

# **The Science of Leadership**

## **WEAPONS OF INFLUENCE-EMOTION AND AUTHORITY**

by

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Transformational leaders are effective because they understand and control their own emotions and are attentive to the emotional response they engender in their followers. They engage in an emotional relationship with their followers to the extent of sometimes manipulating follower emotions to gain follower attention, support, and commitment. Followers are rarely as emotionally astute as their leaders consequently they seldom realize that the emotion their leader is displaying isn't real but an attempt to manufacture an emotional response from them.

Transformational leaders recognize that most people respond to symbols of power. In fact, one of the ways transformational leaders gain idealized influence is by acting and sounding like charismatic authority figures. If they look like an authority figure, act like an authority figure, and sound like an authority figure, then they know many if not most people will assume that they have legitimate authority even if they do not. Most people give blind obedience to authority figures or those they assume to be authority figures. Most people automatically assume that the man or woman in uniform, the doctor or experimenter in the white coat, and the self-proclaimed expert at the podium is knowledgeable and has their interest at heart although in reality that may not be true.

**W**hy is it that most of us are so willing to follow a transformational leader even if his vision is much less than totally inspired? Is there something in our nature that the effective leader is able to tap to win our support, commitment and trust? The answer is yes. As Robert Cialdini says, "there are some people who know very well where the weapons of automatic influence lie and who employ them regularly and expertly to get what they want. They go from social encounter to social encounter, requesting others to comply with their wishes [and] their frequency of success is dazzling."<sup>1</sup> These people use their knowledge of the art and science of persuasion to exercise power over us as transformational leaders. In this article, we begin our examination of the leadership science of persuasion with a discussion of two powerful weapons of influence transformational/charismatic leaders employ appeals to our emotions and to our respect for authority.

### **Appeals to our Emotions**

Transformational leaders understand the powerful effect our emotions have on our behavior. They realize that we are emotional beings and that we don't check our emotions at the organization door. Consequently they tap into both our positive emotions of relief, contentment, happiness, optimism and hope and our

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negative emotions of anger, frustration, dislike, regret and guilt to gain acceptance, trust and commitment. Research into the ways transformational leaders tap follower emotions reveals a number of strategies such as the following:<sup>2</sup>

- Transformational leaders make their appeal to followers in a way that inspires and sustains *optimism* and *hope*, two powerful emotions associated with the willingness of followers to pursue challenging goals. Desmond Tutu tapped such emotions repeatedly by telling his followers that they were already free in their minds and that the government just had to catch up with them.<sup>3</sup>
- Transformational leaders motivate followers to overcome obstacles, learn new skills, or tackle new projects by appealing to the emotions of *challenge*, *self-assurance*, *dominance*, and *pride*.
- At other times transformational leaders may attempt to instill feelings of *regret* or even *guilt* to cause followers to make amends for past failings, set aside self-interest and serve the interest of the larger group.
- Transformational leaders may seek to evoke feelings of *frustration*, *dislike* and even *anger* to rouse their followers to defend the vision when it comes under attack. Followers' *anger* in particular may be tapped in an effort to increase and sustain energy levels and to cause followers to be more willing to take risks.
- Charismatic leaders understand how their own displays of emotion can influence followers. They often are so good at managing their emotional displays that it is impossible to detect when their emotions are real and when they are manufactured.
- When events within or outside the organization occur that elicit negative emotions such as feelings of *pessimism* or *powerlessness*, transformational leaders will attempt to reinterpret the events in a more positive light in order elicit positive emotions of *interest*, *excitement*, *determination*, and *challenge*.
- Transformational leaders may intentionally keep followers ill-informed about their status in order to elicit threat-related emotions such as feelings of *powerlessness*, *meaninglessness*, and *anxiety* thereby making the followers even more dependent on and submissive to the leader.
- Transformational leaders may employ subtle and not-so-subtle forms of coercion to induce *fear* on the part of subordinates. The only way to escape the fear is to serve the leader's goals and vision

Transformational leaders use emotions in different ways at different times with different followers. The key is that they recognize the power of the emotional response of followers, are astute enough to pick up on the clues to elicit different types of emotional responses, and are willing to engage in behaviors intentionally designed to manipulate and orchestrate follower emotions.

### **Practical Lesson**

Transformational leaders are effective because they understand and control their own emotions and are attentive to the emotional response they engender in their followers. They engage in an emotional relationship with their followers to the extent of sometimes manipulating follower emotions to gain follower attention, support, and commitment. Followers are rarely as emotionally astute as their leaders consequently they seldom realize that the emotion their leader is displaying isn't real but an attempt to manufacture an emotional response from them.

## **Appeals to respect for Authority**

In the 1960s, a professor of psychology at Yale University by the name of Stanley Milgram proposed a devilish little experiment. Volunteers would be recruited through the local newspaper to participate in a

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psychology experiment on how punishment affected learning. The experiment would be conducted using pairs of participants—one designated the “learner” and the other the “teacher.” Teachers under the direction of a white-coated experimenter would administer test questions to the learners who would be strapped into a chair and fitted with electrodes. If the learner answered a question correctly, nothing would happen. The teacher would merely go on to the next question. However, if the learner got the answer wrong, the experimenter would instruct the teacher to give the learner an electrical shock.

Initially the shocks for wrong answers would be mild but after a short while the experimenter would tell the teacher to increase the voltage by turning a dial each time the learner gave a wrong answer—165 volts, 195, 210, 240, and so on. The teacher would be told to continue to turn voltage higher and higher and to ignore the learner’s pleas that he/she was in pain and begging the teacher and experimenter to end the experiment.

What Milgram wanted to know was How far would the teachers go? How many of them would ignore the experimenter’s orders and refuse to continue the experiment at the first sign of the learner’s discomfort? How many would quit only when it became obvious that the learner was in significant pain? How many would never stop but continue to administer shocks and ignore the learner’s agonized screams until the experimenter finally ended the experiment?

When Milgram asked students and colleagues at Yale what they thought, the consensus was that only one to two percent of the teachers would go all the way. A group of psychiatrists Milgram consulted predicted the number of teachers who would stick it out would be even lower, maybe only one in a thousand or so. The students and psychologists were all wrong. When Milgram carried out the experiments, nearly two-thirds of his “teachers” continued to the end of the experiment, administering highly painful shocks of as much as 450 volts, not a single “teacher” quit when the learner first indicated pain and demanded to be let out of the experiment. The teachers obeyed the white-coated authority figures right to the end.

Of course, in the actual experiments, the “learners” weren’t really volunteers. They were accomplices of Milgram and in on the so-called experiment. Additionally, they weren’t really receiving an electrical shock. They were just acting, but the “teachers” didn’t know that. They were real volunteers, and they weren’t sadistic or crazy. They tested quite normal on a range of psychological tests. They were just average citizens who were willing to go to extreme lengths to obey a person in authority.<sup>4</sup>

Milgram’s experiment has been repeated numerous times throughout the world with similar results. Additionally, incidents of blind obedience to authority continue to crop up in real life. A famous example is the My Lai case in Vietnam in 1968 in which American soldiers followed the orders of their commander and massacred 300 unarmed civilians, including infants, toddlers, and the elderly. Worse, a majority of Americans when surveyed about what they would have done said, like the soldiers, they would have followed orders and killed the villagers.<sup>5</sup>

Another case of blind obedience occurred in 1987. Protesting shipments of military equipment to Nicaragua, a group of protesters lay down across the tracks outside the Naval Weapons Station in Concord, California to block a Navy train carrying the weapons. The train crew who had been ordered not to stop plowed into the protestors severing both of one protester’s legs below the knee. Again acting upon orders, Navy corpsmen at the scene refused to treat the injured protester. The protester, S. Brian Willson, survived although he was later sued by the train crew for causing them “traumatic stress.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Practical Lesson**

Transformational leaders recognize that most people respond to symbols of power. In fact, one of the ways transformational leaders gain idealized influence is by acting and sounding like charismatic authority figures. If they look like an authority figure, act like an authority figure, and sound like an authority figure, then they know many if not most people will assume that they have legitimate authority even if they do not. Most people give blind obedience to authority figures or those they assume to be authority figures. Most

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people automatically assume that the man or woman in uniform, the doctor or experimenter in the white coat, and the self-proclaimed expert at the podium is knowledgeable and has their interest at heart.

Transformational leaders use appeals to emotion and the relatively automatic respect for authority to lead their followers to the heights of achievement. They can also employ these same weapons of influence to lead their followers to death. If you think that cannot happen, read my next article. I will introduce you to a transformational leader who did just that.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Cialdini, *Influence: Science and Practice*, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001), 11

<sup>2</sup> The discussion and most of the research findings presented here are drawn from Shane Connelly, Blaine Gaddis and Whitney Helton-Fauth, "A Closer Look at the Role of Emotions in Transformational and Charismatic Leadership," in Bruce J. Avolio and Francis Y Yammarino, eds., *Transformational and Charismatic Leadership: The Road Ahead*, (Boston: JAI, 2002), 271-279.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 273

<sup>4</sup> For more information on Milgram's experiments see Cialdini, *Influence*, 179-184 and Blass, T. "The Milgram Paradigm After 35 Years: Some Things We Now Know About Obedience to Authority." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 1999, Vol. 29, 955-978. Also see a web site devoted to Milgram and his experiments at <http://www.stanleymilgram.com/references.html/>

<sup>5</sup> For additional information on the My Lai massacre and its aftermath see Michal R. Belknap. *The Vietnam War on Trial: The My Lai Massacre and Court-Martial of Lieutenant Calley*(University Press of Kansas, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> See Cialdini, *Influence*, 184, "American Notes Protest: Blood on the Tracks," *Time Magazine*, September 14, 1987 at [www.time.com/time/magazine/article/ 0,9171,1101870914-147553,00.html/](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1101870914-147553,00.html/)