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Relational accountability and transformational leadership: Implications for education and multicultural settings

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Abstract

Interdisciplinary studies of leadership have burgeoned over the past 25 years with the development of models grounded in clinical, organizational, social, and educational psychology. Transformational leadership in particular (Bass, 1999; Seltzer, Numerof, & Bass, 1989), has emerged as an important approach to enhancing the motivation, commitment, creativity, and tenacity of individuals and groups across a variety of settings, including educational systems (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Recent empirical studies have focused on the personal and behavioral characteristics of transformational leaders, some of which link to relational accountability, or, the degree to which a leader effectively and credibly responds to the experiences, values and goals of followers, what Bass (1985) called "individual consideration". In further refinements, studies examining underlying aspects of relational accountability and transformational leadership indicate that increased trust levels in work groups, and between leaders and subordinates, depends upon the quality of the relationship and communication. It appears that, along with general personality factors such as extroversion, and the development of a clear vision, leaders must demonstrate skilled communication that responds effectively to the emotions, motivational investments, goals, and values of followers (Caruso, Mayer, & Salovey, 2002). Such responsiveness may require greater skill and awareness in a multicultural setting, where the appropriateness of some strategies or styles may be less clear given the greater variance in expectations, values, experiences, and expressive styles within the group (Jung, Yammarino, & Lee, 2009). This paper aims to integrate contemporary theories and research on leadership with factors likely to influence effectiveness of communication in a multicultural education setting. Several brief case examples will be offered to illustrate the challenge for leaders where cultural and other forms of diversity are high. These examples will include classroom process, administrative systems, and recommendations for leadership components in curriculum development.

Keywords: *Transformational Leadership, Education, Application, Multi-cultural*

In any group or organization, leaders play a significant role in the successful achievement of immediate and long-term goals. They are key agents in motivating individuals and groups, managing resources, and resolving conflicts at micro and macro levels (Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994). Leaders also play a central role in the establishment of collective values and behavioral norms of an organization. Through policy development, resource allocation, and

modeling of desired behaviors, leaders influence collective expectations regarding work investment, team interactions, communication style, and commitment to organizational growth and personal change (Simons, Vasquez, & Harris, 1993). The complexity of leadership functions necessarily requires sophisticated cognitive skill, especially given the need for rapid synthesis, integration, and prioritization of information (Lord & Shondrick, 2011; Shondrick, Dinh, & Lord, 2010). Further, leaders must communicate with varied audiences, tailoring motivational strategies to fit the perspectives, values, and roles of individuals as well as groups.

Given the centrality of leaders in organizational development, and the complexity of their work, it is no surprise that researchers have focused on factors likely to improve leadership selection and training. Transformational leadership (Avolio, Bass & Jung, 1999; Bass, 1999; Seltzer, Numerof, & Bass, 1989) has received significant attention in the empirical literature, given its emphasis on the power of an individual to inspire and motivate followers, and its application across a wide range of organizational types, including educational systems (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2009; Jason, 2000; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). In an effort to validate and refine the transformational model, social science and management researchers have investigated specific factors that contribute to transformational leadership, especially elements that address the demands of an increasingly diverse, globalized work environment (Webb, Vulliamy, Sarja & Hämäläinen, 2006).

A number of empirical studies have focused on the personality traits of transformational leaders in an effort to refine assessment and selection practices for corporations and other large systems (Burch & Anderson, 2008; McCormick & Burch, 2008). Some theorists have embraced the Five-Factor Model of personality as a theoretical and assessment tool because of its strong empirical foundation and application across cultures and settings (Barrick, Mount & Judge, 2001; Bono & Judge, 2004; Judge & Bono, 2000; Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). Through a variety of studies using the Big Five, certain trait configurations have consistently emerged as predictive of effective transformational leaders, specifically the combination of higher extraversion and conscientiousness, coupled with lower neuroticism or anxiety. This trait configuration is consistent with many of the verbal descriptions of transformational leaders including: positive outlook, encouraging demeanor, drive to complete tasks, and low emotional reactivity in response to stressful circumstances and interactions. In addition to the Big Five, some researchers have identified single traits linked to transformational leadership, such as flexibility (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010), charisma (DeVries, Roe, & Taillieu, 1999), and emotional intelligence (Barbuto & Burbach, 2006), to name just a few. Studies of these specific personality constructs have helped to identify behavioral elements of transformational leadership, and connect traits to interpersonal patterns and communication style (Derue, Nahrgang, Wellman & Humphrey, 2011).

Although useful in selecting individuals who may best succeed in top leadership positions, trait models nevertheless provide an incomplete picture of interactional factors that influence a leader's ability to communicate and implement his or her vision for an organization. Further, the trait approach tends to ignore structural factors (e.g. communication channels)

that may impact the leader's effectiveness. For example, fostering change in a highly rigid system may be much more difficult than in one that has greater flexibility, and/or has a history of successful adaptation to change. Without accounting for this systemic perspective, one may come to view transformational leadership as primarily a function of an individual's charisma or brilliance, terms that are often vaguely defined and dangerously linked to the power of individuals to simply dominate and control a group. Thus, one of the promising developments in leadership research has been the investigation of effective leader-follower collaboration (Perry, Witt, Penney, & Atwater; Popper, 2011), an approach that considers interactional process, as well as individual characteristics. This emphasis on the relationship between leaders and followers turns our attention to communication processes and, in particular the challenge of leadership in culturally diverse settings.

Consideration of interpersonal dynamics is one of the clear strengths of transformational leadership theory, with its emphasis on a leader's communication style, particularly elements that validate the experiences, values and goals of followers, what Bass (1985) called individual consideration. Although this aspect of the theory can be easily integrated with trait theories, it is more consistent with a behavioral and relational view that identifies the specific communication strategies leaders use to increase cooperation, motivation, and mutual understanding among followers. In considering research on communication processes, it appears that organizational success may hinge on the degree to which leaders successfully include members of the system or community in goal-setting and strategic development (DeCremer and Wubben, 2010). Further, the mutual respect and trust that results from solicitation of worker feedback may be a stabilizing factor that leads to a more resilient organization in the face of significant and stressful transitions. In studies examining underlying aspects of relational accountability and transformational leadership, increased levels of trust in work groups, and between leaders and subordinates, depends upon the quality of the relationship and communication. It appears that, along with general personality factors such as extraversion, and the development of a clear vision, leaders must demonstrate skilled communication that responds effectively to the emotions and motivational investments of followers (Caruso, Mayer, & Salovey, 2002).

To be more specific, laboratory studies of procedural justice and motivation have consistently shown that follower motivation increases when leaders offer them opportunities to participate in key decision-making (McFarlin & Sweeney, 1996). In particular, pre-decision opportunities for input, tend to increase a follower's self-efficacy, satisfaction, and trust, while post-decision feedback opportunities positively affect the relationship between leader's and follower's (though without increasing the follower's efficacy or control). This line of research has clear implications for team building, enhancing individual motivation, and the quality of the relationships between leaders and followers.

In an effort to better understand leadership factors that influence the impact of collaborative decision-making, DeCremer & Wubben (2010) looked at a leader's expression of confidence in relation to follower's inclusion in decision-making. In line with previous research, they found that when followers had no opportunity to express their opinion about decisions, they

reported the highest levels of negative emotions and the strongest motivation to exit the group. Disappointment and frustration levels were highest for participants in the no-voice condition when the leader expressed confidence about the likelihood of success. The leader's expression of confidence appeared to augment the frustration and disappointment of participants in the "no-voice" condition. In marked contrast, when the leader expressed a high degree of confidence regarding success, and followers had an opportunity to give input before the final decision was made, ratings of negative emotions and desire to leave the group were the lowest.

These findings clearly illustrate the importance timing in soliciting input from followers, as well as the impact of leader confidence on subsequent attitudes and motivation. This was most clear in experimental conditions where the leader expressed low confidence and negativity about the task. When the leader was low in confidence, opportunities to give feedback did not seem to make any difference in the negative emotions of followers, which remained moderately high across the board, with no differences between early, late, or no input conditions. It would appear from this finding that leaders, who express negativity and low confidence in tasks, significantly limit the positive effects of collaborative decision-making on follower's emotions and subsequent motivation. Although there are definite limitations to this paradigm, these studies illustrate the importance of a leader's expression of confidence, as well as the timing of communications about important decisions. Further, it is evident that a leader's positive and confident view of an important task increases motivation, but also increases the sensitivity to procedural justice and the need for control.

Although having a voice during decision-making has generally been viewed as a means of increasing group members' perceptions of fairness and investment in the group, beliefs and expectations about the leader, self, and the task at hand moderate and mediate this effect. For example, when a leader solicits feedback late in the process after many aspects of a project have been determined, followers may feel undermined and excluded, especially when they have a stake in the task and their input might have been useful or significant to the outcome. More importantly, followers may believe that the leader undervalues their contributions and this may provoke anger and distrust (DeCremer, 2006). Further, lack of confidence and negativity that is openly expressed by leaders, should be viewed as potentially damaging to workers own assessment of their contributions, and to their beliefs about the importance of their participation, an issue worthy of further consideration as it applies to leadership training.

In a related study concerning the impact of leader characteristics on follower motivation, De Cremer and van Knippenberg (2002) focused on aspects of leader behavior that may increase cooperative efforts among group members. In this study, the researchers assessed two aspects of leadership that have the potential to increase cooperation: procedural fairness (operationalized as having a voice or no-voice in procedures), and the leader's charisma, (operationalized as whether or not the leader would seek personal benefits from participation, or make personal sacrifices during their work together). In addition to self-report measures of participant perceptions of the leader's charisma, the researchers measured

cooperation by asking participants to specify an amount of money they would like to donate to a collective cause. As predicted, having a voice in decisions significantly increased participant donations to the collective effort. Also, when the leader demonstrated a willingness to make personal sacrifices, contributions were significantly higher than when the leader was self-serving. These findings indicate that followers are responsive to varied indicators of trustworthiness, including leader traits and communication procedures. Further, these factors operated independently and interactively to influence levels of cooperation of group members.

In examining specific variables that increase or decrease aspects of transformational leadership, the question of application to multi-cultural environments inevitably emerges, given the likelihood that individuals from different communities may perceive leader traits and behaviors in relation to culturally distinct values and norms. A growing body of research has examined the degree to which individuals across cultures respond to similar aspects of a leader's behavior. The GLOBE study (Den Hartog, House, Hanges, Ruiz-Quintanilla & Dorfman, 1999) assessed implicit theories about effective and ineffective leaders in a large sample of middle managers (N=15,022) from three different industries across 60 different cultures. Participants were asked to describe attributes and behaviors that either increased or decreased a leader's effectiveness. Across cultures, respondents consistently identified several factors that were universally viewed as important to outstanding leadership, including those related to trustworthiness, such as honesty, and integrity, and characteristics related to charisma such as encouragement, foresight, and confidence. In addition, leader attributes related to high standards of achievement, drive, and excellence in problem solving were endorsed across the board. With regard to negative leadership outcomes, managers universally noted that poor leadership was related to the characteristics "being a loner, being non-cooperative, ruthless, non-explicit, irritable, and dictatorial" (p. 13). These findings give strong indications that transformational leadership embodies a number of important factors that impact leader success across cultures.

The authors also identified important variations in leadership prototypes across cultures, noting in particular that differences in communication style are important factors in developing leadership models that will work across cultures and within multi-cultural settings. Their findings highlight the need for competent leaders who are attuned to the communication of those from other cultures, and who are able to apply what we know about leadership to varied contexts and individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds. The variability and complexity of leadership in large organizations is undeniable, especially where there are multiple languages and cultures represented in the work group (Brownell, 2008).

The underlying skills that lead to flexible adaptation and effective leadership in these settings are likely to be honed over a long period of time through participation in varied groups, where an individual may gain experience as both a leader and a follower. Further, the foundational skills that underlie successful leadership and group dynamics over time are likely to include basic universals that may be flexibly applied in varied contexts and

circumstances, particularly those that instill confidence, promote collaboration, and allow for varied forms and contexts for communication. Listening skills may be one element of this skill set and should be considered a core competency in multi-cultural leadership training. In sum, the field of leadership has shifted to emphasize interactional frameworks that ultimately point to the power of effective communication that incorporates the voice of those who make up the organization. Such responsiveness may require greater skill and awareness in a multi-cultural setting, where the appropriateness of some strategies or styles may be less clear given the greater variance in expectations, values, experiences, and expressive styles within the group (Jung, Yammarino, & Lee, 2009)

Conclusion

Given the importance of leadership in organizations of all types, regardless of size and purpose, learning to lead as can be viewed as a central aspect of individual and group development. As such, education in general, and citizenship education in particular may benefit from a more focused emphasis on leadership development, as a subject that informs both the content and methods of education at all levels. We may rightfully ask, "What makes a good or great leader?" but more strategically, "What is the role of education in the development of leaders and effective communication systems?" This is a question for educational policy-makers as they plan curricula, and as they envision transformational cultures within schools and their surrounding communities (Jason, 2000).

Although some individuals undeniably appear to have a natural aptitude for leadership, it is also important to recognize the many forms of leadership and followership that encompass the activities of every day life for all human beings. This idea moves us away from the notion that leadership is a specialized role, only undertaken by highly trained individuals with unusual characteristics. We are all leaders, and also followers. With this dialectic in mind, it seems clear that the literature on transformational leadership and relational communication provides useful guidance for developing leadership as a theme in citizenship education programs within and across cultures.

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