

What is?

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is a 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” (Bernard Bass, 1990).

Transformational leaders have a clear collective vision and most importantly they manage to communicate it effectively to all employees. By acting as role models, they inspire employees to put the good of the whole organization above self interest. They also stimulate employees to be more innovative, and they themselves take personal risks and are not afraid to use unconventional (but always ethical) methods in order to achieve the collective vision.

This form of leadership goes beyond traditional forms of transactional leadership that emphasized corrective action, mutual exchanges and rewards only when performance expectations were met. Transactional leadership relied mainly on centralized control. Managers controlled most activities, telling each person what, when and how to do each task. Transformational leaders, on the other hand, trust their subordinates and leave them space to breathe and grow. In that respect, transformational is a more developmental and constructive form of leadership for both individual employees and the organization as a whole.

Why is transformational leadership important for organisational functioning?

Numerous studies have shown that transformational leadership:

- significantly increases organizational performance
- is positively linked with long term market share and customer satisfaction

- generates higher commitment to the organization from their employees
- increases employee trust in management and organizational citizenship behaviours (i.e., extra-role work-related behaviours such as conscientiousness, altruism and sportsmanship that are discretionary, not related to the formal reward system of the organization)
- enhances employee satisfaction with both their job and the leader
- reduces employee stress and increases well-being.

How do transformational leaders behave?

Transformational leaders:

- articulate a compelling vision of the future
- use stories and symbols to communicate their vision and message
- specify the importance of having a strong sense of purpose and a collective mission
- talk optimistically and enthusiastically and express confidence that goals will be achieved
- engender the trust and respect of their followers by doing the right thing rather than doing things right
- instill pride in employees for being associated with them
- talk about their most important values and beliefs
- consider the moral and ethical consequences of decisions
- seek different perspectives when solving problems
- get employees to challenge old assumptions and to think about problems in new ways
- spend time teaching and coaching
- consider each individual employee’s different needs, abilities and aspirations
- are compassionate, appreciative and responsive to each employee and recognize and celebrate each employee’s achievements.

Can transformational leadership be trained?

Yes! Transformational leadership is not a quality that only a few privileged individuals possess. Managers can learn how to become more transformational with significant positive implications for their organizations.

There are two primary methods for transformational leadership training:

(a) individual coaching sessions and (b) workshops.

In individual coaching, subordinates' ratings as well as self-ratings of the manager's transformational leadership style are obtained and subsequently fed back to the manager by a coach. Attention is usually drawn to discrepancies between subordinate and self-ratings of leadership behaviours. The coach together with the manager is trying to explore the reasons for those discrepancies or identify the specific behaviours that might have led to them. The coaching sessions result in the development of specific action plans for enhancing the individual manager's transformational leadership style.

In the second type of training, managers participate in workshops on transformational leadership. Common activities in those workshops include brainstorming of effective/ineffective leader behaviours, as well as watching videos that demonstrate various leadership styles in action. Once again, the outcome of those workshops is the development of specific action plans for the participating managers.

Studies by Julian Barling (Queen's University, Canada) and Kevin Kelloway (St. Mary's University, Canada) have shown that both training interventions are equally effective. Subordinates of trained managers report significantly more positive perceptions of their manager's behaviours as well as higher organizational commitment than do subordinates of untrained managers.

Small changes can make a big difference

What happens if a manager doesn't have the time or the resources to attend such a training programme? Can they try to become a little more transformational in other ways? The answer is, of course they can. Day by day, little by little, one step at a time. Small changes can go a very long way and deliver significant results.

What kind of small changes? Kevin Kelloway and Julian Barling suggest that managers can start behaving more transformational by:

- making their decisions more transparent and by being consistent in their reasoning with their employees. Consistent use of the same criteria in decision making builds respect and trust as employees know what to expect from the leader.
- displaying more enthusiasm and optimism. Communicating the message that "I know you can do it" raises employees' confidence and inspires them to try harder.
- getting employees to think about work-related problems in new ways. Instead of offering ready answers and solutions, managers can respond to employees questions by asking "what do you think we should do?". Such behaviour would engage employees' minds in the workplace and also involve them more in decision making.
- making time to pay attention to individual concerns. Personally thanking subordinates for their efforts at work either in personal communication or "thank you" cards can have powerful motivational effects.

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