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Turning Around an Academic Institution through Transformational Leadership

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“A business short on capital can borrow money. But a business short of leadership has little chance of survival.”

—Peter Drucker

Introduction

Every business has its unique challenges requiring the right leaders and the right style of leadership to face challenges responsibly and successfully. In this case study, I will discuss a style of transformational leadership which respects stakeholder interests, precipitates dialogue, is task-oriented, and in one situation, served to revamp an educational institution.

“Transformational leadership recognizes and exploits an existing need or demand of a potential follower . . . (and) looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower.”

— James MacGregor Burns

What is Transformational Leadership?

According to James MacGregor Burns (2003), transformational leadership is a process in which “leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation.” In this vein, transformational leadership can be generally defined as the process of developing the people, who, in turn, develop their organizations by accomplishing pre-determined goals

and objectives. And while the importance of achieving organizational objectives cannot be underestimated, the methods adopted during the process command even more

deliberation. In fact, *the means to the end* necessitates the understanding and implementation of a transformational style of leadership.

Transformational leadership incentivizes ordinary people to achieve extraordinary performance. It develops, enriches, and reinforces an ever-evolving set of values and ethics among the various participants in an organization. Transformational leaders may be described as charismatic “myth-makers” and “tale-tellers.” However, unlike prototypical charismatic leaders, they are not defined by their own hubris. They leave a rich legacy behind them, with suitable successors, unlike charismatic leaders whose departure often precipitates a leadership vacuum. They emphasize the importance of *both* the means and the ends, unlike transactional leaders who myopically dwell only upon the final results.

Transformational leaders demonstrate a profound trust and confidence in their team members and set high ethical and moral standards. They radiate energy and enthusiasm. They are comfortable with working in teams and resolutely believe in their people and their potential. They direct the energies of those under their purview in a manner to derive the very best from them. Consequentially, the heightened focus on *means* ultimately serves to accomplish their objectives as well.

Case Study on Transformational Leadership

RW was a young leadership consultant and researcher who received a call from the Chairman of the Board of Directors of a private business college. *RW* had performed some consultancy work for him previously, so the Chairman had already gained substantial trust and confidence in his abilities. During the meeting, the Chairman narrated the problems confronted by the institution.

The Chairman had received many complaints about the Principal and a senior faculty member. The Principal was perceived as weak and took a long time making decisions or deciding upon a course of action — even on pressing issues. The senior faculty member realized this and began influencing, and to a certain extent, controlling the decisions and actions of the Principal. Consequentially, substantial interpersonal problems ensued between faculty members, negatively impacting their teaching and academic work. Steadily, industrial-based research grants, the presence of recruiting companies, and new student enrollments all began to decrease. The Chairman feared that if no remedial action was taken immediately, the college would have to be closed. *RW* listened patiently to the problems and decided to accept the assignment. He promised to develop a comprehensive course of action within delay.

After a week, *RW* returned with his recommendations. He assessed the situation at the college to be dire and the quality of teaching to be stagnant and substandard. Without immediate and drastic reforms, the college would inevitably be closed. He proposed that both the Principal and the senior faculty member in question be promptly removed from their respective positions. Since there was no time available to recruit a new principal, he offered his services on a three-year contract. But his remuneration would be substantial — almost twice the amount his services had been previously commanding.

The Board of Directors deliberated over the proposal with great consternation. The scenario proposed by *RW* was unconventional. However, as they had allowed the

situation to deteriorate by not taking action earlier, they now felt compelled to accept *RW*'s proposal. The fact that his work and reputation were known to the Chairman was also taken into consideration. Consequentially, the proposed firings were adopted and *RW* was appointed as the new Principal.

Solution

Without input from faculty members or other stakeholders associated with the college in sanctioning this hiring decision, *RW*'s appointment by the Board was ostensibly received with reluctance and hostility. Some senior professors felt that they could have been given the opportunity, especially in view of their long association with the college. However, *RW* was unperturbed and moved ahead with his plan of reform.

He met with every member of the faculty and non-teaching staff and individually noted their concerns. He prepared a list of their misgivings and doubts and prioritized them according to severity and importance. He created a time-bound action plan to resolve each one of them. When he announced this plan, everyone was amazed. They had not seen things moving at such a rapid pace in the past.

The academic activities were already delayed by three weeks. There were no teachers for three subjects and a timetable had to be prepared. *RW* called a meeting of the entire faculty and asked for volunteers to instruct these three courses. Fortunately, a junior faculty member, who was a dedicated and committed professor, came forward and offered to shoulder the responsibility of handling one of the subjects. The other teachers were reluctant to increase their respective workloads. Finally, by offering monetary incentives, *RW* recruited a second instructor to agree to teach a course. Ultimately, in an effort to fill the remaining vacancy, *RW* decided to teach the third subject himself — he wanted to lead by example.

RW realized that there had been a historic lack of transparency and open communication between management and the academic staff. Additionally, he noted a paucity of coordination between the persons who marketed the courses and the instructors who taught them. In an attempt to resolve this situation, *RW* scheduled monthly meetings wherein members of both groups could generate meaningful and constructive dialogue and raise the issues that concerned them for immediate debate and potential redress. During these meetings, *RW* encouraged participants to think creatively about the problems and postulate potential solutions. Often, the issues could be resolved by the team members themselves — without the intervention of management.

Many good ideas and suggestions for improving school operations emerged from these meetings. A team spirit was created among all the members. They were motivated to view issues and develop potential solutions as a collective entity, using their individual resources as a singular team to achieve their organizational goals and objectives. This also contributed to make the working environment more positive and enjoyable. A sense of collective purpose had been imbued which entailed the use of a variety of individual talents.

While the above actions were underway, *RW* gave substantial attention to meeting the commitments he had presented in his initial time plan. He referred to the list several

times a day to ensure that even the smallest task was not overlooked. He knew that a true leader had to deliver upon his or her promises. *RW* infused confidence among the employees by replacing the prevailing pressure with pleasure, distrust with trust, and miscommunication with prompt and open communication.

During the transformation of the college, *RW* undertook various initiatives. He identified the areas where there were conflicts and promptly addressed them. He did not shirk from seemingly insurmountable challenges, but rather assumed full responsibility and accountability. *RW* also realized that the previous principal had encouraged petty politics by favoring a few people and alienating the rest. He had been surrounded by sycophants. *RW* changed this by ensuring that everyone who had a stake in a decision was involved in the decision-making process. Additionally, he made sure that the faculty members were always kept informed of all developments. He persuaded administration to act quickly on all transmitted feedback. Gradually, a climate of trust and confidence was created as direct involvement by all affected stakeholders was encouraged and fostered.

During this time, two dissatisfied faculty members were found to be spreading rumors and negative stories about the inner machinations of this transformative process. *RW* quickly made the decision to fire them immediately to stymie any potential setbacks to the progress being made. He assured that everyone was informed of the true reasons for their departure — not only to serve as a deterrent, but to demonstrate his firm commitment to complete transparency of all actions undertaken.

RW introduced several training and development programs to enhance the skills of the faculty and the members of the administrative staff. People felt valued and their ongoing input was encouraged with this gesture. This infused faith and self-confidence, opening the doors to better performance and growth. Additionally, *RW* arranged regular meetings between students and their teachers. The informal atmosphere allowed the establishment of better relationships. He explained to the faculty that the students were essential to their existence — if there were no students, there would be no teachers either!

Whenever any feedback emerged from these interactions, *RW* assured that commensurate action would be undertaken. When a few students talked of problems with a particular faculty member, he investigated the matter immediately. On occasion, he discovered that a particular faculty member was disparaging and short-tempered in class. *RW* arranged a meeting with the faculty member and provided constructive feedback to improve his behavior. This produced the desired result and the faculty member's relationship with the students improved substantially. *RW*'s success in tactfully and adroitly handling this case further enhanced the respect he received from the college.

Three years passed by quickly. When the Chairman reviewed the situation, he discovered that the primary areas of conflict and contention had dramatically improved. Industry grants had increased to record levels, a large number of students were applying to the college for admission, and the institution had gained an enviable record of placing all its graduating students several months before the conclusion their academic tenure. The number of research papers published by the faculty was at a record high. The atmosphere in the college was spirited and uplifting. The faculty, administrative staff,

and student body had created and fostered constructive and productive relationships with one another.

Bernard M. Bass's 4 I's

According to leadership researcher, Bernard M. Bass, there are four behavioral components that comprise *transformational leadership*: charisma/idealized influence, motivational inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (1985). *Charisma* is the identification with, and emulation of, the leader's mission and vision (Bass & Avolio, 1994). *Motivational inspiration* is "the arousal and heightening of motivation among followers that occurs primarily from charismatic leadership, while individualized consideration is evident when subordinates are treated individually according to their needs" (Reichenau, 2005 quoting Bass, 1985). Intellectual stimulation refers to the leader's influence on followers' thinking and imagination (Bass, 1985). *RW* effectively adopted and implemented the 4 I's defining Bass's transformational leadership paradigm — *individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence* — to truly reform this particular educational institution.

RW cared for his people. He empathized with their problems and solved them comprehensively and promptly. He recognized their motivational needs and acted accordingly. He stimulated the various participants intellectually by encouraging them to be creative and to think "out of the box" in solving the challenges presented. He gave them freedom to act without undue constraint and counseled them only when they were not able to resolve the issues themselves. He clearly articulated the vision of the institution and challenged various categories of stakeholders by setting high standards. He exuded confidence and optimism and demonstrated energy and enthusiasm throughout the reform process. He motivated his people continuously and constantly. Finally, he set an example through his own performance and became a role model for others.

RW demonstrated his integrity, set an example, established organizational goals and objectives clearly, communicated unambiguously and in a timely manner, connected with various stakeholders by fostering new relationships, and opened unfettered channels of communication. He encouraged, supported, and inspired his people to transform the educational institution which was on the verge of collapse and elevate it to greater heights. Ostensibly, *RW* was a true transformational leader.

From this case study, it becomes clear that the right style of leadership is warranted to properly develop an organization in a sustainable and responsible manner. This particular situation called for transformational leadership to prevent the college from closing down, to safeguard the jobs of the employees, and to provide quality education to the students.

Conclusion

Although institutions are not typically defined by their individual actors, at times it is the individual called upon to transform the organization through his or her visionary and transformative style of leadership. Individuals like *RW* made a substantial difference through his exemplary actions to reform a failing educational institution. The results of

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his perseverance, creativity, and tenacity demonstrated that the right style of leadership is integral to enabling institutions to achieve organizational excellence and effectiveness. Hence, transformational leadership will inevitably play a crucial role in years to come. Leaders have to act according to the situation, with greater emphasis on transformational leadership and less on transactional leadership to advance the interests and meet the objectives of their respective stakeholders and organizations.

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Professor M.S. Rao is an internationally-acclaimed leadership educator, executive coach, speaker, and consultant with over 32 years of experience. He is the author of 21 books including the award-winning *21 Success Sutras for Leaders*; has been honored as an upcoming International Leadership Guru by *Leadership Gurus International* (<http://www.leadershipgurus.net/upcoming.php>); and serves as an Advisor and Board Member for several international organizations including the *American Institute of Business Psychology* (AIOBP). He coined the innovative teaching tool, *Meka's Method*; the leadership teaching tool, *11E Leadership Grid*; and the newly-released leadership tool, *Soft Leadership Grid*, based on his new leadership style, *Soft Leadership* – copyrighted with Jossey Bass. His *Soft Leadership* webinar, organized by the International Leadership Association, can be accessed at <http://www.ila-net.org/Webinars/Archive/Rao082012.html> and his top-rated speaker ranking in India is

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