

The Journal of Values-Based Leadership

Volume 14
Issue 1 *Winter/Spring 2021*

Article 8

December 2020

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Recommended Citation

Caldwell, Cam and Anderson, Verl (2020) "University Professors as “Transformative Leaders”," *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol14/iss1/8>

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University Professors as “Transformative Leaders”

Abstract

University professors have a moral obligation to be ethical leaders in guiding their stewards. Transformative Leadership, a concept identified in both the educational and business leadership literature, provides a valuable model for university professors to consider as they interact with students and help them to learn and to prepare for the challenges of the modern world. This paper integrates the education and business leadership perspectives of Transformative Leadership and identifies the contributions that this leadership model can contribute to the effectiveness of university professors who adopt its principles.

Introduction

Great leaders in every walk of life are recognized for their ability to achieve worthy goals (Burns, 2010; Rath, & Conchie, 2008), their commitment to achieving a noble purpose (Lussier & Achua, 2015; Conger & Kanungo, 1998), their efficient and effective use of resources (Bennis & Nanus, 2007), their ability to inspire others (Pava, 2003; Kouzes & Posner, 2017), and their personal integrity (Hosmer, 2010; Kouzes & Posner, 2011). In today’s performance-dependent world, university professors in virtually every academic discipline share this same set of responsibilities (Marion & Gonzalez, 2013).

The purpose of this paper is to explain the values-based responsibilities of the modern university professor, incorporating the leadership perspectives of “Transformative Leadership” – an ethically-based leadership model that honors the many responsibilities of leaders. The paper begins by briefly describing the nature of the “product” provided by university faculty members at colleges and universities and the obligation of those who teach to “add value” to students. Following that introduction, we identify the leadership perspectives that comprise Transformative Leadership – including both the education-related framework that focuses on eight underlying principles and the business-related model that incorporates six well-respected leadership perspectives.

After integrating these two approaches to Transformative Leadership, we then identify how the responsibilities of university professors are achieved by transformative leadership to demonstrate how and why that leadership model makes such a powerful contribution to student learning when adopted by university faculty. We then suggest four contributions that this paper makes to the leadership literature and the benefits achieved when university

professors adopt the transformative leadership role in their classrooms. The paper concludes with encouragement to university faculty members to reflect on the moral obligations that they owe to their students and the underlying values that they apply within the university classroom.

The Educational “Product”

The academic experience at great colleges and universities provides students with the opportunity to learn substantive information about a future professional career, to increase their understanding of a specific academic focus, and to enable them to discover their own identities (Flum & Kaplan, 2012). Hadar and Hotam (2012) describe the role of education as the internalization of patterns of thinking, values, views, and behaviors – as viewed in terms of what really is, rather than what ought to be in the world.

Heather Malin (2018, p, 14) describes education as empowering individuals to find their life’s purpose – and defines that purpose as a “higher-order goal” that is a motivating force in individual lives. Discovering that purpose and affirming one’s identity is a self-reflection activity that requires individuals to not only affirm their own values and the standards that equate therewith, but that provide the opportunity to compare individual behavior with those same values and standards (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Education also includes organizational and societal level impacts on individuals. Reimers (2020) identified five dimensions of the educational product of higher education that include five contextual insights about the world and its complex nature.

- ***Cultural*** – Education includes implicit assumptions about organizational and national cultures.
- ***Psychological*** – Education influences and increases one’s understanding of the mental and emotional factors in life.
- ***Professional*** – Education not only can develop personal skills that affect individuals’ professional lives, but can frame the context of a career or chosen occupation.
- ***Institutional*** – Education helps individuals to understand the stable, valued, and recurring priorities and behaviors of organizations that have a major role in communities and countries.
- ***Political*** – Education clarifies the processes of governance in countries and organizations and the strategies and activities involved in decision-making processes.

By explaining the functioning of societies at each of these five levels, education enables learners to understand how they can fit within the world in which they will live and work.

More than ninety years ago, the brilliant Alfred North Whitehead (1978) explained that the ideal byproduct of education is its natural capacity to inspire individuals in the lifelong pursuit of continuous learning and improvement – rather than to simply dispense knowledge about a specific subject area or academic discipline. To educate is to draw from others the inherent ability within them to recognize their highest potential (Yair, 2008).

Thus, the greatest benefit of education and its most important byproduct is its capacity to unlock the human spirit, to inspire individuals to pursue becoming their highest and best version of themselves, and to achieve a vision of life’s most noble purposes (Maslow, 2014). In every real sense, then, we suggest that fulfilling the calling of being an educator is a sacred

and covenantal responsibility in which those who teach also serve, inspire, empower, and enable others to build upon the principles which they share with their students (cf. Pava, 2003).

Great teachers are, in every sense, leaders, mentors, and exemplars – partners in a shared journey in the pursuit of wisdom – rather than simply relegated to assist students in the acquisition of data, facts, and knowledge (Glasper & Caldwell, 2016). As leaders in the process of learning, the role of teachers is complex and multi-faceted when done well. By doing more than simply explaining theoretical concepts and teaching about specialized topics, great teachers add value to the lives of their students by helping them recognize the challenges that they and their fellow citizens will face in the troubled world in which they live (Mintzberg & Caldwell, 2017).

Transformative Leadership

Transformative Leadership is universally described as a practical value-based approach to building relationships. Shields (2020) described the education-focused version of Transformative Leadership as “distinct from other leadership theories because of its inherently normative and critical approach grounded in the values of equity, inclusion, excellence, and social justice.”

Within the context of education research, Transformative Leadership is founded upon eight tenets or principles. Shields lists those principles as follows:

- ***A Mandate for Deep and Equitable Change*** – This need for change reflects a world where change is seemingly constant and omnipresent (Kotter, 2012).
- ***Deconstructing and Reconstructing Knowledge about Justice, Inequity, and Injustice*** – Justice and trustworthiness are widely recognized as two sides of the same coin and are closely related but subjectively perceived factors that influence perceptions about leaders (Colquitt & Rodell, 2011).
- ***The Inequitable Distribution of Power*** – The misuse of power by leaders often results in perceived breaches in ethical duties and undermines commitment (Cramer, 2005).
- ***An Emphasis on both Individual and Collective Good*** – Balancing the needs of individuals and organizations enhance achievement of personal growth and welfare while benefiting organizations and adding value for society (DePree, 2004; Burns, 2010).
- ***A Focus on Emancipation, Democracy, Equity, and Justice*** – Acknowledgement of the primacy of personal rights demonstrates that people are valued ends, rather than simply the means to public benefit (Wood, 2007).
- ***An Emphasis on Interdependence, Interconnectedness, and Global Awareness*** – The importance of recognizing the consequences of moral choices – including the obligation to future generations – affirms the need for long-term thinking as opposed to an ethic of short-term self-interest (Friedman, 2009).
- ***The Necessity for Balancing Critique with Promise*** – Leadership must be aligned with reasoned action to rationally understand the consequences of choices and their logical impacts – with citizenship including the active pursuit of the public

good and a willingness to take a position against dysfunctional choices (Jackson, 2000).

- ***The Exhibit of Moral Courage*** – Although effective leadership demands the ability to get things done within the dominant social and political systems, leaders must also actively push for change and transformation in the achievement of noble purposes (Serrat, 2017).

Like Shields, Nicoll (2014) has also called for an emphasis on transformative change and a fundamentally new paradigm in thinking about the leader's obligations to society and to individuals – a shift in perspective that Transformative Leadership principles make possible. As Shields (2011) has noted, Transformative Leadership is both normative, or values-based, and instrumental or outcome-based in the pursuit of transformative changes.

Transformative Leadership is also a business-related model that integrates six highly-regarded and ethically-based leadership perspectives (Caldwell, 2012). The six perspectives that make up this business-related model are briefly described as follows.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational Leadership is a change-focused perspective of leadership that reflects an organization leader's commitment to both achieving the goals of an organization while simultaneously meeting the needs of the individuals who make up that organization and inspiring those individuals to excel and become their best (Burns, 2010). Transformational leaders empower others and help them grow by aligning individual and group goals with the priorities of the leader, as well as the objectives of the larger organization (Bass & Riggio, 2005).

Level 5 Leadership

Level 5 Leadership is a perspective for leading that combines personal humility with will, or fierce commitment to the goals and purposes of an organization, to achieve unprecedented results (Collins, 2001). In his book, *The Five Levels of Leadership*, John Maxwell (2013) described the Level 5 leader as someone who others follow because of who they are and what they represent. Such leaders “look out the window to give credit to others” when success occurs but willingly “look in the mirror” and take personal responsibility for the problems that occur in organizations (Collins, 2005).

Servant Leadership

Servant Leadership chooses service to others over personal self-interest (Block, 2013), and believes that the leader owes others the opportunity to become the best version of themselves (DePree, 2004). Robert Greenleaf (2002), who is credited as coining this term for describing leaders who willingly serve, has emphasized that the leader is morally obligated to care genuinely for the interests of others – including employees, customers, and the society at large. In their book about the important role of servant leaders, Jennings and Stahl-Wert (2016) explain that such leaders earn the respect of others through genuine commitment to others' welfare and growth.

Charismatic Leadership

The Charismatic Leadership perspective suggests that leaders touch lives because they are endowed with powerful qualities and the ability to connect with others due to their devotion to a special “calling” (Conger & Kanungo, 1998). The charismatic leader models the values

of her or his mission or purpose and is given the authority to lead by others because (s)he is perceived to be endowed with a special level of qualities that are viewed by others as exemplary (Lussier & Achua, 2015). The personal relationship between the charismatic leader and followers inspires others to achieve the noble goals which the leader espouses (Owen, 2015).

Principle-Centered Leadership

Principle-Centered Leadership identifies core principles and values that are universally applicable in helping individuals and organizations to flourish and succeed (Covey, 1992). Stephen R. Covey (2004) developed his fundamental belief in universal principles, values, and habits in an effort to assist others to become effective at not only “finding their own voice,” but in helping others to become their best as well. Jones (1999) observed that leaders who follow true principles are effective as leaders because of their personal self-discipline and the integrity by which they lead their lives. Covey (2013) repeatedly explained that people cannot break the universal laws of life – although, he noted, they could break themselves against them.

Covenantal Leadership

Covenantal Leadership, a leadership perspective developed by Moses Pava (2003), explained that the leader’s role encompassed teaching correct principles, modeling those principles, empowering and teaching others, and applying truths in the pursuit of greater wisdom and insights. The covenantal leader advocates the importance of constantly seeking new meanings, engaging in lifelong learning, and recognizing that the pursuit of true knowledge and wisdom is an experience available to all individuals and organizations. The covenantal leader owes others the opportunity to fulfill their highest potential and that obligation is a sacred duty of true leaders (Caldwell & Hasan, 2016).

These six leadership perspectives each contribute to Transformative Leadership and its ethical commitment to long-term value creation, building relationships of high trust, and honoring an organization’s obligations to stakeholders. *Figure 1*, provided below, is a pictorial representation of the business-related Transformative Leadership model.

Figure 1: The Six Perspectives of the Transformative Leadership Model
(Caldwell, et al., 2012)



Xu and colleagues (2016) noted that the business-related model of Transformative Leadership was closely aligned with Lawrence Kohlberg’s stages of moral development. Gandhi and Martin Luther King are examples of historic leaders who modeled Transformative Leadership principles – enabling them both to be perceived as authentic and trusted leaders (Holt & Marques, 2012).

Integrating Education and Business

Although Transformative Leadership is viewed somewhat differently within the contexts of education and business, there are natural overlapping characteristics in how Transformative Leadership influences conceptual thinking, the articulation of value priorities, and the role of leaders within both contexts. *Table 1* lists the eight principles noted by Shields as defining education-related Transformative Leadership and identifies how the six perspectives of the business-related model are aligned with those defining principles.

Table 1: Comparing the Education-Related Principles and the Six Leadership Perspectives

Education-Related Principle	Business-Related Perspectives	Comment
Mandate for Change	Transformational Leadership especially emphasizes preparing for change.	The ability to constantly change is an ever-present reality in all aspects of life.
Knowledge about Justice, Inequity, and Injustice	Principle-Centered Leadership is value-based and principle-centered and emphasizes honoring others.	Leader trustworthiness as an ethically-based fundamental is incorporated in all six perspectives.
Inequitable Distribution of Power	Servant Leadership turns the leadership relationship upside-down.	Several perspectives of the six emphasize leadership humility in relationships.
Individual and Collective Good	Servant and Transformational Leadership both integrate this goal.	The win-win assumption makes stakeholders owners and partners.
Emancipation, Democracy, Equity, and Justice	Covenantal, Level 5, and Principle-Centered Leadership endorse individual rights as vital.	The focus of leadership empowers and engages individuals and promotes basic fairness.
Interdependence, Interconnectedness, and Global Awareness	Principle-Centered Leadership recognizes the importance of balancing outcomes and discipline.	The emphasis is on long-term value creation and stewardship obligations.
Balancing Critique with Promise	Principle-Centered and Covenantal Leadership focus on rational knowledge and truth.	The focus on applying correct principles permeates all six leadership perspectives.
Exhibiting Moral Courage	Charismatic and Level 5 Leadership emphasize purpose and commitment.	All six perspectives are ethically-based and highly moral in focus.

Clearly, the education-related principles and the business-related perspectives of Transformative Leadership are closely aligned and reflect a commonality of focus. The priorities of both are consistent in emphasizing the ethical and moral responsibilities of leaders, in responding to the needs of an ever-changing world, and in honoring the obligations owed to stakeholders in the pursuit of excellence.

The How and Why of Transformative Learning

The Transformative Leadership model has great value for University Professors to adopt because its underlying principles, its assumptions about values, and its commitment to student learning are all easily recognized by students when faculty members incorporate it as

a teaching foundation. We suggest that there are seven fundamental reasons why students in university classrooms respond to the faculty member who teaches with Transformative Leadership as her or his underlying basis for applying course concepts.

1. ***Students value the inherent virtuousness of this teaching approach.*** The eight principles and six leadership perspectives communicated to students by faculty who teach as Transformative Leaders affirms the value of excellence and virtue ethics (Solomon, 1993).
2. ***Students resonate at the emotional level with the faculty member's personal example.*** The ability to touch lives and to connect with others, to inspire hope for a better world, and to honor the obligations implicit in Transformative Leadership are perceived and respected when faculty genuinely adopt this teaching foundation (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005).
3. ***Students subconsciously understand the validity of the message.*** The Transformative Leadership message encourages students to rethink the self-serving actions of dysfunctional leaders and organizations (Block, 2013). That message strikes home at a subconscious level and students recognize the validity of a moral standard that honors duties to others and that rises above the dishonesty and moral emptiness that typifies so many leaders and organizations.
4. ***Students recognize the importance of achieving their own highest potential.*** Within each individual, there is a flame that affirms her or his personal knowledge that (s)he can achieve far more than what (s)he has ever dreamed to be possible. The Transformative Leadership concepts taught by a university faculty member validate the truth of that flame and challenge students to achieve what they implicitly know is possible, but have not yet recognized (Williamson, 1996).
5. ***Students appreciate the faculty member's interest in students' success in life.*** By challenging students to embrace the values of Transformative Leadership, faculty members demonstrate that they value students' success. The authentic demonstration of their commitment to the welfare, growth, and wholeness of their students challenges those individuals to find their voice and become the best possible versions of themselves (Covey, 2004).
6. ***Students implicitly know that they also must be part of the change in the world.*** When faculty members articulate the obligations of individual social responsibility that accompany the underlying message of Transformative Leadership, students are able to acknowledge that they must also take up the standard and contribute to making a better world (cf. Anderson, Ndalamba, & Caldwell, 2017).
7. ***Students respond to the moral and ethical obligations that life demands.*** Transformative Leadership raises the bar of moral and ethical duty required by modern individuals and organizations – asking those who lead to become ethical stewards who pursue outcomes desperately needed, but so often passed over by many self-serving leaders who willingly seek their own self-interest (Caldwell & Anderson, 2017). The message of Transformative Leadership is commonly recognized by students as aligned with moral truth.

These seven factors explain why the adoption of Transformative Leadership can make such a profoundly significant impact on students – at a time when the need for those students to join

hands with others to find solutions to the problems of the world that portend burdensome challenges for both present and future generations (Friedman, 2009).

Four Contributions

By clarifying the importance of university professors being leaders to their students, we do not advocate that faculty members sponsor a specific political position or a social philosophy. To the contrary, we suggest that Transformative Leadership is simply about serving others, honoring moral and ethical duties, and the pursuing excellence as leaders become true ethical stewards (Caldwell, et al., 2012; Hernandez, 2008).

In presenting this thesis that university professors can make profound changes in their student lives by adopting the principles of Transformative Leadership, we also suggest that this paper adds value to the scholarly literature about teaching and leadership in four significant ways.

1. ***We identify the importance of Transformative Leadership as a framework for assisting university professors in adding value to the learning process of their students.*** Faculty members are far more than dispensers of facts, information, and data. Their role encompasses preparing students for the challenges of life – challenges that demand the wisdom and moral courage that are the underlying principles and foundation of Transformative Leadership (Shields, 2020).
2. ***We explain both the education-related and business-related nature of Transformative Leadership and compare the two.*** Although the scholarly literature has sometimes integrated both the education-related and business-related facets of Transformative Leadership (Shields, 2017), this paper is the first effort to provide an explanation of the education-related and business-related commonalities of Transformative Leadership in any depth.
3. ***We identify how and why university professors can integrate the principles of Transformative Leadership in adding value in student lives.*** The seven reasons that we present that explain how and why Transformative Leadership can make a significant impact on students and add value in their lives clarify the potential benefits that are possible as faculty members incorporate Transformative Leadership in their teaching approach.
4. ***We affirm the profoundly moral and ethical nature of the university professor's leadership role in delivering education to their students.*** Education implicitly involves the teaching of values and lights the way for students as they run the course of life (Whitehead, 1978). Education enriches the souls of men and women and the foundations of Transformative Leadership honor the obligations of educators in not only teaching students, but in uplifting their lives and making them more responsible citizens (Shields, 2017).

We suggest that these four contributions are significant for university faculty members to consider as they reflect on their responsibilities as contributors to student learning.

Conclusion

The Greek city-states that profoundly influenced civilization were based upon a philosophy of citizenship obligations and the accompanying moral responsibility to add value to the world (Manville & Ober, 2003). For physicians, that set of obligations was founded on the

Hippocratic Oath's mandate, "First do no harm" (Miles, 2003). Citizenship and moral responsibility, whether for physicians or for educators, encompassed a quasi-sacred set of duties that mandated that those who served honored and added value to others and to society-at-large.

In today's world where the challenges facing present and future generations seem ominous, the need for leaders who can be trusted is acknowledged to be at a premium in organizations of all types (Harrington, 2017). The social responsibility obligations of academic institutions and the faculty at universities has been made increasingly challenging due to scarce resources, a global pandemic, and a worldwide economic recession. University faculty members, like members of virtually every other profession, have the obligation to become part of the solution in solving the troubling problems facing virtually every country in the world (Caldwell & Anderson, 2017).

Adopting the principles and philosophy of Transformative Leadership can enable university faculty members to make a profound difference in the lives of their students (Shields, 2017) – but only if those faculty members actually believe in the underlying assumptions and values upon which Transformative Leadership is based (McKee & Boyatzis, 2008). Although Transformative Leadership as a set of guidelines and principles is by no means a panacea for the problems of modern society, its tenets are worthy of thoughtful consideration by university faculty members who are deeply committed to their moral responsibilities to students and to society.

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