “Joe” had been a behavioral safety observer, and recognized the benefits of behavior-based safety to maximize organizational safety culture. His reports, for the most part, were not convinced. Joe’s values were such that he believed everybody to be capable of contributing to the organization beyond their stated roles. Rather than force his beliefs on his subordinates, he used the elements we associate with transformational leadership to get them on board: as a charismatic individual, he naturally influenced them; he had a vision for safety, which he communicated broadly. Rather than seem an authoritative figure,

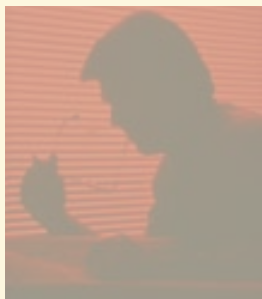
Joe coached, taught, and mentored his staff, always modeling the behaviors he valued. He also engaged his subordinates in discussions, inviting them to think outside the box they had previously been comfortable in. Joe clearly exhibited and lived the characteristics of a transformational leader. His results in safety? For the first time in its history, his site achieved over four million worker-hours without a lost-time incident. Interestingly, Joe didn’t take credit for it. He said his team did it.

How to Spot a Transformational Leader

The transformational leader incorporates much of what Douglas McGregor called the Theory Y manager (*The Human Side of Enterprise, The Professional Manager*). This leader displays energy and commitment and a passion for the vision. The leader creates trust by behaving with integrity. This leader is action-oriented and models the behaviors and practices that he or she espouses. These leaders are people-oriented and committed to their followers. They communicate extensively, recognize accomplishments of others and promote a feedback-rich environment. They are “big picture” people.

But the reality of leadership isn’t that clear; in the real world, leaders use a variety of approaches to achieve their objectives. Leaders have a tendency or a preference for the use of one or more strategies, or approaches. A given style used in one circumstance may appear contradictory to a style used in another. For example, Jack Welch certainly was controversial during his tenure at General Electric – his hard and what appeared to be ruthless approach embodied characteristics of the transactional leader. He flattened the organization by ridding it of layers of middle management. However, Welch also achieved enduring successes for the company he managed and is credited with using Six Sigma and other strategies to bring the company closer to the customer, to developing e-business and to increasing the company’s market value by over \$400 billion during his tenure.

Lee Iacocca of Chrysler is probably best remembered for petitioning Congress for financial assistance when the company faced bankruptcy in 1979; his successful obtaining of government loan guarantees is still controversial today. However, this action saved thousands of jobs. In the 1980s, Iacocca oversaw the acquisition of AMC and its very profitable Jeep Division. These are examples of recognized leaders who, to achieve their objectives, used apparently contradictory leadership styles.



The Dimensions of Transformational Leadership

Influencing - Building a sense of mission and commitment to the vision, gaining respect and trust, increasing optimism and instilling pride

Inspiring - Setting high standards; using symbols to focus effort; modeling new standards and communicating a vision and translating it into language that resonates with individuals at all levels of the organization

Engaging - Helping others to commit to the desired direction, including: the ability to coach, mentor, provide feedback, give personal attention and link the individual’s needs to the organization’s mission

Challenging - Providing subordinates with a flow of challenging new ideas aimed at rethinking old ways of doing things; challenging dysfunctional paradigms; and promoting rationality and careful problem solving

Becoming a Transformational Leader

There is a lot of evidence to support greater use of the transformational leadership style. The approach focuses on and recognizes the importance and value of individuals; thus, the ideas of respect, values, morality, doing “good,” justice, collaboration, mutual support, and others, all weave through the fabric of the transformational style of leadership. Members of the group feel trusted, supported and cared for – these are basic human needs, counterbalanced by an appealing sense of direction and an expectation of achievement. The consequences for the individual members are to elevate and improve; the consequence for the organization is to receive the benefits of higher level contributions from its members. These are all leading indicators, which almost inevitably have a positive impact on results.

The inspirational element is characterized by the leader describing a vision, a compelling and future desired state. The leader helps establish high expectations and the desire of the followers to achieve those levels of performance. Recognition of followers’ efforts is an important component of the inspirational element. This might be characterized as:

- Developing an inspiring vision and ensure it is communicated to followers in a way that resonates with them;
- Discussing the importance of that vision and what it will take to achieve it;
- Publicly recognizing followers so they recognize they are appreciated; celebrate achievements;

They communicate extensively, recognize accomplishments of others and promote a feedback rich environment. They are big picture people.

So what does transformational leadership look like? What do transformational leaders really do?

The behaviors that transformational leaders regularly practice are supportive of the four dimensions of this leadership style: *influencing*, *inspiring*, *engaging*, and *challenging*. Some influencing practices and behaviors include motivating group members towards an established vision. This includes establishing respect and trust, in part through the ethical treatment of others. Those with innate abilities leverage their charisma to gain the following of the members. Some practices and behaviors might include:

- Recognizing your own mistakes and weaknesses;
- Rigorously establishing and enforcing principles of procedural and organizational justice – treat members equally and fairly;
- Sticking to your guns – hold on to a position you know is right in the face of opposition;
- Emphasizing the correctness, the desirability, of the objective;
- Displaying belief in your followers.

- Displaying belief that your followers will achieve and even exceed expectations.

A transformational leader is engaging with his or her followers, which is translated into providing followers with developmental opportunities. In recent years the rapid growth of individual coaching provided by the leader at all levels of the organization is a recognition of the importance of this element in business life. Some examples of how leaders display the engaging element:

- Personally coaching followers to help them achieve higher levels of attainment;
- Taking part in developmental opportunities;
- Making developmental opportunities available to followers.

The fourth characteristic of the transformational leader is the challenging dimension. This is a de-stabilizing dimension whereby the leader challenges the intellectual status quo of the individual and encourages reviewing models and paradigms, to view life in a new and different way. How might this be visualized?

- Challenging the functionality of models, paradigms, thought patterns; offers opportunities to view the situation in a different light through the application of different tools that promote rationality in the analysis of problems;
- Providing followers with new and different ideas and concepts and encouraging them to develop their own;
- Engaging followers in discussions; encouraging them to think differently about a given situation.

Is Transformational Leadership Always the Best Option?

While transformational leadership is powerful and yields results, it is important to recognize that leadership is situational – that an effective leader modifies his or her style and approach depending upon the situation and what is called for.

In October, 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis brought the United States and the Soviet Union to the verge of nuclear war as a result of the Soviet placement of missile-mounted nuclear weapons in Cuba, barely 90 miles from Key West. President John Kennedy is credited with defusing the situation. Did he

do it in a transformational way? Certainly not! He was assertive and action-oriented as he demanded that the nukes be dismantled and removed from the island. His actions were purely transactional – the transactions in question being the exchange of force.

Are Transformational Leaders Born or Made?

As is true of personality traits and elements of leadership styles, it is clear that we all have natural tendencies toward being more transactional or transformational. However, research empirically demonstrates that leaders can shift from managing through transactional behaviors to being more transformational. The understanding of, as well as the applications of, behaviors and practices comprising transformational leadership can be learned and developed.

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