

Transformational leadership: an in support of this model of leadership essay

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From Strength to Strength

Prior to the introduction of transformational leadership theory by James MacGregor Burns (1978), leadership theory had been focused on a two factor person and task orientated paradigm (Lowe & Gardner, 2001). The leadership theories generated by this paradigm “ ignored the charismatic and affective aspects of leadership (Lowe & Gardner, 2001, p. 502).” The shift created by the introduction of transformational leadership theories “.

.. has rejuvenated the field of leadership, moving leadership research out of the doldrums and attracting new scholars and constructs to the field (Lowe & Gardner, 2001, p. 502).” As a result of the interest generated by this paradigm shift, theories of transformational and charismatic leadership have been ascendant since the late 1980s (Yukl, 1999). That transformational leadership has become a, if not the, dominant leadership theory is reflected on by Lowe & Gardner (2001) who cite Den Hartog, House, Hanges, Ruiz-Quintanilla, & Dorfman (1999) as providing proof to “ the notion that charismatic/transformational leadership is universally endorsed as a contributor to exceptional leadership (p. 475).

” But why is transformational leadership so appealing a theory? What are its strengths? What weaknesses are evident? The following is a short reflection on these questions with a particular focus on the strength of the research to date, and its leadership instrument, the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). Transformational Leadership: A model backed by research

The transformational approach has benefitted from being the focus of a large

body of research from its introduction by James MacGregor Burns in the late 1970s, in his seminal book entitled 'Leadership'. Bernard Bass (1985) cited in Northouse (2007), expanded and refined a new version of transformational leadership. He extended Burns' work “..

. by giving more attention to followers' rather than leaders' needs, by suggesting that transformational leadership could apply to situations in which the outcomes were not positive, and by describing transactional and transformational leadership as a single continuum rather than mutually independent continua (p. 180).” This single continuum incorporates seven different factors, each assigned leadership behaviours. This model is known as the Full Range of Leadership Model. This collection of behaviours, derived from series of interviews conducted by Bass, helped him to develop the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire or MLQ; the most widely used measure of transformational leadership. The excitement generated by these two leadership theorists is undeniable when the associated research is assessed. The strength of transformational leadership as a theory becomes apparent in the rigour through which it has been examined to date by leadership scholars.

Northouse (2007) cites Lowe & Gardner (2001) who undertook a content analysis of the dedicated leadership journal *Leadership Quarterly*, showing that over the past decade, 34% of all articles chose to examine transformational or charismatic leadership. In a two-part assessment of transformational and charismatic leadership research, Hunt & Conger (1999) remark on “ The pervasiveness of transformational and charismatic

leadership in recent academic and practitioner writings...” and describe this vein of research as, “ a remarkable flowering (p. 335)” over the decade and a half period from the mid-1980s to the millennium. Tejeda, Scandura & Pillai (2001) comment on the dominance of theories of charismatic, transformational and visionary leadership on much of the practitioner and scientific literature on leadership in the decade leading up to their publication, and James MacGregor Burns (Bailey & Axelrod, 2001), although arguably biased, continues to feel that “ the most exciting and potentially fruitful avenue of leadership research today lies in the study of transformational or transforming leadership (p. 119).

” This research has been conducted from many different perspectives, including qualitative and quantitative studies of prominent leaders within the military, public and private sectors, across diverse organizations and industries, and at different organizational levels. The theory and its leadership instrument, the MLQ, have its critics. One notable critique of the MLQ is the Tejeda, Scandura, & Pillai (2001) study on the psychometric properties of the MLQ.

This study is examined in more detail in a subsequent section. It is Gary Yukl (1999) who has, to date, created the most comprehensive critical evaluation of the conceptual shortcomings of the Full Range of Leadership Model, of which he lists six. The first criticism is that “ the underlying influence processes for transformational and transactional leadership are still vague, and they have not been studied in a systematic way (p. 287).” He believes that the theory would be strengthened by the clear identification of these

influence processes as well as an explanation of the mediating variable(s) and outcome(s) affected by each type of leadership behaviour. Secondly, he feels that the theory focuses too much on the dyadic relationship between leader and follower to the detriment of research examining the impact of transformational leadership on group and organizational dynamics or processes. He provides examples of group processes, like the procurement and efficient use of resources, which he feels are not addressed well by transformational leadership theories.

His third criticism stems from what he feels is an ambiguity about the transformational behaviours as outlined in the 4 I's of Bass' Full Range Leadership Theory; the name of which Yukl takes issue because "no single theory should be expected to include all aspects of leadership behaviour (p. 289)." He challenges each transformational factor for reasons of diverse components leading to ambiguous definition, the high inter-correlation of some transformational behaviours leading to doubts about construct validity, poor or non-existent rationale for the inclusion of some behaviours, and a lack of clarity surrounding applicable descriptions of leader behaviours (process). Connected to his first criticism, Yukl (1999) outlines what important transformational behaviours are missing in Bass' (1996) version of the theory and in the MLQ as a result of neglecting group level and organizational level analysis. At the group level, for example, he proposes including the facilitation of mutual trust and cooperation. At the organizational level, for example, he proposes including articulation of a vision and a strategy.

At the dyadic level, he suggests the addition of task-oriented behaviours relevant for effective leadership and important empowering behaviours, like consulting and delegating. Other shortcomings identified include the further need for research on the impact of situational variables on transformational leadership effectiveness, insufficient research on the potential negative effects of transformational leadership, and the tendency towards heroic leadership bias. While there is not the scope in this paper to treat each of these criticisms in turn, the message to be drawn from Yukl's critique is that these criticisms create new avenues of study rather than a negation of the value of the research to date. Yukl encourages his readers to make corrections to the theory in order to improve its usefulness; not to dismiss it.

The MLQ: Measuring the Effectiveness of Transformational Leadership

In a critique of transformational and charismatic leadership, Yukl (1999) states that there is substantial evidence to support the effectiveness of transformational leadership.

Citing a meta-analysis of 39 studies by Lowe, Kroeck, and Sivasubramaniam (1996), Yukl states that significant correlations were found between transformational leadership factors and subordinate satisfaction, motivation and performance, when using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) to appraise leaders. This model, developed by Bass & Avolio (2000), “assesses the Full Range of Leadership (FRL) model, including laissez-faire leadership; the components of transactional leadership, namely, management by exception (both active and passive forms); and contingent

reward, as well as the components of transformational leadership (Bass, 2006, p. 19).

” Adding to the research, Avolio & Bass (2002) demonstrate the effectiveness of transformational leadership in a variety of situations using case studies and interviews with leaders. The widespread use of the MLQ to measure transformational leadership has opened this model to criticism. Bass & Riggio (2006) state that, “ As research on transformational leadership continues, it will be advantageous to use multiple methods for assessing the construct (p. 31)”. The reason for this, they argue, is that the MLQ has been both “” a boon and a bane to research on transformational leadership” (p. 27).

The popularity of the MLQ has led to its almost exclusive use in research relating to transformational leadership to the detriment of the development of other measurements. The result has been that when the MLQ has been criticized as a measurement tool, by extension, transformational leadership as a leadership model is criticized. The MLQ was created to measure the different behaviours involved in transformational and transactional leadership with the content of the questionnaire varying/evolving over time with different researchers and, by the original authors, in response to criticism. Yukl (1999), criticizes the MLQ for failing to include what he feels to be relevant leadership behaviours like “ task-oriented behaviour relevant for effective leadership (e. g.

, clarifying expected results, setting specific task goals, operational planning, coordinating activities, allocating resources, monitoring operations in a non-obtrusive way)(p. 289).” Tejeda, Scandura, & Pillai (2001) argue that the four factors of transformational leadership (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration) correlate so highly with each other that they cannot be considered to be distinct factors. This same study also claims to have found correlations between the transformational leadership factors, and the factors of transactional and laissez-faire models, leading them to conclude that the 4 I’s were not unique to the transformational model. Supporting this argument, although not in relation to the MLQ, Northouse (2007) cites research by Tracey and Hinkin (1998) which shows a substantial overlap between the 4 I’s, leading them to conclude that the factors are not appropriately delimited. What is important to note, however, is that the criticism levied at the MLQ and, by extension, to the theory of transformational leadership, is limited to proposed refinements of the theory and its measurement.

As indicated at the beginning of this discussion, Yukl does not deny the efficacy of transformational leadership. In their conclusion, Tejeda, Scandura, & Pillai (2001) state that Bass’ Multifactor Leadership Theory, encompassing both charismatic and mundane leadership, “ offers much promise in terms of integrating diverse perspectives on leadership across the full range of leader behaviour, follower reactions and situational attributes (p. 49).” They go on to say that the MLQ already represents a measurement

tool which has been carefully developed and has offered up a “ rich base of information”. It is the conclusion of this author that research which addresses the difficulties involved in measuring the psychometric elements of the MLQ, the addition of new behavioural factors and the streamlining of others, will lead to future iterations of the MLQ which will enhance measurement accuracy and reduce theoretical objections to the Multifactor Leadership Theory. The Intuitive Appeal of Transformational Leadership In his book, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, Peter G.

Northouse (2007) examines additional strengths of transformational leadership theory. They include 1) the intuitive appeal of transformational leadership, 2) the way that transformational leadership treats leadership as a process that occurs between followers and leaders, 3) the augmentation of other leadership models by the broadening of its own approach to leadership, and 4) because of the way that the transformational approach places a strong emphasis on followers’ needs, values, and morals. The transformational approach appeals to those who view leaders as advocates of change for followers; for those who view leaders as visionaries. This popular view of leadership is one that has an intuitive appeal.

The popular counterargument to this strength is the danger, then, of heroic worship of the leader because transformational leadership stresses the role of the leader in moving followers to do exceptional things. However, Burns (1978) as cited by Sendyaya (2005) states that, “ In transforming leadership interaction, leaders and followers ‘ raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality’ (p. 76).” In the process of leading, the

transformational leader and the led would experience mutually beneficial change incompatible with the one-way hero worship dynamic. Another one of the strengths of transformational leadership is its incorporation of the needs of both the leader and his/her followers.

The needs and the attributes of followers become more prominent in this model of leadership. By elevating the status of followers, leadership then becomes a process which occurs between followers and leaders. This interplay between followers and leaders means that leadership is no longer the sole responsibility of the leader and that the needs of followers become of central concern. Critics have claimed that transformational leadership is in fact elitist and antidemocratic, with leaders appearing to act independently of the needs of followers to establish a new direction or creating changes (Avolio, 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1993). This is countered with the argument that transformational leaders can be directive and participative as well as democratic and authoritarian (Northouse, 2007). Transformational leadership addresses the needs and growth of followers in a way that purely transactional leadership models do not by meeting the unconscious and affective aspects of leader-follower interactions. The transformational leadership model asks leaders to motivate, be an agent of change, act as a social architect, build trust, nurture their followers, and to proceed with a vision, among other roles.

It is thus that the transformational approach provides a broader view of leadership while incorporating or building on other leadership models (Northouse, 2007). This broader view of leadership has been criticized as

lacking conceptual clarity, leading to a difficulty in defining the parameters of transformational leadership (Yukl, 1999) and has been addressed in a previous section. The transformational model of leadership introduces a moral dimension to leadership. Northouse (2007) cites Avolio (1999) as stating that, “ Transformational leadership is fundamentally morally uplifting (p. 192)”.

In addition to followers needs, transforming leadership engages follower values and morals. The benefit of such engagement is that it motivates followers to act beyond their own interests to the benefit of their wider organization. James MacGregor Burns states that he, “...[thinks] that the most exciting aspect of the study of transformational leadership..

.. relates to the role of moral leadership in transformation (Bailey & Axelrod, 2001, p.

119).” It is important to note that the moral dimension of transformational leadership negates the pseudotransformational coercive uses of power by charismatic leaders like Hitler as legitimate examples of transformational leadership as is often the criticism. Final ThoughtsIn their review of the first ten years of The Leadership Quarterly, Lowe & Gardner (2001) suggest some research directions to strengthen the already dominant theories of transformational leadership. In line with the conclusions of Yukl (1999), they suggest that the need for process-focused studies remains great.

They also call for an advance in the predictive accuracy of the MLQ regarding specific dimensions of the charismatic components of transformational

leadership, namely, personal liking, trust, and legitimacy. Finally, they suggest that there is a need for research which matches the intentionality behind a leader's behaviour with follower responses and reciprocal intentionality. The value and efficacy of the transformational leader as proven in research, the intuitive appeal of the transformational factors, and the moral dimension of this model of leadership make this a leadership theory of strength. With this in mind, this author is in agreement with James MacGregor Burns who, in relation to transformational leadership theory, said that, " Perhaps the problem will be less a matter of making new discoveries or developing new concepts than of trying to achieve greater agreement among leadership scholars..

. (Bailey & Axelrod, 2001, p. 119)."

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