

# Transformational Leadership

What is it that wonderful leaders do that elevates us? And can we learn to do it, too?

*By Julian Barling*

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### About the author

**Julian Barling** is Professor of Organizational Behaviour and Borden Chair of Leadership at QSB. His research interests focus on the nature and development of transformational leadership, and employee well-being. He is the author of well over 150 research articles and book chapters, and the author or editor of several books.

In 2002, Dr. Barling was elected to as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and was awarded one of the inaugural Queen's Research Chairs in recognition of his distinguished accomplishments in research and scholarship. Dr Barling is also a Fellow for the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, the European Academy of Occupational Health Psychology, the Association for Psychological Science, and the Canadian Psychological Association.

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**QSB** Insight

Even before we assume our first full-time jobs, we all encounter numerous leaders in different contexts, whether teachers, sports coaches, parents or organizational leaders, who hold in their hands the power to influence us. And influence us they do, leaving many of us wondering what magic do they have that eludes the rest of us? While we may not always be able to precisely define wonderful or dreadful leadership, we know it when we see it! Simply put, wonderful leaders elevate us, leaving us believing that as long as we try hard enough there is virtually nothing we cannot do. In contrast, dreadful leaders demean us, leaving us feeling that no matter how hard we try, we will not succeed. But what is it that wonderful leaders do that elevates us? And can we learn to do it, too?.

### Transformational Leadership – What is it?

Transformational leadership is the dominant leadership theory today, attracting more research than any other leadership theory over the past 20 years. Transformational leadership involves four critical components or behaviours.

- Idealized influence – building respect and mutual trust by choosing to do what is right rather than what is expedient.
- Inspirational motivation – conveying meaning through stories and symbols with which followers can identify; helping followers attain more than they thought was possible by setting high expectations.
- Intellectual stimulation – challenging employees to think for themselves, to answer their own questions.
- Individualized consideration – recognizing that people are at their best when their individual needs are considered, and their efforts and accomplishments encouraged and recognized.

### How does transformational leadership impact an organization?

Academics have been studying transformational leadership for decades, with hundreds of studies since the 1980s demonstrating that transformational leadership affects critical organizational outcomes and attitudes.

Specifically, research has shown that transformational leadership is positively linked to:

- Subordinate work attitudes (e.g., loyalty and commitment, job satisfaction)
- Subordinate work performance (e.g., sales)

- Employee creativity
- Employee well-being (mental and physical health, occupational safety)
- Financial performance
- A strengthening of the leader's influence networks

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We now know *how* transformational leadership affects work outcomes. Just because someone has a transformational leader does not directly and immediately translate into higher performance.

Instead, higher levels of transformational leadership translate into commitment to the organization and trust in the leader. In turn, it is that deep commitment to the organization and trust in leadership that motivate employees toward superior performance.

## Are leaders born or made?

Whether leaders are born or made is a question that has captured the attention of management practitioners, organizational scholars and the lay public for decades. Many people hold strident opinions about this question, and when we are bewildered by the charisma of some leaders, it is easy to believe that it must have been something that they were born with. Fortunately, there is now a growing body of research identifying the environmental and genetic influences on leadership development, from which we learn that both parental socialization and genetic factors contribute approximately equally to whether children will come to hold leadership positions.

## Can we teach leadership? Leadership development in organizations

In the mid 1990s, some colleagues and I worked together with a major Canadian financial institution to see if we could train transformational leaders. We identified 20 bank (i.e. branch) managers and assigned them randomly to either an experimental or control group. Branch managers in the experimental group attended a one-day workshop on transformational leadership, followed by four individual counseling sessions. (Control group managers received neither the training nor counseling.) Subordinates whose leaders had attended the training reported significant differences in their leaders' transformational leadership behaviour within weeks, and themselves showed significant increases in organizational commitment; subordinates of the untrained managers saw no such

changes. Most significantly, branch-level credit card sales and personal loan sales increased only in those branches where the managers were trained in transformational leadership. Since then, we have replicated these findings in other organizations, and most recently showed that teachers can also be taught transformational behaviours, with significant benefits for their students.

## **So how do you do it?**

The good news is that when we listen to people whose lives have been touched or changed by awe-inspiring leaders, we learn that it was the smallest things that their leaders did that made such a difference. These were things their leaders chose to do rather than had to do. And the leaders did not engage in these behaviours because they were not busy; they chose to do them despite the fact that they were busy, making their followers feel even more appreciated. Transformational leadership behaviours do not require the impossible from leaders but do involve small behaviours that will make a big difference in the long term.

Some examples of the four transformational behaviours include:

**“Walk the talk!”** Employees trust and respect leaders who consistently choose to do the right thing, rather than the merely expedient. Doing what is right rather than what is expedient might even leave you in a difficult position, but you do it anyway, because you appreciate that leadership is not about benefitting you personally, but about elevating those around you.

**“Optimism is infectious!”** Telling employees that “I know you can do it!” inspires them to go the extra mile and accomplish great things. You also inspire your employees when they can share stories and symbols that unite them around a core value.

**“Suppose I wasn’t here, how would you solve this one?”** encourages subordinates to think about work-related problems in new ways, provides opportunities for them to develop and grow, and prepares them for their next position in the organization. Remember that oftentimes when employees ask you how to do something, they already know the answer; they are really just asking for permission.

**“What can I do to make my employees feel respected and appreciated?”** involves compassion (listen!), appreciation and recognition (say thank you!), and establishes a relationship (use their names, in conversations and emails). None of this takes time, but all of it serves as the glue that will bind you together in a lasting relationship within which your leadership will be sought after.

## **Transformational Leadership in practice**

In my teaching, I often cite examples of transformational leaders, none more inspiring than Nelson Mandela. Mandela characterizes the four transformational leadership behaviours. He used his moral authority to inspire a nation to rise above its terrible history, to attain heights most did not think possible. His ideal was of a non-racial society, and he spent his life creating opportunities to show all South Africans that they could achieve it. In a sense, as one commentator said, “Mandela was deliberately constructing himself as the embodiment of an ideal he wanted all South Africans to follow.”

But how did he do it? “He would pick up the phone and call them on their birthdays. He would go to family funerals. He saw it as an opportunity. When Mandela emerged from prison, he famously included his jailers among his friends and put leaders who had kept him in prison in his first Cabinet. ‘Yet I well knew that he despised these men’,” said Cyril Ramaphosa, a colleague of Mandela’s, in a 2008 interview with Richard Stengel of *Time* magazine. Why would Mandela do this after suffering through all the years of apartheid? Because wonderful leaders know that they are not there just to fulfill their short term needs (for revenge), but to elevate others. And they know that leadership is not about helping those who already love you to love you more – it’s about convincing those who doubt you that you can be trusted.

So what have I learned from working with and studying transformational leaders, and my research on transformational leadership? People are remarkably responsive to the way in which they are treated, and respond in kind. Faced with wonderful leadership, people will aspire to superior performance. Transformational leadership teaches us why this occurs, and given the behaviours involved in transformational leadership, the most important lesson is that “you can do it!”

## Some recent leadership books that influenced me

*Transformational Leadership*, by B.M. Bass and R.E. Riggio: Provides the most credible introduction to transformational leadership in a manner that is easily accessible.

*The One Minute Apology: A Powerful Way to Make Things Better*, by Ken Blanchard and Margret McBride: Despite fear to the contrary, leaders who apologize for transgressions are seen as stronger, not weaker. This book, by one of the authors of “The One Minute Manager,” tells us how and why we should apologize, and the benefits of doing so.

*Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game That Made a Nation*, by John Carlin: Perhaps the most readable and inspiring story about Mandela’s leadership, and his pivotal role in the single event that Nobel Prize winner Desmond Tutu called “the defining moment in the life of our country.”

*Mandela: A Critical Life*, by Tom Lodge: Perhaps the most thoughtful and well-researched biography of Mandela written by a deeply respected historian of apartheid.

*Mandela’s Way: 15 Lessons on Life, Love and Courage*, by Richard Stengel: Richard Stengel had the unparalleled privilege of spending nearly three years with Mandela preparing to ghost write his biography. This book is Stengel’s distillation of the lessons he learned from Mandela.

*The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace And Surviving One That Isn’t*, by Robert I. Sutton: At times humorous and at times deadly serious, Sutton helps identify what it is that some leaders do that demeans us so badly, and offers suggestions of what to do if you find yourself led by a leader like this, or in an organization that rewards this type of leadership.

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