Transformational leadership

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The concept of transformational leadership, as envisioned by Burns (1978), originally referred to moral political leaders who engaged with their followers in such a way that each was raised to a higher level of morality and motivation. The concept has since been applied in areas such as business, psychology, and education. For more information, see Burns (1978).

Summary Article: Transformational Leadership
From The Encyclopedia of Positive Psychology

In 1978, political scholar, James MacGregor Burns, published Leadership, a book that distinguished between traditional leaders who use a more transactional leadership style and transformational leaders. Transactional leaders offer social exchange – money for labor, or recognition in exchange for loyalty. Transformational leaders raise leadership to a higher level. Transformational leaders inspire followers to achieve extraordinary outcomes, and in the process, they help develop followers’ own leadership qualities. Transformational leaders are often seen as visionary and as agents of change.

An important central element of Burns’s theory is the moral quality of transformational leaders who are more concerned with the common good than achieving their own self-interests. It is this moral or ethical element that distinguishes transformational leadership from earlier notions of charismatic leadership. While both transformational leaders and charismatic leaders are able to inspire followers with a compelling vision, transformational leaders go beyond mere charisma and strive to develop meaningful interpersonal relationships with followers and are characterized by a concern for individual followers’ needs. Moreover, while charismatic leaders can be both morally good or bad (e.g., Hitler), transformational leaders, by definition, are ethical and put concerns of others over their own.

Inspired by Burns’s work, psychologist Bernard M. Bass developed the concept of transformational leadership further, including outlining the components of transformational leadership, measuring these leadership components, and demonstrating that transformational leaders do indeed lead groups to high levels of performance and follower commitment. As a result of both Bass’s efforts and the positive nature of the theory, transformational leadership has become the most researched theory of leadership from the 1990s forward.

Components of Transformational Leadership

The four components that make up transformational leadership are: idealized influence; inspirational motivation; intellectual stimulation; and individualized consideration.

Idealized Influence

Transformational leaders serve as positive role models for their followers. They emphasize the collective mission of the group or organization and demonstrate high standards of ethical conduct. As a
result, followers want to be like the leader, they believe the leader has extraordinary capabilities, and they have great admiration and respect for the leader.

**Inspirational Motivation**

Transformational leaders are able to inspire and motivate followers through their display of enthusiasm, optimism and the articulation of attractive future outcomes. Together, the components of idealized influence and inspirational motivation represent the transformational leader’s charisma.

**Intellectual Stimulation**

Transformational leaders challenge followers in an effort to stimulate their creativity and innovation. They do this by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and encouraging followers to take risks and try new approaches.

**Individualized Consideration**

Focusing on individual followers, transformational leaders pay particular attention to each follower’s needs, concerns, and personal development and growth. The leader accepts that there are individual differences in followers and encourages the personalized development of each one through mentoring and coaching.

Although many leaders could have the qualities associated with transformational leaders, such as charisma, Burns describes truly transformational leaders as “morally uplifting.” Initially, Bass did not include this moral component in his conceptualization of transformational leaders. In recent years, however, Bass has agreed with Burns about the necessity for the moral element, referring to leaders who are self-serving and only appear to be concerned about followers, as *pseudotransformational*, or *inauthentic* transformational leaders.

Together Bass and leadership scholar, Bruce Avolio, created the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), which measures each of the four components, and is widely used in research on transformational leadership. This measure requires followers to rate their leaders using the MLQ items. In their full range of leadership model, Bass and Avolio view leadership as a continuum of effectiveness, with transformational leadership at the top, transactional leadership as effective, but less so than transformational leadership, and laissez-faire leadership – where the leader abdicates his or her leadership obligations – at the bottom. In addition to measuring the components of transformational leadership, the MLQ also assesses laissez-faire leadership and different forms of transactional leadership.

**Research on Transformational Leadership**

Research has clearly demonstrated that transformational leaders lead groups that are more committed and loyal to their leaders. The level of satisfaction of followers of transformational leaders is also quite high. As a result, groups led by transformational leaders are also more effective than groups led by nontransformational leaders, in terms of both ratings made of group performance and more objective measures of group productivity.

Transformational leaders affect followers through the building of a relationship characterized by trust and mutual respect. The transformational leader holds high expectations for follower performance, but provides the inspiration, encouragement, and stimulation to think creatively that followers need to reach and maintain high performance levels. As a result, followers of transformational leaders develop

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self-esteem and a sense of self-efficacy in their abilities to succeed. This then translates into more effective performance and high levels of group loyalty and job satisfaction.

Bass also asserts that transformational leaders are particularly effective in conditions of crisis and stress. He cites leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Franklin Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill who were effective in calming followers’ fears in times of crisis. Inspiring courage and stimulating innovative thinking and solutions, transformational leaders help followers turn stressful situations into challenging ones.

Bass, Avolio, and colleagues have shown that transformational leadership training can produce leaders who do indeed enhance followers’ loyalty and commitment, although developing transformational qualities requires a great deal of time and effort. Some success has also been achieved in training work groups for transformational team leadership.

The Future
Research on transformational leadership continues at a robust rate. The popularity of the theory stems in part from its positive nature. In fact, critics have suggested that transformational leadership is really just a description of an “ideal leader.” In looking toward the future of work on transformational leadership, Bass suggests that women, who tend to be more transformational than men, will have much better representation in upper-level management and leadership positions. He also notes that leaders who are able to develop followers through coaching and mentoring – hallmarks of the individualized consideration characteristic of transformational leaders – will be a future leadership requirement, as will leaders with a strong ethical orientation.

In looking toward the future, James MacGregor Burns suggests that the future “test” for transformational leaders will be to address significant global problems such as world poverty and hunger. He views leadership as a moral undertaking and transformational leadership as the epitome of good leadership.

SEE ALSO: ▶ Charisma ▶ Job satisfaction ▶ Leadership ▶ Self-efficacy ▶ Self-esteem

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