

Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership is related to charismatic leadership but somewhat more broadly. The concept of leadership being transformational is often associated with the political scientist James Burns' (1978) idea of leadership as involving a higher purpose and inspirational commitment, and which contrasts with transactional leadership, based on a more instrumental exchange. According to several proponents of transformational leadership, the classic traditions are insufficient in terms of acknowledging the relevance of higher meaning and strong emotions (Kotter, 1982). As demonstrated by the previous discussion of the classical approaches, this may be debatable, as ideas within the relational (concern for people) leadership style often involve moral commitment and inspirational organizational objectives. Even so, at the beginning of the 1980s many of the classic approaches were regarded more as forms of management and as a key problem behind the decreased competitiveness of numerous American companies. Kotter (1990) suggested that US organizations were



‘over-managed’ and ‘under-led’, arguing that they were good at maintaining their direction in stable environments – through management – but poor at initiating and leading transformations and change under more unpredictable and turbulent circumstances. The latter was said to require a leadership that also targeted the hearts and minds of people in terms of higher purposes, values, organizational cultures and inspirational messages (Spector, 2014).

Burns’ ideas were taken up by several managerial leadership researchers, Bass (1985) in particular, and were applied in various organizations. According to Bass, in contrast to the transformational leader, the transactional leader: (1) recognizes what people want to get out of work and tries to see that people get it (given the performance requirements); (2) exchanges rewards and promises of rewards for work efforts; and (3) is responsive to people’s self-interest if relevant to getting the work done. Transactional leaders also clarify work tasks and requirements in order to provide people with enough confidence to reach desired outcomes. This should provide motivation for subordinates to reach the expected level of performance.

In contrast to just aiming for an expected level of performance, transformational leaders motivate people to do more than they initially intended. A transformation is accomplished by: (1) raising awareness among followers of the value of intended outcomes and of the means of reaching them; (2) encouraging subordinates to transcend their individual interests for the sake of the work group or organization; and (3) triggering people’s inner motivation – moving upwards on Maslow’s Need Hierarchy – by enticing feelings of participation and self-actualization. Self-confidence is targeted as well as people’s views about the possibility of reaching the outcomes (Bass, 1985). These activities are thought to provide motivation for subordinates to go the extra mile in order to do an extraordinarily good job. Transformational leadership adds something extra to the transactional leadership (transactional plus) according to Bass.² In a similar and later version by Bass and Avolio (2000), transformational leadership is characterized by the following:

- *Idealized influence*: Transformational leaders become role models – idealized means a good influence morally – for followers who admire, respect and trust them. They put followers’ needs above their own, and their behaviour is consistent with the values and principles of the group.
- *Inspirational motivation*: Transformational leaders should motivate by providing meaning and an element of challenge in the tasks of followers. This is the charismatic aspect of transformational leadership – seen as most important – and involves rousing team spirit, enthusiasm and optimism, and helping followers develop a desirable vision of the future.
- *Intellectual stimulation*: Transformational leaders stimulate innovation and creativity by encouraging followers to question assumptions, reframe situations, and approach old problems from new perspectives.
- *Individualized consideration*: Transformational leaders treat each individual differently and act as coaches who foster personal development. Their coaching and mentoring are tailored to the individual needs and desires of each follower.

As well as overlapping with parts of the ‘concern for people’ style discussed above, transformational leadership embraces a broad variety of different themes and seems demanding indeed. This is seen as necessary since competitiveness and organizational development are increasingly dependent on engaged and inspired subordinates who actively participate in the creation of organizational culture (Tichy & Devanna, 1986). Ideally, transformational leadership motivates people beyond the scope of their formal work tasks to the extent that people commit and identify with the organization, its culture, vision and leaders. For example, Peters and Waterman (1982) suggested that the most successful organizations were led by people exhibiting transformative traits, including the capability to create organizational cultures inspiring people to perform beyond formal task demands. Also, Jack Welch, the renowned former chairman and CEO of General Electric, known for being tough as nails and drawing on a lot of power as a mode of organizing, suggests that leadership in terms of empowering people is central: ‘You may be a great manager, but unless you can energize other people, you are of no value to General Electric as a leader’ (Goldsmith et al., 2010, p. 36).

Transformational leaders are supposed to avoid or minimize formal hierarchical modes of organizing – such as management – in their influencing efforts. The idea is to reach voluntary obedience by targeting thinking, feelings, identity and generally how people look upon what is important and desirable to accomplish.

Symbolic processes and management of meaning are central. Typically ‘transformational’ means having high impact on individuals’ thinking and emotions. These are not necessarily to be transformed all the time, but high commitment to the idealized leader and the organization are often things that need to be maintained and reproduced.

Many advocates of transformational leadership are lyrical about its potential. According to Maxwell (2001, p. 185):

The single biggest way to impact an organization is to focus on transformational leadership. There is almost no limit to the potential of an organization that recruits good people, raises them up as leaders and continually develops them.

In-depth qualitative studies on transformational leadership are very rare, and most suggest that the celebrated type of leadership is not easy in practice. Often the leadership industry – the popular press but also practitioner-friendly academic writings – grossly misrepresents admired leadership efforts (Spector, 2014). In general, questionnaire studies are more positive about its effects – especially in terms of project leadership – but most are very limited when it comes to understanding how people are transformed in terms of cognition, inspiration and emotions (Keller, 1992). There is much research on transformational leadership, but most of it is highly questionable. There are plenty of tautological concepts blending practice and effect, for example ‘intellectual stimulation’ combines and muddles intention, practice and effect, neglecting the possibility that a manager may try but fail to be intellectually stimulating. Measurements are unreliable. The comparison of transformational and transactional leadership (really management) means the ‘good’ and ‘sexy’ being compared with the boring and mundane (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). In real life it is possible that



most subordinates are less interested in being inspired and motivated by the leader than in having interesting job tasks and good colleagues, wages, promotion possibilities and work conditions – the latter being within the realm of transactional relations (again, management more than leadership in our terms). Interestingly, in a study of leadership researchers' views of effective/ineffective leadership in higher education organizations there were hardly any references to transformational leadership (Bryman & Lilley, 2009). Organizations are full of people with diverse interests and perceptions who are not necessarily that easily transformed into enthusiastic embracers of a vision invented and communicated by a leader (Bolden et al., 2011). Of course this is not to say that elements of what is claimed to be part of transformational leadership do not often play a role in workplaces.