

The characteristics of an exceptional leader



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Many may wonder how we define an exceptional leader. In order to define exceptional leader we must first define the word exceptional. Merriam-Webster Dictionary online (2010) defines exceptional as “ better than average: superior.” Combining the word exceptional with the word leader, we create a person who not only is commanding and influential but someone who goes beyond being an ordinary leader. Thus, an exceptional leader will not only exhibit many of the characteristics of an average leader but will develop other characteristics that will define them as an exceptional leader.

Numerous researchers have studied and developed leadership styles that demonstrate the key characteristics of a leader. These leadership styles consist of laissez faire, autocratic, participative, situational, emergent, transactional, transformational, strategic, team, and facilitative leadership. Although these leadership styles are unique and display admirable characteristics, many fall short of being defined as an exceptional leadership style due to the lack of exceptional leadership characteristics.

Only one leadership style exhibits leadership characteristics, which define it as exceptional. The leadership style, which displays exceptional leadership characteristics, is the transformational leadership style. The characteristics that make the transformational leader exceptional include helping their followers to see beyond their own self-interests, moral and ethical integrity, set goals and communicate a clear vision, and empower followers.

Bass (1999) identified several of these factors of the transformational leader’s abilities that engage their followers in order to move them past self-interests by “ idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual

stimulation, and individualized consideration” (p. 11). The transformational leader with their revolutionary ideas not only opens up the lines of communication between themselves and the follower, but they are the key in the development of change within the organization.

According to Riggo and Orr (2004), idealized influence “ involves leaders serving as idealized role models for followers” (p. 51). The transformational leader’s moral and ethical values determine every aspect of their decision-making. Shamir, House, and Arthur (as cited by Riggio and Orr, 2004, p. 51) suggest, “ Followers personally identify with their transformational leader, using the leader as a model for their own behavior.” Establishing this step between the transformational leader and follower is only the beginning of the bonding process, which takes place between the transformational leader and follower. In order for the transformational leader to continue to receive the trust and admiration of the follower, it is imperative they be aware that their actions are under constant scrutiny by the follower. Any deviation from their moral and ethical path could have dire consequences on the leader-follower relationship.

Transformational leaders create an inspirational motivation or vision that they have to sell to the follower. Rowsell and Tony (as cited in Avolio and Yammarino, 2002, p. 346) “ suggest that to do this a leader must “ live their vision.” Through this inspirational vision, the follower discovers their own role within the organization and is eager to commit to the vision. According to Avolio and Yammarino (2002), “ If followers know in which direction they are headed, they will no longer feel stress due to operating in the unknown. Thus, visioning is clearly related to the social process of resolving

uncertainty” (p. 345). The follower may buy the vision but inspiring them to continue with the vision will require the transformational leader to be there as a guide. Castro, Perinan, and Bueno (2008) deduced that offering a vision allows the follower some sense of control, which offers a higher sense of being satisfied with the follower’s job. Since the transformational leader creates such a compelling vision, the followers usually feel less stress within the work environment. The lower stress level allows the follower to perform beyond their expected potential.

Nanus (1992) states “ if employees do not feel that they themselves have chosen to adopt the vision, they will eventually revert back to their old ways” (p. 135). The leader must allow the follower to accept their compelling vision. If a leader tried to force the vision on the follower, the vision could have the opposite effect and send the followers into retaliation mode. According to Burns (2003) “ A leader not only speaks to immediate wants but elevates people by vesting in them a sense of possibility, a belief that changes can be made and that they can make them” (p. 239). The transformational leader and follower over time develop a relationship based on mutual respect and trust. This type of respect allows the leader to not only sell the vision but also implement the vision into the organization with the cooperation of the followers.

The transformational leader tries to empower their followers through intellectual stimulation. “ Often this stimulation occurs through a process of empowering and intellectually challenging followers to take initiative” (Riggio & Orr, 2004, p. 51). The leader encourages their followers to be more innovative and solve their own problems. Through the empowerment

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process, the transformational leader aids the follower in the development of their leadership skills. During the relationship between the transformational leader and follower the goal is to one day have the follower evolve into the leader.

According to Bass (1999), “ Individualized is displayed when leaders pay attention to the developmental needs of followers and support and coach the development of their followers” (p. 11). Transformational leaders recognize each of their follower’s cognitive abilities and they try to develop those abilities through added responsibilities. The follower recognizes the added responsibility as being a valued part of the team. Allowing the follower to develop their self-esteem and defining their place within the organization will not only enrich the follower but the transformational leader.

Gary Erickson the owner and founder of Clif Bar & Company is prime example of a transformational leader. When he established Clif Bar