

Transformational leadership is the new reality

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Leadership and management have been discussed and employed for many years – there are very few postgraduate courses that do not cover the key associated issues. Most MBA programs provide significant focus – and many opt for two subjects – one on leadership and the other on management suggesting they are associated – but at the same time worthy of consideration independently. *Transformational leadership*, though not a new concept (Burns, 1978 and later Bass, 1985), is emerging as the mode of leadership best suited to the new reality and to these hanging times. Kauppi (2022) and associate provide a useful history on the matter.

The new reality – emerging from the ashes of COVID-19 – calls for a refreshed approach to leadership (and management for that matter) that understands the importance of involving staff in decision making and at the same time developing a bold, new approach to succession planning and leadership training.

Transformational leadership is the term applied to this appropriate approach.

What is transformational leadership?

A solid definition is – ‘a leadership approach that causes change in individuals and social systems. In its ideal form, it creates valuable and positive change in the *followers* with the end goal of developing followers into *leaders*.’ Essentially the followers become the leaders.

The ideal approach to change management is using a leadership approach that assists the change to take place and equally important to ensure that those involved have a high level of ‘buy in’ and feel that they are part of that change – and despite perhaps being uncomfortable with all the elements of the change (perfectly understandable) – are able to embrace the ‘new reality’ with their self-esteem and ownership intact.

A reasonably big ask, by the way. It becomes a challenge for the leader/leadership group and equally a challenge for employees who have been used to following – in some cases mindlessly – and are now asked to step up and take the lead.

Simply put – ‘Transformational leadership is a model of leadership that relies on the encouragement of a team to realize overall success. By raising a team’s morale and self-confidence, the team can then align itself to an overall vision or common purpose’ (Ugochukwu, 2021).

Elements of transformational leadership

It is a commonly held view (Farnsworth et al 2020) that there are four elements of transformational leadership. They are – Idealized influence; Inspirational motivation; Intellectual stimulation and Individual consideration.

Idealized influence refers to modelling of exemplary behaviours that in turn are aligned with the goals of the organisation. In order to achieve this leaders need to be aware of the goals; embrace these goals with high levels of enthusiasm and commitment; and encourage other staff to embrace the issues/ideals. Essentially, it is about provide a high level role model so that others can emulate it. If, for example, scholarship is deemed a high priority – the leader must be scholarship active at the highest level – share this information on a regular basis – and encourage others to do the same,

Inspirational motivation is the degree to which a leader articulates an appealing vision that inspires and motivates others to perform beyond expectations. Leaders who use inspirational motivation have high standards and expectation for their followers. They are able to clearly articulate the goals/objectives so that followers not only understand them – but actively embrace them. If, for example, using technology is deemed essential to the survival of the organisation – the leader must be technology focussed and seen to be using the technology available in the best possible way – providing evidence and motivation for others to do the same.

Intellectual stimulation is best understood as having a leader who encourages innovation and creativity, as well as critical thinking and problem-solving. Intellectual stimulation involves arousing the thoughts and imagination of followers, as well as stimulating their ability to identify and solve problems creatively. If, for example, the industry focus is higher education - the leader needs to be seen informed in all matters and be actively involved in the key issues associated with that industry – as a ‘thought leader’ and activist.

Individual consideration is the extent to which a leader attends to each follower's needs and is a mentor, coach or guide to the follower. The leader listens to the concerns and needs of each follower and provides support and is empathic of each situation and background. This is about knowing what the various needs of the employment group are – individualising it carefully – and wherever possible supporting those needs and aspirations.

The demands on the leader (leadership group) are obvious.

According to Nuthouse (2001) top end leaders – who have focus on the transformational approach - have a range of qualities (perhaps they could actually be called - skills) that are needed in the new reality. These include – the ability to empower followers to do what is best for the organization; the ability to be a strong role model with high values; to be able to listen to all viewpoints in order to develop a spirit of cooperation; be able to create a vision, using people in the organization; have the acumen to be a change agent within the organization by setting an example of how to initiate and implement change; and understand that the best way to help the organization is by helping *others* contribute to that same organization.

Gans (2022) believes ‘transformational leadership is a leadership style that can inspire positive changes in those who follow. Transformational leaders are generally energetic, enthusiastic, and passionate. Not only are these leaders concerned and involved in the process, but they are also focused on helping every member of the group succeed’.

Leadership for the new reality

So much has changed in the new normal as a consequence of COVID-19 and its impact on a world scale. Many are using the term – the new reality – which best sums up the times and the rapid changes seen in so many domains. In order to lead (or perhaps facilitate) the

change that is need to cope and thrive in this new reality – a special kind of leadership – transformational – is needed.

White (2023) articulates – ‘Transformational leaders inspire and motivate their workforce without micromanaging — they trust trained employees to take authority over decisions in their assigned jobs. It’s a management style that’s designed to give employees more room to be creative, look to the future, and find new solutions to old problems. Employees on the leadership track will also be prepared to become transformational leaders themselves through mentorship and training’.

Ray (2023) argues – ‘It is incumbent on leaders to heighten their respective sensitivities in these circumstances. Every individual has his or her own unique set of personal challenges to manage, in addition to getting the job done. While the situation remains fluid and timetables for return to work remain unclear for many types of businesses, leaders must be cognizant of safety protocols as well as the personal preferences of their workforce. Employers and employees alike are navigating an unprecedented period in history. The acronym VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) is apropos when describing current times. With so many factors outside of a leader’s control, one constant remains during a time of crisis: *Individuals look to their leadership for reassurance, steadiness, compassion and understanding.* No matter the size of your enterprise, you can choose to adopt a considerate, thoughtful approach as a key priority.’

As we face the various challenges associated with - Working from Anywhere (WFA), part-time work; diverse interests of the work force; the new challenges to various industries (including higher education); and the technological revolution that has emerged largely inspired by the pandemic – leadership needs to reflect that diversity and embrace it head on.

References

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