

Transformational Leadership: Then and Now

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When we picture great leaders, familiar names often come to mind: Nelson Mandela, Gandhi or Hillary Clinton. Something about them embodies our common ideas about leadership. They possess charisma, an inspiring vision, and integrity of character. They emanate a sort of magnetic energy, which motivates and inspires followers and is uniquely people-centric.

This portrait of leadership is what we call **transformational leadership**.

The Origins

The concept of transformational leadership is usually credited to James MacGregor Burns, a political biographer (although the term was coined slightly earlier). In Burns' book *Leadership* (1978), he explores the qualities of great leaders and makes a key distinction between leadership which is **transactional** and **transformational**.

The transactional leader uses rewards and punishments to incentivise team behaviour and achieve desired outcomes. This leader's relationship with the team is more like a bargain, where each side gives and receives certain things (i.e., labour for wages), with no overarching joint purpose.

The transformational leader, on the other hand, is able to energise and motivate teams to achieve a shared mission. Burns defined the transformational leader as one who “looks for the potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower.” Transformational leaders are deeply purpose driven and inspire their team to action through engaging intrinsic motivators.

The Theory

Burns' typology of the transformational leader was then expanded on by organisational scholar, Bernard Bass. Bass formulated a Transformational Leadership Theory, stating that transformational leadership “occurs when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the

group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group.”

He defined four dimensions of transformational leadership, which were later codified as:

- *Idealized Influence (II)* – related to charisma, a leader is a role model who inspires and is aspirational for others
- *Inspirational Motivation (IM)* – a leader articulates and unifies a team around a shared vision, which they are passionate about
- *Individualized Consideration (IC)* – a leader is highly aware of team members’ characters and interests and supports them to reach their individual potential
- *Intellectual Stimulation (IS)* – a leader encourages and cultivates the curiosity and creativity of the team

The truly transformational leader has the ability to inspire extraordinary results from followers by harnessing these dimensions of the relationship.

A number of measures have been developed to assess transformational leadership since the inception of the theory, the most well-known being the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). Applying these tools, meta-analyses have found a reliable and significant relationship between transformational leadership qualities and the effectiveness of both teams and organisations. Over the

years, transformational leadership has also been [linked to](#) a range of other positive factors such as increased intrinsic motivation of teams and reduced burnout.

So, is transformational leadership the ideal form of leader in this day in age? Undoubtedly, it has great power to effect positive change, but how does it deal with an ever-complexifying world? And is it sufficiently relational for the contemporary era? Increasingly, we are seeing more nuanced visions of leadership and the need for more strongly contextualised leadership.

The Developments

Further developments in the field of leadership research have seen a challenge to the proponents of transformational leadership. David Rooke and William R. Torbert have pushed back against the view that transformational leadership is a set of behaviours one can simply learn and practice. They believe that programs that only teach these behaviours to leaders will not bring about sustainable change in a person or a group.

For Rooke and Tobert, leadership is not about a

leader's "philosophy of leadership, their personality, or their style of management." Instead, transformational leadership requires a changed perspective and way of thinking and acting. They refer to this malleable leadership frame as the Action Logics of the leader. Rooke and Tobert have identified seven action logics of leaders ranging from lower logics, the opportunist leader or a diplomat leader who is fearful of disrupting the status quo, through to a strategist or alchemist.

What is central to action logics is the idea that leaders can switch between the different logics, depending on what their leadership context requires. For example, we might need to practice the expert action logics to solve a domain-specific knowledge problem. However, we will need to move to a higher logic to communicate and energise the team around the solution.

Under the Action Logics framework, leaders who display higher action logics (such as strategist or alchemist) are able to transform people and organisations. This is because they have the creative perspective and imagination to perceive the necessary change and the inspirational capabilities to engage others around it.

The Call

Transformational leadership has been a powerful theory in the study of leadership for many years and outlines a type of “ideal leader.” As we move into more complex understandings of leadership interactions, the primacy of this type of leadership may not be as clear-cut. We see that leadership is often contextual to the needs of a particular group or organisation. In this way, being able to understand and react to these needs may be more important than fitting a particular form.

So, what is your context calling for?

Need More Help?

Keen to find out more about the powerful theories behind

transformational leadership? Performance Frontiers help guide organisations and their people to thrive as we move into more complex understandings of leadership interactions in our VUCA world. Speak to us today about how we can partner with you to lean into contextual leadership and to meet the call of your organisation's needs in pursuit of a bright future.

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