

The Themes and Theory of Leadership

James MacGregor Burns and the Philosophy of Leadership

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The Themes and Theory of *Leadership*: James MacGregor Burns and the Philosophy of Leadership

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Introduction

A professor of management once told a friend, that if he comes upon an article on leadership and notices the bibliography does not include *Leadership* by James MacGregor Burns (1978), he dismisses it as unthoughtful and incomplete. That is quite a litmus test. Nevertheless, many share the view that anyone who claims to have thought seriously about the concept of leadership, must wrestle with the ideas in Burns' book. It is a seminal work; perhaps it is the one book that ensconced in academia the legitimate field of leadership theory and practice.

The intention of this work is to review the major themes of Burns' book, discuss the two concepts that are most often debated and studied (i.e. transactional and transforming leadership), and suggest that these two concepts are important mainly as they help to elucidate the real focus of the book -- a general theory of leadership that is inherently based on interpersonal relationships, motives, and values. Doing this will help explain why some who focus on the checklists and measurements of organizational effectiveness often confuse the distinctions between the concepts and functions of leadership and management.

Major Themes

Although much of the current literature on leadership focuses on the biographical or historical approaches to understand leadership through the study of leaders, a few authors are trying to delve into the philosophy of leadership -- not what it "looks like on others," but what it conceptually is. Burns was one of the first of these rare authors to embark on a more philosophical approach to understanding and describing leadership. He points a way to a general theory of leadership that is powerful enough to apply with great success.

A number of major themes emerge. The first theme pinpoints the essential elements of leadership. Burns defines them as power and

purpose. In discussing these elements, he downplays the somewhat macabre fascination people have with the concept of power. Power is important in discussing leadership, but it is not the essential nature of it. Burns states,

our main hope for disenthraling ourselves from our overemphasis on power lies more in a theoretical, or at least conceptual, effort, than in an empirical one. . . . We must see power -- and leadership -- as not things but as *relationships*. We must analyze power in a context of human motives and physical constraints. If we can come to grips with these aspects of power, we can hope to comprehend the true nature of leadership -- a venture far more intellectually daunting than the study of naked power (p. 11).

Another major theme is that leadership is a relationship. Stated another way, leadership is a relationship of power for a specific purpose that is consistent, or eventually consistent, with the motives, needs, and values of both the leader and the led. The idea of relationship becomes significant in discussing the transactional and transforming leadership conceptions, but also in discussing the general theory of moral leadership

In order to understand fully the elements of power, purpose, and relationship, Burns relies heavily on the notions of motives and values and their impact on purpose and behavior. He uses Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory and Kohlberg's theory of moral stages of development to refine his ideas about the interplay between motives and values in the leader-follower relationship. He maintains that leadership elevates people from lower to higher levels of needs and moral development, and that true leaders come from self-actualizing individuals who are motivated to grow, to be efficacious, and to achieve (London, 2001).

From this, Burns distinguishes between leaders and mere "power-wielders." Leaders in some way satisfy the motives and tap into the values of their followers, whereas power-wielders are

intent only on realizing their own purposes. Whether or not the people over whom they exert their power share the purposes, motives, and values is inconsequential to the power-wielder. To the leader, however, this sense of unity and shared values is his or her *raison d'être* and the source of his or her transforming influence. Using this definition, Hitler, for instance, was not a leader, but rather a power-wielder. Ghandi and Mao would be considered, by Burns, to be leaders.

This is a useful distinction, especially as Burns elaborates on his most significant theme: leadership, to be more than wielding power or manipulating others, is a moral endeavor. Power, purpose, relationship, motives and values are essential to leadership because the leader is engaged ultimately in lifting the morals of the follower; in elevating the follower from a lower state to a higher state. In other words, to help develop others to become moral leaders in the cause of achieving a collective purpose. This moral component to leadership concerns Burns the most (p. 4). It is a vital theme throughout the entire book.

These themes (power, purpose, relationship, motive, values, leadership vs. power-wielders, and the moral component) are essential to Burns' argument and pervasive throughout his discussions. They are more finely developed as he writes about the nature of conflict, the origins of leadership (psychological, social, and political), and the difference between transforming and transactional leadership.

Ultimately, these themes support Burns' general theory of leadership. It is this general theory of leadership that helps move an examination of leadership away from the case study and away from mere reviews of historical leaders toward a theoretical approach to studying leadership -- not *who* has been a leader and *why*, but rather *what* is leadership and *how* does it operate in our lives.

Transactional and Transforming Leadership

Most of what the world remembers of this work is Burns' distinction between transformation and transactional leadership. These two conceptions seem to be the easiest for others to grasp, explain, and "put into practice." However, what Burns hoped would be implemented was his

general theory of moral leadership (developed in part by understanding the transforming and transactional distinction) not the institutionalization of this distinction in management texts and consulting practices. In a sense, his observations of these two phenomena became, to his cursory readers, the point, instead of serving to elucidate the more general point of leadership he was trying to develop. And yet, this distinction between transforming and transactional leadership *is* powerful and compelling.

Transforming leadership, as opposed to the transactional leadership, forms the foundation of recent study on leadership. It focuses on the more personal side of organizational interactions. Words such as vision, culture, values, development, teamwork, and service make sense in the world of transforming leadership. Burns describes transforming leadership this way:

Such leadership occurs when one or more persons *engage* with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality. Their purposes, which might have started out as separate but related, as in the case of transactional leadership, become fused. Power bases are linked not as counterweights but as mutual support for common purpose. . . . The relationship can be moralistic, of course. But transforming leadership ultimately becomes moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, and thus it has transforming effect on both (p. 20).

As stated earlier, two examples of transforming leaders are Mao and Gandhi. According to Burns they met their people's initial needs but instead of riding them to power remained sensitive to their higher purposes, needs and wants (London 2001). In so doing, they served to not only inform those purposes, needs, and wants, but also to bring their people closer to achieving them.

On the other hand, transactional leadership focuses mainly on rewards or punishments in exchange for performance. This in many ways defines the essence of management. Burns defines it this way:

Such leadership occurs when one person takes the initiative in making contact with others for the purpose of an exchange of valued things. The exchange could be economic or political or psychological in nature: a swap of goods or of one good for money; a trading of votes between candidate and citizen or between legislators; hospitality to another person in exchange for willingness to listen to one's troubles. Each party to the bargain recognizes the other as a *person*. Their purposes are related, at least to the extent that the purposes stand within the bargaining process and can be advanced by maintaining that process. But beyond this, the relationship does not go. The bargainers have no enduring purpose that holds them together; hence, they may go their separate ways. A leadership act took place, but it was not one that binds leader and follower together in a mutual and continuing pursuit of a higher purpose (pp. 19-20).

Burns begins to differentiate the practice of using external uses of power and incentives, and internal fountains of commitment and development. In many ways he is differentiating the science of management from the art of leadership and he makes a compelling argument that the two are not the same.

A General Theory of Leadership: Values, Motives and Relationship

Burns' observations regarding transforming and transactional leadership serve to support his general theory of leadership and the structure of moral leadership. Burns answers some important questions about the role of values (the leader's and the follower's) and which ones should be mobilized and how. He concludes by this surmise: "leaders with relevant motives and goals of their own respond to the followers' needs and wants and goals in such a way as to meet those motivations and bring changes consonant with those of both leaders and followers, and with the values of both" (p. 41). To make the point even more sharply, Burns concludes that

to control *things* – tools, mineral resources, money, energy – is an act of power, not leadership, for things have no motives. Power wielders may treat people as things. Leaders may not. . . . I define leadership as leaders inducing followers to act for certain

goals that represent the values and motivations —the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations – *of both leaders and followers*. And the genius of leadership lies in the manner in which leaders see and act on their own and their follower's values and motivations (pp. 18-19).

The leader fosters appropriate changes by tapping into and shaping common values, goals, needs, and wants to develop and elevate others in accordance to the agreed upon values set. Leaders address the needs, wants, and values of their followers (and their own) and, therefore, serve as an independent force in changing the makeup of the followers' values set through gratifying their motives (p. 20).

This was a radical approach to discussing leadership. It is philosophical, theoretical, and analytical. It still rings true to the practitioner, though, because it is based on observation and experience. It was, after all, written by a practitioner. Burns has created a theoretical understanding of leadership, with certain definitions and perspectives so that the study of leadership practice will be both more focused and more accurate. Much of his definitional work revolved around the concepts of power, motives and values. Power and the power-wielder have already been discussed, but the others deserve more attention.

Motives come from within. They are our inner drives, desires, inclinations, and wants. They are personal, individual, and powerful. Motives are the source of action and determination that move us in certain directions and the source of meaning for our behavior. Burns describes motives in this way, "motives are 'pushed' by generalized drives and other body-bound forces and 'pulled' by more specific wants, needs, aspirations, goals, and values . . ." He adds, "the main source of action, though, is still the response to internal requirements" (p. 64).

These "internal requirements" are what Burns further discusses in terms of values. Burns makes some important distinctions between the concepts of motives and values. He explores the nuances by asking the question, "Are values mere motives, or do they have an independent (and thus stronger) arousing and directing power?" "Students of the subject disagree," he answers, "sometimes values are

treated as being merely another kind of motive. If so, the difference in degree amounts to a difference in kind. . . . [V]alues are internalized so deeply that they define personality and behavior as well as consciously and unconsciously held attitudes. They become an expression of both conscience and consciousness" (p. 75).

The distinction between motives and values may depend upon whether or not the inner drive is merely an expression of need, want or desire, or whether the inner drive becomes a standard and guide to action toward a desired end-state. In a sense, motives are those drives that are *acted upon* to be satisfied or deprived, while values are those inner drives and commitments that shape or enable us *to act* in certain ways or towards certain end-states. This is what Burns alludes to as he states,

values have a special potency because they embrace separate but closely interrelated phenomena. Values indicate desirable or preferred *end-states* or collective goals or explicit purposes, and values are *standards* in terms of which specific criteria may be established and choices made among alternatives (pp. 74-75).

Values, then, serve as goals and standards, modes of behavior, and a representation of instrumental and intrinsic bases for means and ends, and are a "formidable arsenal for any leader who can command them" (p. 75).

From this conceptual work on values and motives, and drawing upon the themes outlined earlier in this paper, Burns develops a general theory of leadership. His theory is not limited to the political or corporate world, but applies also to the social world, the family, the volunteer group, or the work unit. Burns' conception of leadership goes beyond the political theory or historical biographies that he used throughout the book to develop his themes. Leadership is, at heart, philosophical. It involves a relationship of engagement between the leader and follower based on common purpose and collective needs. The key to leadership is the discerning of key values and motives of both the leader and follower and, in accordance to them, elevating others to a higher sense of performance, fulfillment, autonomy, and purpose.

This general theory of moral leadership is

revolutionary. Theory and philosophy have been adeptly injected into the practice and techniques of "leadership." By doing this, Burns forever added a dimension to leadership study that had been neglected. He points a way to clear up the confusion that sometimes exists as we focus on traits, behaviors, roles or situations. He began to define the distinct nature of leadership from that of management. Moreover, he moved us away from talking about *leaders* to talking about *leadership*. That shift alone made people view the topic in more philosophic ways instead of mechanistic or reductionist ways. Burns general theory of moral leadership helps us begin to understand what it is that makes a leader different from great managers and why leadership is a significant force in society.

Conclusion

The development of a general theoretical framework of leadership has dramatically altered the study and application of leadership principles. Burns' work is an essential part of any study into the true nature, purpose, and applicability of leadership in today's organizations. However, the professor who, at the beginning of this paper, relied on a bibliographic reference to Burns to decide the validity of a leadership paper would be sorely disappointed today. Only some of the recent works on leadership mention Burns and do so, it appears, only to pay homage. His ideas are not readily incorporated into the popular or academic works. Many do not even include *Leadership* at all in the references.

Perhaps this explains why some of the recent literature on leadership misses the point -- focusing on the checklists and measurements of "effective" leadership and often confusing true leadership with management functions. Burns' great service to the study of leadership may lie less in the popular distinction between transactional and transforming leadership and more in the elevation of leadership as a philosophical and developmental relationship between people who share common purpose, motivations, and values.

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