

The Science of Leadership

WHY TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP WORKS

by

Joseph H. Boyett, Ph.D.

Boyett & Associates

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transformational leaders are successful because they tap into some of our most basic human needs such as the need for a sense of identity, the need to belong, the need to feel good about our efforts, the need to feel that we are part of something special, the need to believe that our future is a hopeful extension of our past, and the need to feel that we are achieving something worthwhile with our lives. In short, transformational leadership works because most of us as followers desperately want it to work.

Why does transformational leadership work? What is it about the transformational leader that makes him or her so attractive? Why are we drawn to transformative leaders the way we are? What is it about our psyche that makes us so susceptible to the transformational leader's wiles? There are no definitive answers to such questions but leadership researchers have some theories.

NOTE: In this and subsequent articles I will use the terms "charismatic leader" and "transformational leader" interchangeably. The primary difference between the two terms as they are used by leadership researchers is that researchers using the term "charismatic leader" are usually emphasizing the Idealized Influence/Charisma and Inspirational Motivation aspects of transformational leadership as the key leadership behaviors that make this style of leadership successful. For more on Idealized Influence, Charisma, Inspirational Motivation and other aspects of transformational leadership see my article "Transformational Leadership."

The Leader as Ideal Object

Some researchers attribute our attachment to the leader to our search for a lost ideal. Boas Shamir explains this approach to understanding why followers are so attracted to charismatic leaders by tracing the matter to the earliest days of our existence.

This explanation finds the root of the charismatic relationship in the earliest days of development--the stage of primary narcissism--when the infant does not distinguish between itself and others. At this stage it experiences the external world--its mother--as part of itself. It is not just the center of the universe--it is the universe... As the child experiences the frustrating realities of the external world, it begins to differentiate itself

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from it. This happens in stages. First, it is demoted from being the universe to being merely its center. At this stage the child maintains a fantasy of omnipotence confirmed by the responsiveness of its nursery environment. The caretakers become enslaved to the infant and it becomes their master--"his (her) majesty the baby".

Later, when the child experiences the caretakers' less than perfect response to its needs, it develops an idealized image of the parents as all powerful ideal objects, and maintains its own sense of being complete and worthwhile by experiencing itself as being connected to or united with these idealized objects. Still later, when the child discovers that the parents are like itself, limited and imperfect, the imaginary omnipotence attributed to the parents is deconstructed, and "paradise" is lost.¹

According to this view, our attachment to the leader is grounded in our desperate need to recapture that "paradise" we lost in our childhood. By merging with an apparently omnipotent and perfect other person—the charismatic leader—we regain the sense of self-sufficiency and contentment that we once lost. We regain that sense of being complete and worthwhile. Once again we feel whole.

The Leader as an Answer to the “Empty Self”

Philip Cushman, a professor at the California School of Professional Psychology, Berkeley/Alameda argues that Americans in particular are attracted to transformational/charismatic leaders for the same reason we are a consumer-driven society. Our psychological “self,” he says, is essentially “empty.”² It is devoid of the sense of community, tradition, and shared meaning that gave previous generations a sense of mastery, personal conviction and self-worth. Cushman sees evidence of this emotional emptiness everywhere.

Low self-esteem—the absence of a sense of personal worth.

Values confusion—the absence of a sense of personal convictions.

Eating disorders—the compulsion to fill the emptiness with food, or to embody the emptiness by refusing food.

Drug abuse—the compulsion to fill the emptiness with chemically induced emotional experiences.

Hunger for spiritual guidance—a wish to be filled up by the spirit of God, by religious “truth,” or the power and personality of a leader or guru.

And especially,

Chronic consumerism—the compulsion to fill the emptiness with consumer items and the experience of “receiving” something from the world.

Since we are emotionally empty, we are hungry for the person or thing that will fill us with the “meaning” we are missing.

The Leader as the “Good Parent”

A third, somewhat less “psychological” explanation for why transformational leadership works was offered by Micha Popper and Ofra Mayseless of the University of Haifa, Israel in a 2003 article in *Leadership Quarterly*.³ Popper and Mayseless argue that transformational leaders are effective in bonding with followers for the same reasons good parents are effective in developing strong, loving relationships with their children. In support of their argument, they offer the following comparison between research findings concerning good parenting from developmental psychology and research findings concerning transformational leadership.⁴

Transformational Leader: Gives individual attention: listens, is sensitive and accessible for personal needs and for development and growth.

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Good Parent: Is sensitive, available, and responsive to the child's needs, understands the child's needs: and adapts his/her responses to those needs.

Transformational Leader: Communicates using emotional messages.

Good Parent: Is emotionally open and expressive. Engages in warm, loving, and accepting emotional communication.

Transformational Leader: Sets realistic challenges and inspires Faith in one's ability to achieve them.

Good Parent: Sets challenging goals for the child according to the child's maturity level; trusts the child to be able to cope in these situations.

Transformational Leader: Develops autonomy, motivation and initiative in followers. Creates a sense of identity, worth and competence, at the level of the individual and the individual and the group.

Good Parent: Accepts and reinforces the child's developing needs for autonomy. Reinforces the child's sense of worth, identity, and competence.

Transformational Leader: Sets goals and standards for performance, but is not critical, judgmental.

Good Parent: Sets limitations, establishes rules and discipline, but does not criticize, domineer, pressure, or forbid without a reason.

Transformational Leader: Provides opportunities for experience and reinforces success. Provides intellectual stimulation; stimulates imagination and thinking and develops creativity

Good Parent: Provides the child with opportunities for new and challenging experiences. Stimulates the child's interest and promotes the child's skills and abilities in a cooperative and supportive manner

Transformational Leader: Builds feelings of self-worth, self-generation, competence, independence, inner-directed motivation, willingness to invest further efforts and strive for success. Enables people to make use of their individual and organizational potential.

Good Parent: Generates a sense of self-worth, emotional maturity, competence, independence, explorative capacity, and achievement orientation. Enables the child to make use of the social, emotional, and cognitive potential.

Transformational Leader: Wins complete trust and respect, and creates feelings of admiration and pride in being near him/her. Sets personal example. Serves as a model for imitation and identification.

Good Parent: Generates a sense of trust in him/herself. Serves as an example and positive model for the child. Serves as a model for identification and imitation.

Transformational Leader: Develops transformational leaders that can replace him/her.

Good Parent: Promotes secure attachment in child which then translates into "good," secure (autonomous) parenting as the child matures.

The Self-Concept Theory

Boas Shamir, Robert House and Michael Arthur of the Hebrew University, Israel; University of Pennsylvania; and Suffolk University, Boston respectively have undertaken perhaps the most elaborate

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effort at explaining the attractiveness of charismatic leadership. They start with the following basic assumptions about human nature.

Humans are not only pragmatic and goal-oriented but are also self-expressive. We assume that behavior is not only...calculative but also expressive of feelings, aesthetic values and self-concepts...We "do" things because of what we "are," because by doing them we establish and affirm an identity for ourselves.

People are motivated to maintain and enhance their self-esteem and self-worth. Self-esteem is based on a sense of competence, power, achievement or ability to cope with and control one's environment. Self-worth is based on a sense of virtue and moral worth and is grounded in norms and values concerning conduct.

Self-evaluation is an important source of intrinsic motivation: People's... reactions to their own performances serve as principal sources of reward and sanction.

People are...motivated to retain and increase their sense of...consistency. People derive a sense of "meaning" from continuity between the past, the present and the projected future. ...and from the correspondence between their behavior and self-concept.

Self-concepts are composed, in part, of identities. The self-concept comprises a personal identity encompassing idiosyncratic characteristics and a social identity [such as a national, organizational or occupational identity.]....

Humans may be motivated by faith...When goals cannot be clearly specified or the...probabilities of accomplishment and rewards are not high, people may be motivated faith, because being hopeful in the sense of having faith in a better future is an intrinsically satisfying condition....⁵

Shamir, House and Arthur then show how the charismatic leader connects with his/her followers by catering to these all too human needs.

- We seek to establish and affirm an identity through our efforts. We want our efforts to have more than just instrumental value. The charismatic leader responds by giving our effort a higher meaning. He/she makes our effort a moral statement. He allows us to "stand up and be counted" for something that truly matters.
- We want to enhance our self-esteem and sense of self-worth. We want a sense of competence, power, achievement, and confidence that we can not only cope with but exercise control over our environment. The charismatic leader reassures us through his expressed high expectations for our accomplishment and confidence in our ultimate success.
- We want a sense of continuity between the past, present and future. The charismatic leader demonstrates how his vision and goals for the future are consistent with "our" collective past. He/she creates a sense our future is "evolving" by interpreting our present and past and linking what WE are and have been to what WE will become.
- We want a social identity as well as a personal one. We want to feel part of something bigger than ourselves. The charismatic leader stresses group identity and the pursuit of a common goal as central to that identity. We are set apart from other individuals and groups by our common and worthy purpose.
- We want to feel hopeful about the future. The charismatic leader instills in us the faith that all will be well if we only follow him or her.⁶

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PRACTICAL LESSON

Why does transformational leadership work? Perhaps the simple answer is that it works because we want it to work. We need for it to work. We want a sense of identity. We want to feel that we belong. We want to feel good about our efforts and ourselves. We want to feel that we are achieving something worthwhile with our lives. We want to see our future as the hopeful extension of our past. We want to make a difference. Transformational leadership works because the transformative leader convinces us that by following him we can fulfill these wants. Like the good parent, the transformative leader makes us feel good about our future and ourselves.

Then, of course, there are the weapons of automatic influence that transformational leaders wield so effectively. What do I mean by "weapons of automatic influence?" They are the psychological tricks and persuasion tools of the leadership trade. As we shall see, they go largely unnoticed by most of us but are powerful that most of us can't resist them. I'll turn to them next beginning with some savvy and, some might say, unscrupulous appeals to our emotions and our respect for authority.

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NOTES

¹ See Shamir, Boas, "The charismatic relationship: alternative explanations and predictions," *Leadership Quarterly*, 1991/2/2, 81-104 for a more complete explanation.

² See Cushman, P., "Why the self is empty: toward a historically situated psychology," *American Psychologist*, 1990/45/5, 599-611

³ Popper, Micha and Ofra Mayselless, "Back to basics: applying a parenting perspective to transformational leadership," *Leadership Quarterly*, 2003/14, 41-65

⁴ Based upon Table 1, p. 45 in Popper, Micha and Ofra Mayselless, "Back to basics: applying a parenting perspective to transformational leadership," *Leadership Quarterly*, 2003/14, 41-65

⁵ Shamir, B., R. House, and M. Arthur, "The motivational effects of charismatic leadership: a self-concept based theory," *Organization Science*, 1993/4, 580

⁶ Adapted from the discussion in Shamir, B., R. House, and M. Arthur, The motivational effects of charismatic leadership: a self-concept based theory, *Organization Science*, 1993/4, 581-587