Transformational leadership

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# Introduction

In recent decades, many researchers have authored popular books that focus on transformational leadership. During the formative years of this debate, the term “rebellious leadership” was being used synonymously with “transformational leadership” (Simola, 2010). The popularity of books and scholarly articles that address this subject is an indication that there is a growing expectation for leaders to have the ability to transform organizations. The question that this paper sets out to answer is on why leaders of are expected to transform their organizations. To answer this question, one should focus on the most recurring themes in these books and articles. Emphasis should be on analyses of perceived organizational deficiencies that the authors think can be dealt with through transformational leadership.

The aim of this paper is to discuss literature on transformational leadership and highlight the various reasons why many researchers attach so much importance to the need to transform every organization. The thesis that forms the basis of this discussion is that leaders are expected to transform organizations with the primary objective of improving organizational effectiveness.

# Recurring themes in literature on transformational leadership

Transformational leadership plays a critical role in contemporary organizations. Transformational leaders are known for their creativity and visionary leadership. They do this to inspire their employees so that they can become more motivated in their work. They also use this approach to encourage them to be creative and innovative in problem-solving. The main themes that books on transformation leadership focus on include creativity, innovativeness, and emotional intelligence. These themes continue to be debated upon, with evidence suggesting that they are linked to employee psychological wellbeing (Avolio & Yammarino, 2013).

Transformational leadership behaviour has continued to attract the attention of both theorists and practitioners. Their main interest is on how leadership behaviour influences the way followers perceive work characteristics. In work environments where there is role clarity and opportunities for development, employees are likely to be motivated. Similarly, the goal of motivation can be achieved if the employee is well informed regarding the meaningfulness of his work. Leaders are said to be transformational if they can communicate all these aspects effectively to employees.

Many organizations fail to succeed because employees perceive their work characteristics negatively. According to Liaw (2010), transformational leadership is assumed to mediate between work characteristics and the wellbeing of employees. In the absence of this mediation role, the organization may not reach its performance targets. When the wellbeing of customers is put into consideration, they are able to succeed in the pursuit of customer orientation. This creates numerous opportunities for customer service to be enhanced.

Literature on transformational leadership emphasizes on the need for both co-worker and supervisor support. In many instances, customers are able to pick out the relationship between supervisors and employees as well as the relationship among employees. If this relationship is one that is negative, the customer is likely to develop a negative perception towards the entire organization. Research aimed at determining how transformational leadership influences the way employees interact with customers has taken root. In this undertaking, an obvious assumption is that any leader who wants to transform his organization must encourage his employees to spend a lot of their time understanding and fulfilling the needs of customers.

During the last four decades, many theories of transformational leadership have been proposed. In these theories, one of the catchphrases is “vision”. Many founders of successful organizations often insist that their companies started simply as a vision. This notion has been picked up by proponents of transformational theories in efforts to explain the need for organizations to transform their operations in order to become more effective. In these propositions, some efforts are often made to demonstrate why the organizations should stop relying too much on transactional leadership.

During the 1970s, the concept of “rebel leadership” was introduced (Simola, 2010). In this conceptualization, scholars seemed to be creating the impression that managers who deviated from the norm were rebelling from conventional organizational leadership practices. During the 1980s, formal theories of transformational leadership started being refined. Evaluative investigations were carried out in efforts to develop a transformational leadership model. These efforts have led to the emergence of a clear-cut description of elements that must exist for transformational leadership to be said to exist.

According to Sosik (2010), a transformational leader must be seen to stimulate interest among followers and colleagues alike, such that they are able to view their positions from new perspectives. Such a leader also generates awareness of the vision or mission of the organization in general and organizational teams in particular. He must also develop followers and colleagues to higher levels of potential and ability. He also needs to provide motivation to followers, who then gain the ability to see beyond their interests by reaching out to those of the entire group. The discussions have led to the emergence of an understanding of a transformational leader as one whose behaviour demonstrates that he readily accepts individual differences among employees. In response, he gives some employees more encouragement. Others are accorded greater autonomy. It is also common for some employees to be subjected to firmer standards for them to become efficient. In other cases, it may be necessary to provide more task structure.

During scholarly deliberations on this type of leadership, the concept of “management by walking around” has emerged (Inness, 2010). In most instances, it is understood to be one of the components of transformational leadership. When leaders walk around different departments of the organization, they are able to engage in personalized interactions with employees. They are also able to remember the previous discussions they may have held with specific employees the previous day. This way, they are able to view the individual as a whole person and not just as an employee. Such a leader is said to be considerate and one who listens effectively to the needs of every member of the organization. At the same time, the interactions enable the leaders find out whether the tasks they have delegated are being undertaken in the right way by the followers (Gill, 2010). Apart from achieving set targets, those to whom tasks are delegated gain exposure to new ideas, thereby increasing their work experience.

The debate on the need to transform businesses and organizations has not been restricted to scholarly circles. Concerted efforts are being made to put this type of leadership into practice. Community leaders as well as top executives in the private and public sectors are nowadays expected to have the abilities to transform the departments that they head (Fitzgerald, 2010). It is expected that the transformation process culminates to an increase in the level of organizational effectiveness (Nielsen, 2008; Harms, 2010). Employees and managers are motivated to improve their operations. Many opportunities for proper use of human resources are created. These changes greatly contribute to improvement in the level of innovation and creativity across the organization (Wang, 2011). In such an organization, employees are likely to be increasingly aware of the importance of greater involvement, commitment, loyalty, and enlightened management (Pieterse, 2010). These elements are critical to the long-term improvement of the organization’s activities.

Recent literature has also shown that the ability to delegate is also important for a transformational leader (Liaw, 2010; Wang, 2010; Felfe, 2010). By doing this, the transformation leader is able to enhance his self-efficacy, leading to greater organizational effectiveness. At the same time, employees who are exposed to the transformational attributes of the leader are likely to be positively influenced to adopt a transformational approach in their workplace activities. At the very least, employees may become aware of the need to transform the business as part of the inevitable process of organizational evolution.

In everyday business situations, new threats keep emerging, market trends change, new competitors emerge, and governments impose new restrictions. In today’s world of globalization, these changes are so frequent that they may easily have a destabilizing impact on a business (Wang, 2012). Recent management scholars are keen to put emphasis on the dynamism caused by globalization (Wang, 2012). They are particularly keen to highlight the role played by transformational leaders in steering business organizations towards safe practices for them to thrive in times of recessions, economic downtowns, and off-peak seasons. According to Michaelis (2010), most businesses collapse simply because they fail to adopt new practices in responses to changes in the external environment.

# The need to improve organizational effectiveness through transformational leadership

There is agreement among researchers that transformational leadership enhances organizational effectiveness (Lindebaum, 2010; Wright, 2010; Kearney, 2009; Asgari & Silong, 2008). One way in which this effectiveness is being improved is through safety outcomes. Supervisors who adopt transformational leadership are able to influence their followers to participate in activities aimed at promoting safety compliance (Inness, 2010). According to Inness (2010), the amount of time that supervisors spend promoting relationships with followers greatly influence safety outcomes.

Employees often like to be empowered as they undertake their duties in the organization. The notion of empowerment has far-reaching implications for safety because it requires the leader to determine the extent to which he should let employees to be in charge of safety issues. All employees cannot be entrusted with safety issues in the same way. It takes a transformational leader to identify the varying strengths and weaknesses of different employees and to assign them roles accordingly (Vecchio, 2008).

Mullen (2009) uses the term “safety leadership” in his discussion on the impact of transformational leadership on safety outcomes. The need for safety leadership is particularly important in organizations that operate in high-risk environment where accidents can occur in the event of laxity among employees. For example, safety is a critical factor in healthcare institutions. Transformational leaders occupying top positions in hospital settings can greatly enhance safety outcomes for patients. They may also spearhead programs aimed at training staff members to enable them develop positive safety attitudes as well as self-efficacy. According to Vecchio (2008), one may even predict performance and level of satisfaction that arises out of transformational leadership. In this undertaking, Vecchio indicates that the path-goal theory can provide useful insights for this undertaking.

# Strategies used by transformational leaders to enhance organizational effectiveness

Other than the attribute of emotional intelligence, transformational leaders are also defined in management literature by virtue of their character, intentions, moral beliefs, and predispositions. These attributes are essential for any organization that intends to improve performance, to adapt to external environment, and to promote employee wellbeing. Numerous efforts have been made to demystify the complex nature of character. The debate has even moved towards the question of whether transformational leaders are born or made. One may expect the disagreements that exist today to continue manifesting themselves in the near future. Meanwhile, regardless of whether transformational leaders are made or born, the fact remains that they contribute significantly to the overall improvement of organizational effectiveness.

Different models that provide suggestions regarding the strategies that transformational leaders use to achieve their goals have been proposed. In one such model, Charbonnier-Voirin (2010) argues that these leaders begin by establishing an ascetic self-construal arising from their character strengths. They make use of the positive self-image that arises from this idealized influence to stimulate other people intellectually as well as to motivate them. According to Charbonnier-Voirin (2010), the leaders use creative and innovative strategies to subject different individualized consideration behaviours to different people. This strength of character is an essential trait for any leader who hopes to be able to lead an organization to new heights in terms of productivity, innovation, efficiency, and profitability.

The character traits of transformational leaders put them in a position where they are able to create the ideal climate for innovation. Whenever organizations encounter serious problems, such leaders are often called upon to reinvigorate them and steer them back towards the path of excellence. Such leaders are able to map their individual capacities to adapt their behaviours to the prevailing circumstances and to project them across the organizations that they lead. They are able to transcend organizational hierarchies in the pursuit of relationships that will promote innovation, growth, and increased efficiency. In other words, such leaders often seem to be in an endless pursuit of a vision. Preference for such leaders shows that everyone would want to work in an environment in which a strong sense of direction, vision, and empowerment is ever-present.

Leaders are expected to be transformational because this means that they will remain committed to efforts to bring about positive change to the organization. These leaders pursue change not just because it is their duty to do so but because the passion to improve the way the organization operations is embedded in their character traits. Korek (2010) points out that the emotional intelligence of transformational leaders puts them in a situation where they are perpetually attempting to improve the way things are done. They make such attempts tirelessly simply because they are able to identify the numerous abilities exhibited by employees, most of which may not have been fully exploited. Not only are the leaders able to identify these missing links in the abilities of employees, they are also able to understand the psychological mechanisms that characterize organizational relationships. This means that the leaders can easily exploit these mechanisms to trigger the appropriate responses from every follower in order to create the right environment for innovation.

The leader’s ability to establish both individual- and group-level influences is critical in contemporary organizations (Hardy, 2010). It paves way for consensus on most issues, such that managers, teams, and board members do not spend too much time in decision-making processes. However, this is not a simply undertaking. Every manager faces the challenge of managing the perceptions of both individual employees and teams. Without qualities of transformational leadership, it becomes extremely difficult to achieve this goal. Hardy (2010) argues that in situations where a positive organizational climate prevails and the decision-making process leans towards consensus building, employees are more likely to engage in behaviour that enhances affective commitment.

According to Hardy (2010), one of the institutions where transformational leadership has been seen to bring about positive outcomes is the military. The leadership behaviours of military trainers can mean the difference between success and failure of the entire training program. Trainees would hate to operate in environments where outdated, ineffective practices are continually being “forced down their throats” (Hardy, 2010). It takes an emotionally intelligent leader for the attitudinal variables of satisfaction, resilience, and self-confidence to be responded to through the establishment of new training practices (Lindebaum, 2010; Clarke, 2010).

# Conclusion

In summary, the debate on transformational leadership is ongoing. An analysis of many books and scholarly articles authored by theorists, management practitioners, and business consultants indicate that leaders are expected to have the ability to transform organizations. This is an indication that the world in which these organizations operate is changing at an alarming rate. To be able to respond to this dynamism, organizations should be headed by people who are able to adapt to new practices and ways of thinking. This calls for creativity and innovation on the part of the leader. From the discussion presented in this paper, it is evident that transformational leaders are in high demand primarily because of their ability to promote effectiveness in the operations of today’s organizations.

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