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# What we have learned about developing transformational leaders

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## Keywords

Training, Leadership,  
Individual behaviour, Motivation

## Abstract

This article reviews an approach to training transformational leaders that has been used for the past five years. Data assessing the effectiveness of the approach are reviewed and the key elements of the training program are described. Concludes with an assessment and identification of ongoing research issues.

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". Please don't tell us how they made you feel; rather, focus on what they did to make you feel that way.

If you are like the thousands of individuals that we have had complete this exercise over the past several years, it is likely that the behaviors that you identify as being characteristic of effective leadership fall into the four dimensions that comprise the central tenets of transformational leadership (Bass, 1998).

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" (see Bass (1998) or Avolio (1999) for an extended discussion of transformational leadership). Bass goes further to suggest that there are four dimensions that comprise transformational leadership behaviors, namely idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration.

Idealized influence occurs when leaders engender the trust and respect of their followers by doing the right thing rather than ensuring they do things right. When they focus on doing the right thing, they serve as role models. Leaders who engage in inspirational motivation "raise the bar" for their employees, encouraging them to achieve levels of performance beyond their

own expectations. They do so by using stories and symbols to communicate their vision and their message. Intellectual stimulation involves engaging the rationality of subordinates, getting them to challenge their assumptions and to think about old problems in new ways. Leaders who engage in intellectual stimulation no longer answer all their employees' questions; instead, they now help their employees to answer all their own questions. Finally, individualized consideration deals with treating employees as individuals, by being compassionate, appreciating and responding to their needs, and recognizing and celebrating their achievements.

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## Does transformational leadership make a difference?

The idea that the dimensions comprising transformational leadership affect critical organizational attitudes and outcomes is now well established in the leadership literature (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1985; 1990; 1998; Conger and Kanungo, 1987; House, 1977). Although several authors have identified difficulties in the measurement of transformational leadership (e.g., Bycio *et al.*, 1995; Carless, 1998), there has been substantial empirical support for the effects of transformational leadership on both productivity and morale-related outcomes.

Meta-analyses have reported moderate to strong links between aspects of transformational leadership and work performance (Lowe *et al.*, 1996). Transformational leadership has also been linked with employee attitudes such as affective commitment to the organization (Barling *et al.*, 1996; Bycio *et al.*, 1995; Koh *et al.*, 1995) and a sense of fairness within the organization (Pillai *et al.*, 1999), trust in the leader (Pillai *et al.*, 1999; Podsakoff *et al.*, 1995), enhanced satisfaction with both the job

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**Preparation of this manuscript was supported by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Research Grants to both authors. Correspondence regarding this article may be sent to the first author at kevin.kelloway@stmarys.ca**

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Leadership & Organization  
Development Journal  
21/7 [2000] 355-362

© MCB University Press  
[ISSN 0143-7739]

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(Hater and Bass, 1988) and the leader (Hater and Bass, 1988; Koh *et al.*, 1995), and lower levels of both job (Sosik and Godshalk, 2000) and role stress (Podsakoff *et al.*, 1996). Importantly, the associations between transformational leadership and organizational outcomes have been substantiated in both laboratory studies (e.g. Howell and Frost, 1989; Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1996) and field studies (e.g. Barling *et al.*, 1996; Howell and Avolio, 1993) that go beyond the traditional correlational findings.

While there is little doubt that leaders' use of a transformational leadership style results in positive organizational outcomes, there remains the question of how organizations can use this knowledge. Bamberger and Meshoulam (2000) have argued that organizations can either make (train/develop) or buy (recruit/select) the competencies they need.

Recognizing that most organizations do not have the luxury of replacing all of their current organizational leaders with "transformational" leaders, we would suggest that the training and development of transformational leaders is the most viable route for organizations to pursue.

Whether such training is a viable option for organizations remains an open question. Most reviews have concluded that although organizations spend a great deal on leadership training (Saari *et al.*, 1988), the training itself is of questionable value (Fiedler, 1996). In particular, reviewers have suggested that:

- we know little about the processes involved in training leaders (Burke and Day, 1986; Gordon, 1985) and
- such training has been rarely evaluated against organizational criteria (Burke and Day, 1986).

Thus, arguably the central questions for organizations are:

- Can you train transformational leaders?
- If so, how do you do it?
- Does it make a difference to organizational outcomes?

In Kirkpatrick's (1967) terms we were asking the questions related to level 3 and level 4 training evaluations – can we change leaders' behavior (level 3) and, if we do, does it result in a change in outcomes of importance to the organization (level 4)? These questions are particularly salient given persistent suggestions that leadership is poorly defined and/or unteachable (e.g. Barker, 1997). Despite a wealth of correlational and experimental evidence linking transformational leadership to organizational outcomes, we hold that these

data are of limited utility unless individuals can enhance their transformational leadership and such enhancements result in meaningful changes in valued outcomes. We now engage in a discussion of these issues, after which we focus on a different source through which individuals might learn about transformational leadership, namely their parents.

### **Can you train transformational leaders?**

We believe that the answer to this question is an unequivocal yes! There is now consistent evidence that transformational leadership can be taught. In two published studies (Barling *et al.*, 1996; Kelloway *et al.*, 2000) we have used rigorous research designs to assess the effectiveness of leadership training in two different organizations. In both cases, we have found statistically significant changes in transformational leadership resulting from the training. Moreover, we have obtained similar results (i.e. improvements in transformational leadership) in numerous organizational interventions in which a rigorous design was not possible.

Barling *et al.* (1996) worked with a major financial institution in Canada. We first identified 20 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 Figure 1, 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

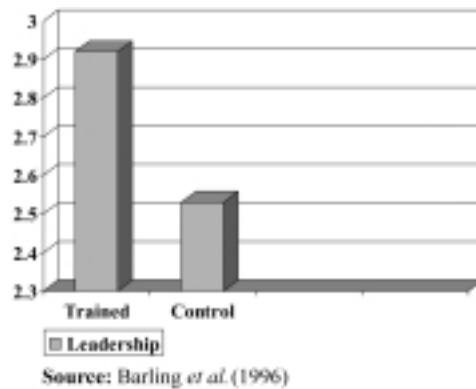
committed (i.e. loyal) to the organization than were subordinates of untrained leaders (see Figure 2).

Perhaps more importantly, branch-level credit card sales and personal loan sales (adjusted for branch size) increased only in

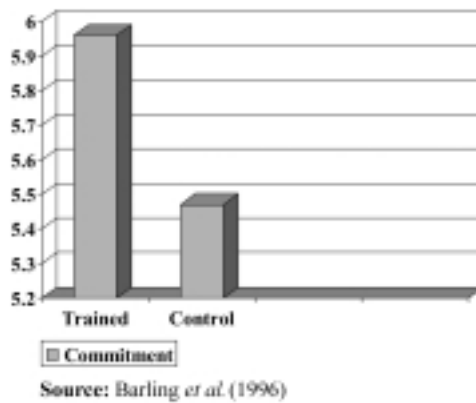
those branches where the manager was trained (see Figure 3). These results are particularly important because:

- they show the impact of leadership training on bottom line outcomes; and
- the individuals we had direct contact with (i.e. the leaders) were not personally engaged in credit card and personal loan sales.

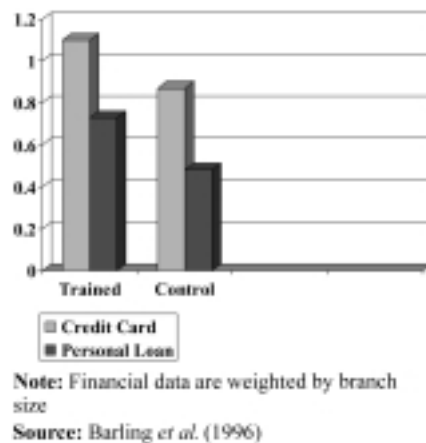
**Figure 1**  
 Leadership scores by group



**Figure 2**  
 Subordinates' commitment by group



**Figure 3**  
 Branch level financial outcomes by group



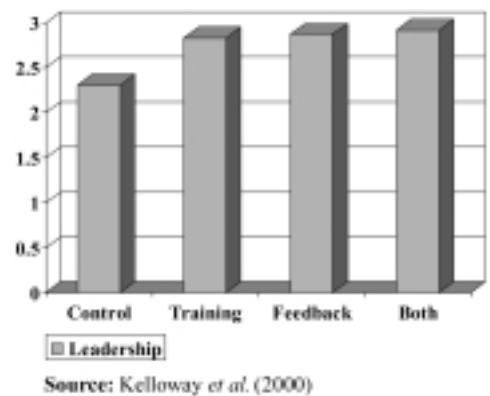
This latter observation shows that an increase in transformational leadership “trickles down” through the organization, raising the level of performance at all levels.

Similarly, Kelloway *et al.* (2000) used an experimental design to assess the effectiveness of leadership training. Extending the training model established by Barling *et al.* (1996), we randomly assigned 40 leaders to one of four groups. One group participated in a day-long workshop, one group received a 30-minute feedback/counseling session, one group received both training and feedback, and a final control group received neither training nor feedback. The results of our study shown in Figure 4 suggest that both training and counseling are effective means of behavioral change.

Both of these studies incorporate the use of control groups, manipulation of the treatment and the use of criteria that go beyond traditional self-report measures. In doing so, they substantially enhance our confidence in the conclusion that leaders can be taught to use transformational leadership behaviors. Perhaps most importantly, the results of these studies suggest that:

- subordinates do indeed notice changes in the behavior of leaders participating in the training intervention; and
- the attitudes/behaviors of subordinates change in response to leaders' enhanced transformational leadership skills.

**Figure 4**  
 Leadership scores by group



Although not focussed strictly on training, the results of Hochman *et al.* (2000) show similar results. In this study we had a sample of university undergraduates participate in a binding task (see Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1996). Trained actor-confederates played the role of “leaders” for each group and, in doing so, followed a script that emulated either a “charismatic” (i.e. idealized influence and inspirational motivation) or an “intellectually stimulating” leadership style. Manipulation checks revealed that participants in the study could clearly detect and differentiate between the two leadership styles. Results show that productivity was increased when the leader was either charismatic or intellectually stimulating. Paradoxically, when the leader was both charismatic and intellectually stimulating, productivity did not differ from the control group. Post hoc analyses suggested that trust in the leader declined in this condition, perhaps suggesting that the combination of both leadership styles was “too much of a good thing”. While this question certainly bears closer scrutiny, these results confirm the findings of field studies suggesting that subordinates can:

- detect the leadership style used by leaders; and
- alter their behavior (i.e. performance) in response to leaders’ behavior.

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. Importantly, these changes are reported by their subordinates. 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”.

#### **How do you do it?**

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 undoubtedly contain some valuable insights. Sadly, most of the strategies advanced in these works are bought but not read, read but not implemented,

implemented but not sustained. We believe that a key reason for this state of affairs is that leadership theorists have been proposing large scale, unsustainable change.

The simple fact is, if we find that the behavior or leadership style to be implemented is overwhelming, or it does not “fit” with our view of ourselves or our workplace, we soon drop the new behavior (if we even had decided to implement it in the first instance). As a result, our subordinates become cynical and merely wait out the new “flavor of the month” until things get back to “normal” – which is not always the desired situation anyway.

In our work we have been advising trainees to invest in only those changes that can be worked into their daily routine. Our logic for this suggestion is as follows: every February, Canadians are inundated with advertisements inducing them to contribute to a registered retirement savings program (RRSP). Most of these ads stress the value of making small, consistent contributions to our retirement savings over a lifetime rather than one large contribution toward the end of a working career.

In the same way, we suggest that making small changes and maintaining those changes over time will have a large effect on subordinates. In contrast, just making a few, major but infrequent changes will have less of an impact over the long term. Just as compound interest substantially enhances our retirement savings, our experience is that the “payoff” for making small consistent changes in behavior is much greater than we might initially believe.

What kind of small changes? Well, to enhance idealized influence, we often suggest that leaders do what is right, rather than what is expedient or the most cost-effective. We also suggest that leaders take some time to make their decision making more transparent and to be consistent in their reasoning across people. Consistently making decisions using the same criteria builds respect and trust, as employees learn exactly what they can expect from their leader. Leaders who are seen by their employees as people who can be counted on to “do the right thing” epitomize idealized influence, and in return are justly rewarded with their employees’ trust.

Leaders who display inspirational motivation display enthusiasm and optimism. Communicating the message that “I know you can do it” is a powerful act of leadership that raises the employee’s sense of self-efficacy and inspires individuals to try harder. Certainly, the famous Pygmalion studies conducted by Robert Rosenthal (1968)

provide ample evidence for this. Recently, Parker (1998) has expanded on the notion of self-efficacy to define a new construct, namely role breadth self-efficacy. In her words, role breadth self-efficacy is sense of confidence individuals have in their ability to “carry out a broader and more proactive role, beyond traditional, prescribed technical requirements” (Parker, 1998, p. 835). Especially in organizations struggling with de-regulation, globalization, restructuring and escalating competitive pressures, the ability of a leader to communicate optimism and enhance role-breadth self-efficacy is critical to enhanced organizational outcomes.

Intellectual stimulation is enhanced by a leader’s ability to get employees to think about work-related problems in new ways. 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. Although we often describe intellectual stimulation as the forgotten child of leadership theory because of the extent to which it is ignored in popular leadership theories, the role of this aspect of leadership becomes more important with the increased emphasis on knowledge work in today’s economy (Kelloway and Barling, 2000). Based on their study of 30 organizations, Davenport *et al.* (1996) identify finding, creating, packaging and using knowledge as critical dimensions of knowledge work. By displaying intellectually stimulating behaviors, leaders enhance these behaviors, and quietly provide their employees with opportunities for development that are permanent.

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*‘... in both the workshop and the feedback sessions we encourage leaders to set challenging, specific, and achievable goals for exhibiting specific leadership behaviors...’*

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Finally, individualized consideration is the ability of a leader to respond to individual needs by “acting as a coach, mentor, teacher, facilitator, confidant, and counselor” (Avolio, 1999, p. 47). Making time to pay attention to individual concerns is one of the key behaviors that results in leaders exhibiting individualized consideration. Indeed, the leaders that we have worked with regularly that are rated highest on this dimension are typified by the “scheduling” of time to spend in management by walking around. They do not resort solely to formal recognition through “employee of the month” awards.

These leaders frequently block off time in their day planner to talk with their subordinates on a daily basis. They personally thank their subordinates for their efforts at work either in personal communication, “thank you” cards, or both. Indeed, we have been struck by the potentially powerful motivational effects of “thank you” and other similar cards: we are struck by the number of executives who admit to having kept thank you cards that they themselves received, sometimes many years ago.

Our research (Kelloway *et al.*, 2000) suggests that transformational leadership can be enhanced by both training (i.e. participation in a workshop) and counseling (i.e. feedback of subordinate ratings), but that combining these two approaches does not enhance leadership beyond that obtained from either approach alone. In trying to understand why both approaches seem equally effective, we have reached the conclusion that the key element in training transformational leaders is the development of specific action plans based on the substantive theory of transformational leadership.

Specifically, in both the workshop and the feedback sessions we encourage leaders to set challenging, specific, and achievable (Locke and Latham, 1990) goals for exhibiting specific leadership behaviors. We focus on small behavioral changes (such as described above) and emphasize the implementation of only those changes that can be sustained over time. Typically, leaders are encouraged to develop a list of five such goals to implement. Our consistent experience is that, based on subordinate perceptions, individuals will be seen as exhibiting more transformational leadership within three or four months as a result of implementing these goals. This observation is consistent with the meta-analytic finding that goal-setting and feedback programs typically result in substantial and meaningful effect sizes (Guzzo *et al.*, 1985).

A key element in implementing this program is the use of a training program design that extends beyond the actual “training”. Thus, approximately one month prior to each leader-training session we collect subordinate ratings of leaders’ transformational leadership style and, where appropriate, outcomes thought to be associated with transformational leadership, e.g., affective commitment (Barling *et al.*, 1996). These data are used to provide feedback to leaders on their current use of a transformational leadership style and to

provide baseline data from which to evaluate change.

Similar data are collected again approximately six months after the workshop/initial feedback sessions. In a second feedback session leaders are presented with the information that allows them to evaluate the effectiveness of their changes in behavior.

The use of a second feedback session has at least three important functions. First, it establishes the expectation for change. Participants in the training are clearly told that changes are expected and will be measured. Second, the second feedback session serves as a “booster” session, reinforcing the changes that leaders implement in order to enhance their transformational leadership style. Finally, the second round of data collection provides evaluative data from which both the training participants and the trainers can evaluate the effectiveness of the program.

This approach to training transformational leaders is also consistent with the propositions of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) that “marries rigorous conceptual knowledge with opportunities to practice and apply observable behaviors” (Whetten and Cameron, 1995, p. 12). Whetten and Cameron (1995) suggest that this approach to training comprises four essential elements;

- 1 the presentation of behavioral principles;
- 2 demonstration of the principles;
- 3 opportunities to practice the principles; and
- 4 feedback on performance.

These elements are found in both the formal “workshop” presentation as well as in the use of a follow-up session to assess change.

### **Family development of transformational leadership**

Whenever we engage in interviews to provide feedback or counseling to organizational leaders, we are always impressed by leaders who receive extraordinarily highly ratings. In such situations, our own curiosity frequently drives us to ask such individuals where they learned their leadership lessons. Our curiosity only increases when we find that some leaders obtain these wonderful ratings, despite the fact that they have never received any leadership training at all. We have been struck by the number of times we hear the identical answer in such situations. These leaders will tell us, almost nonchalantly, that they learned it from their

parents, from watching how their parents interacted with them as they were growing up.

Based on this, as well as other research that we have conducted showing how parents affect their children’s work-related beliefs and aspirations (Barling *et al.*, 1998; Barling *et al.*, 1991; Barling and Mendelson, 1999; Barling *et al.*, 1999), we decided to focus on this issue in an empirical investigation. We focused on the development of transformational leadership among 112 high school students, who were members of 11 different sports teams. Our findings showed that their perceptions of what might be called a transformational parenting style had a very significant effect on the way these adolescents’ peers and team coaches rated the adolescents’ own transformational leadership behaviors (Zacharatos *et al.*, 2000). What these findings suggest is that aside from formal training, the opportunity also exists for transformational leadership to be learned during the normal course of adolescent development. This suggests the opportunity for a whole new line of research that could extend the focus beyond parental influence to include teachers, sports coaches and other authority figures that adolescents encounter, as well as focusing on even younger children to see when the transmission of transformational leadership commences.

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### **Conclusion and current research issues**

Our approach to training transformational leaders is demonstratively effective. Leaders participating in the program do make behavioral changes that are seen by subordinates as enhancing their transformational leadership (e.g., Barling *et al.*, 1996; Kelloway *et al.*, 2000). Moreover, implementing a transformational leadership style does result in enhanced attitudes (Barling *et al.*, 1996) and productivity-related outcomes (Barling *et al.*, 1996; Hochman *et al.*, 2000).

Despite these encouraging results, there remain several avenues for future research. Perhaps most importantly, now that we know that transformational leadership training does work, it is time to address the question of how it works. Avolio (1999) makes the point that if an intervention has a direct effect on task performance, then it probably is not dealing with leadership. Rather, the effects of leadership are manifested through intervening variables such as employee

attitudes and motivation. Data are now emerging that support this suggestion.

For example, Barling *et al.* (2000) found that employees' affective commitment to the organization, trust in management and sense of group cohesion mediated the relationships between perceptions of supervisors' transformational leadership and group performance. In a sample of university athletes, Charbonneau *et al.* (2000) noted that athletes' intrinsic motivation mediated the relationship between coaches' transformational leadership and athletic performance. These results suggest that transformational leaders are successful to the extent that they foster critical employee attitudes.

Our observations during, and experience from, training and feedback sessions lead us to speculate on a causal mechanism through which leadership training indirectly influences subordinate performance (see Figure 5). First, we posit that leadership training should convince leaders that they can make a difference. This would raise leaders' self-efficacy beliefs, which would lead to greater effort and persistence (Bandura, 1977). In turn, subordinates' self efficacy is enhanced by having a leader who exemplifies the characteristics of transformational leadership. Similarly, having a leader who behaves in a transformational manner will raise subordinates' sense of group cohesion, intrinsic motivation, and affective commitment. It is these enhanced employee attitudes that lead to higher levels of performance. Although our investigations to date support these suggestions, identifying and confirming these critical paths remains a task for future research. Our results and experience to date suggest that this is a task well worth pursuing, and one which has substantial implications for organizations.

**Figure 5**

Hypothesized links between leadership training and performance



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