DEVELOPING TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERS: How do you do it and does it matter?

Think of the best leader you ever had. It could be a supervisor, a teacher, a sports coach or anyone that stands out in your mind as a leader. Take a few minutes and note down what it is that this individual did that made him/her a truly effective “leader”. If you are like the hundreds of individuals that we have had complete this exercise, it is likely that the behaviours that you identify as being characteristic of effective leadership fall into the four dimensions that comprise the theory of transformational leadership.

Bass (1990, p. 2) defines transformational leadership as a superior form of leadership that occurs when leaders “broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and the mission of the group and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group.” He goes further to suggest that there are four dimensions that comprise transformational leadership behaviors: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration.

- Idealized influence occurs when leaders engender the trust and respect of their followers.
- Leaders who engage in inspirational motivation “raise the bar” for their employees, encouraging them to achieve levels of performance beyond their own expectations.
- Intellectual stimulation involves engaging the rationality of subordinates, getting them to challenge their assumptions and to think about old problems in new ways.
- Individualized consideration deals with treating employees as individuals and helping them to meet their needs.

Training Transformational Leaders: An evaluation

While there is an impressive body of research evidence supporting the validity of the theory, we became interested in two central questions which, to us, defined the central issues. First, can transformational leadership be taught? Second, does it make a difference to organizational outcomes?

In a study reported in the Journal of Applied Psychology, (Barling, Weber, & Kelloway, 1996) we addressed both questions. The design of our initial research was quite simple. Working with a major financial institution in Canada we identified twenty bank (i.e., branch) managers operating within the same geographic region. Managers were randomly assigned to either an experimental group or a control group. Members of the experimental group initially participated in a one-day workshop on transformational leadership, and subsequently attended four individual counseling sessions in which subordinate ratings of transformational leadership were presented for each leader, and specific goals were developed and
monitored. Members of the control group received neither the training nor the counseling sessions.

Consistent with our goals, the effectiveness of the training intervention was assessed with two types of measures. First, we thought that the intervention could only be judged a success if the subordinates saw an increase in the transformational leadership behaviors displayed by their leaders. As shown in the first figure, the subordinates of trained leaders reported significantly more positive perceptions of their behaviors than did subordinates of the untrained managers.

Second, while these data speak to the ability of training to increase leadership behavior, we were also interested in whether increasing leadership behaviors resulted in increases in outcomes of interest to the organization. Our results suggest that subordinates of trained leaders became more committed (i.e., loyal) to the organization than were subordinates of untrained leaders.

Perhaps more importantly, branch-level credit card sales and personal loan sales (adjusted for branch size) increased in branches where the manager was trained. These results are particularly important because (a) they show the impact of leadership training on bottom line outcomes and (b) the individuals we had direct contact with (i.e., the leaders) were not personally
engaged in credit card and personal loan sales. This latter observation shows that an increase in transformational leadership raises the level of performance by “trickling down” through the organization.

Developing Leaders: Planning for sustainable change

Since obtaining these encouraging results we have been conducting leadership training for a diverse array of Canadian private and public sector organizations. Although we could not always obtain a “clean” experimental design, we have consistently been able to document increases in leadership behavior as a result of training. Moreover we have continually refined our approach to developing enhanced leadership skills, emphasizing the implementation of small-scale and sustainable behavioral changes that have a high “payoff.”

Most major bookstores now carry racks and racks of books on leadership. Academics, consultants, executives and HR practitioners are all eager to share their particular slant on organizational leadership. Most of these books contain at least some valuable insights. Sadly, most of the strategies advanced in these works are bought but not read, read but not implemented, or implemented but not sustained. We believe that a key reason for this state of affairs is that leader-

Branch-level Financial Outcomes by Group

Note: Scale is arbitrary. Financial data are weighted by branch size and performance targets.
Leadership Scores by Group

Note: Leadership scores ranged from 0 (low) to 4 (high)

ship theorists have been proposing large scale, unsustainable change. The simple fact is, if we find a behavior or leadership style to be uncomfortable, or it doesn’t “fit” with our view of ourselves or our workplace we soon drop it. As a result, our subordinates become cynical and merely wait out the new “flavor of the month” until things get back to normal.

In contrast, we advise trainees to implement only those changes that can be worked into their daily routine. When we wrote this, RRSP season was upon us, and we learned once again of the value of making small, consistent contributions to our RRSP rather than one large contribution at the end of the year. In the same way, we suggest that making small changes and maintaining those changes over time is likely to have a large effect on subordinates.

What kind of small changes? To enhance idealized influence, we often suggest that leaders take some time to make their decision-making more transparent. Simply explaining that “I can’t give you the afternoon off because I asked first” emphasizes that you value and uphold fairness in your decision-making. Consistently making decisions using the same criteria builds respect and trust as employees learn exactly what they can expect from you. Responding to employee questions by asking “what do you think we should do?” or “what would you advise if you were me?” engages employees’ minds in the workplace - the definition of intellectual stimulation.

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Recently, we conducted another experimental investigation in which we tried to isolate the effects of training and counselling to induce these small-scale changes in behaviour. We used a four group design in which one group participated in a day-long workshop, one group received a thirty-minute feedback/counseling session, one group received both and a final control group received neither. The results of our study shown in Figure 4 suggest that both training and counseling are effective means of behavioral change.

Indeed, we interpret our findings to suggest that the key to such change is to actively set goals for the desired behavior. Whether through training or counselling, when we have leaders set a small number of specific, challenging goals, their subordinates see an improvement in transformational leadership. Such improvements are associated with enhanced employee attitudes and enhanced performance. A better place to work and a more productive organization – substantial outcomes resulting from small, sustainable behavioral changes.

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References