

“Transformational Leadership”: What Is It, and What’s It Good For...?

So I get a call from a respected client, and their representative tells me that the company is involved in a “transformation process” program, and can I facilitate a meeting with top management to launch the program?

It’s been a while since I focused on this subject, so I went back to my notes and my memories of some years of working with this topic for clients.

Let’s review some history around this matter. There’s an article on our website about Frederick Winslow Taylor, whose management theories at the turn of the 20th century became all the vogue. (See “Looking Back at Taylor”.) Taylor, you may remember, was an efficiency expert, and his focus was on job simplicity and constancy so that machine work could be done more quickly under standardization. Of course, although Taylor believed that this efficiency would ultimately benefit the worker under reduced working hours and higher pay, the focus on efficiency was seen by many to be de-humanizing; and Charlie Chaplin’s film, “Modern Times” has become an icon in the filmology of social critique on the nefarious effects of “taylorism”.

Fast forward to the business literature response, which came from another icon in its field, James MacGregor Burns’ classic book (1978), *Leadership*. (Do you remember when a book in this area could be given a one-word title?) Burns argued for a leadership process in which “...leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation”. He distinguished between “transactional leadership”, which focused on pay-for-performance, i.e. a “give-and-take” relationship where workers get their rewards from output they produce, and then, as the saying goes, “*Next!...*” Transformational Leadership was seen to be a more fulfilling process where leaders provide followers with something more than just working for their own monetary gain.

A few years later, Bernard Bass extended Burns’ work and began to put measurement to the concept of Transformational Leadership. Here is a reduced version of Bass’s concept of leader behaviors to be measured, in 4 “I” elements (with additions and comments from my reading and experiences):

1. Individualized Consideration. This element would involve behaviors designed and intended to address followers’ needs, concerns, and motivations. Coaching and mentoring are the principal tools, but how these behaviors are carried out is key. Are these behaviors some rework of the pay-for-performance system, or do they connect with the motivations and skill development of followers? Do they align with people’s value systems, or are they simply thinly disguised dictates of a tightly controlled output system, sometimes known as “command and control”. And do they reflect empathy and support and co-ownership of results? (See *POEMS* model in “Coaching and Feedback....” on this website.)

2. Intellectual Stimulation. This element focuses on behaviors that challenge the status-quo and the assumptions that underlie current performance. The leader encourages creativity and “out-of-the-box” thinking, and independence of thought within some “acceptable” guidelines, perhaps taking into account the realities of the marketplace and the culture of the organization. Learning through mistakes is accepted, and possibly even encouraged. But followers essentially are led to ask questions and figure out better ways to accomplish their tasks and mission. When applied to a team, these behaviors may look like setting a challenging set of goals for a group and asking the members to work together to accomplish these “stretch goals”.

3. Inspirational Motivation. Tied to the previous element, the leader articulates a vision that is appealing and inspiring to followers. And leadership engages the person/group to collaborate closely with others in carrying out the vision. For my money, this is the area where Transformational Leadership can make things work, or easily break down. Unless followers really engage with themselves as thinking and feeling people and link up with others as non-competing colleagues, the transformation from a pay-for-performance, transactional approach likely falls apart. In *The Wisdom of Teams*, Katzenbach and Smith write about a working environment where people really “care about one another”, and this means that leadership must exhibit and promote behaviors that link colleagues as people at every level, and between levels, and across silos. We call this “collaboration”, where each person’s job is to help the other person, and it differs ever so much from “cooperation”, where we all do our own jobs and keep out of each other’s way. Even more so, the enemy of motivation is “conflict” (from the Latin *conflingere* to strike, as in battle), where the mood and the modus operandi are to push each other aside to be the best, and the devil take the hindmost. If you consider your workplace to be a battleground, there will be a body count, and you may be the one that leaves in a zippered bag!

4. “Idealized influence”. This used to be called “charisma”, and it has to do with leaders exercising a positive influence around ethical behaviors, generating trust and pride among followers, and respect for personal difference. This 4th element now shades into another aspect of transformation, “authenticity”, and Bass joins thought leaders such as Bruce Avolio, Bill George, Jack Gibb and others in a complex context of provoking and maintaining an environment where people actually engage and connect with each other because they know that they will be honored for their contributions, trusted to do their jobs, and esteemed for who they are as people. For more on this high context of behaviors, see the Authenticity articles on this website.

So here you have a primer on Transformational Leadership, but it’s just the “Cliff’s Notes” on the subject. The bottom line is that we have to read the whole book and live into the maturity that encompasses our responsibility to ourselves and to others to care for and care about each other and, while we’re about it, our community and our planet. I think this is now called “sustainability” or the “triple bottom line”, and that’s the topic of another article....

Several years ago, I was in Spain doing a program for an airline caterer. On the second or third day, a senior manager approached me with a very pleased look on his face and announced the following learning: “Ah, Dr. Osborn, what you’re telling us is that we have to treat people as if they really mattered...” Yep, I told him, I think you’ve got it! That was the beginning of some kind of transformation for him, to be sure!

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