

The Transforming Leader: A Meta-Ethnographic Analysis

C. Dean Pielstick

Introduction

This paper presents the findings from a meta-ethnographic analysis of the research and other writings on transforming leadership, as well as other related literature. It provides an overview of what we have learned about transforming leaders over the past 20 years, since the publication of James MacGregor Burns's *Leadership* in 1978.

Some Definitions and Dilemmas

One of the challenges to those of us studying the phenomenon of leadership is that of definitions. In the process of struggling with these definitions, I have identified five dilemmas that cloud the picture:

1. Managing vs. leading
2. Position of leadership vs. the process of leading
3. Exercise of power vs. the process of leading
4. Formal leadership vs. informal leadership
5. Charisma vs. leading

Consider the first one: managing versus leading. This dilemma has been addressed by many of the authors in the field of leadership and, accordingly, is well articulated. One of the best definitions of management is that given by John Kotter (1988):

Planning, budgeting, organizing, and controlling some activity through the use of (more or less) scientific techniques and formal authority.

Compare this to one of the better definitions of leadership from John Gardner (1990) in his book, *On Leading*:

The process of persuasion or example by which an individual (or leadership team) induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her followers.

Several other definitions may also be helpful. Peter Drucker said that management is the efficiency of climbing the ladder, while leadership determines whether the ladder is leaning against the right wall. Bennis and Nanus (1985) wrote, “Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right thing.” James MacGregor Burns (1978) defined leadership as “when persons with vision mobilize resources so as to arouse, engage and satisfy the motives of the followers.” His definition adds two important considerations: vision and the motives of the followers. One does not lead without followers. Burns went on to define transforming leadership: “To engage each other to higher levels of motivation and morality, having a transforming effect on both...instilling purpose.”

The second dilemma has to do with the fact that not all persons in positions of leadership actually lead. Conversely, we all know persons not in positions of leadership who are, nevertheless, recognized as leaders within the organization. One of the problems we face in our understanding of the phenomenon of leadership is that nearly all studies have involved persons in positions of leadership. This presents the problem of identifying what parts of the process are associated with the position versus the actions of leading. At this point I think it is safe to say that we really don't know for sure. We need further studies in this area.

This, in turn is related to the third of our dilemmas, the exercise of power versus the process of leading. When a person is in a position of leadership, there are forms of power

associated with the position that distort our perceptions of the process of leading. French and Raven's (1959) model of power is helpful in this regard. I have modified it somewhat as follows:

- *Legitimate power*—the authority granted in policy, procedures and job descriptions, as well as power attributed to the person in the position through cultural norms, a form of deference
- *Coercive power*—the authorization to punish (or threaten to punish) as granted in legitimate authority, as well as the physical strength (personal, armed forces, etc.) to force another's hand
- *Reward power (extrinsic)*—the ability to grant (or withhold) extrinsic rewards such as pay, bonuses, a new office, etc.; includes “economic power” associated with the *new* golden rule: the person with the gold makes the rules
- *Reward power (intrinsic)*—the ability to grant intrinsic rewards such as recognition, responsibility, and professional growth; includes self-fulfilling rewards as well such as job satisfaction
- *Expert power*—the influence of expertise; may also derive from control of information
- *Referent power*—the influence of identification with a person (may range from “liking” to “affiliation” to “reverence and awe”); some characterize this as charisma

Burns, Gardner, Heifetz (1994), and others have differentiated the role of some “leaders” as power-wielding, with Hitler being a particular case in point. In most cases the use of power is far more subtle. The first three forms of power listed above are primarily associated with authority granted to a position, whereas the bottom three are primarily independent of such authority. Thus, when we speak of power-wielding, we are generally referring to the first three forms of power, particularly coercion.

This brings us to the fourth dilemma of formal versus informal leading, i.e., leadership of persons in *positions* of leadership vs. those *not* in positions of leadership but recognized as leaders

nevertheless. It appears that informal leaders, as well as the best of the formal leaders, rely on the latter three forms of power. They tend to use influence and example rather than authority and incentives to lead. We need additional research in this area to get at the process of leading separate from issues of authority, position, and management.

The dilemma of charisma will be addressed later in this article.

Methodology

Meta-ethnography is a qualitative research methodology developed by Noblit and Hare (1988) to provide a similar function to meta-analysis in the quantitative research tradition. These methodologies allow multiple studies or other sources to be combined so that we may determine an aggregate synthesis of findings. Meta-analysis is limited due to strict statistical standards for comparability that must be met. In 1992 Gasper conducted a meta-analysis on transforming leadership and was able to include only a very limited number of studies due to these restrictions.

Meta-ethnography has no such limitations. It is a process of identifying relevant findings or other statements from the literature and sorting them into a *pattern of evidence* on the subject of study. In this case, I used The Ethnograph software to facilitate the process of recording, coding, and analysis.

In lieu of reliability and validity standards in quantitative studies, qualitative studies use a different set of standards such as those defined by Marshall and Rossman (1989):

- Credibility—accurate identification and description
- Transferability—generalizability of findings
- Dependability—accounting for changes in the phenomenon of study
- Confirmability—degree of objectivity
- Utilization/application/action orientation—findings have value for practitioners

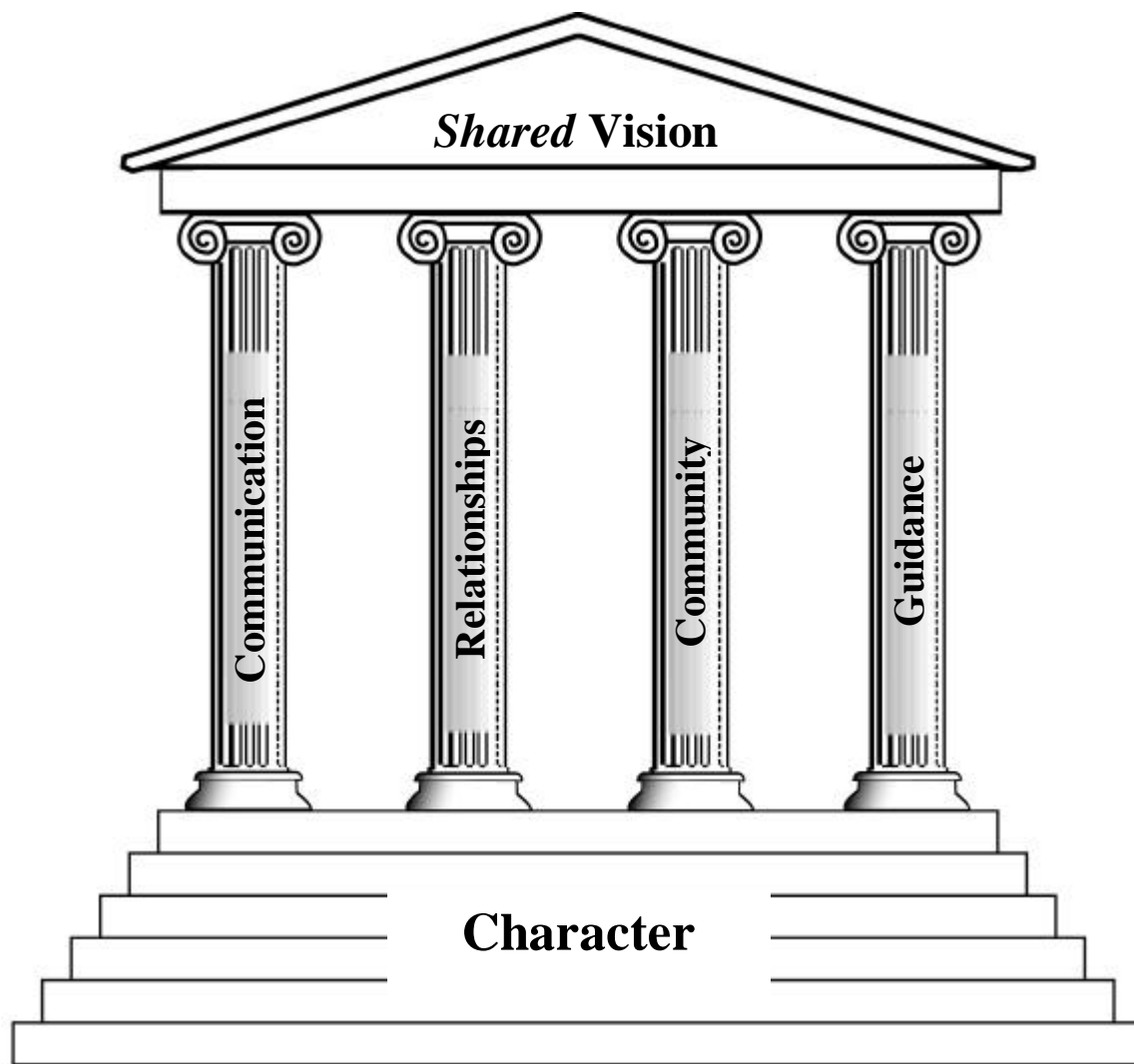
In addition, qualitative studies use *triangulation* to help ensure an accurate portrayal of the findings. The use of multiple sources provides one level of triangulation. In addition, a panel of three experts was asked to review the findings. They recommended a few minor changes that were consistent with the findings. These were incorporated into the statement of the findings.

The methodology uses a constant comparative technique whereby new additions are compared to previous information to determine a point of stability. In comparing multiple sources, one must decide how many sources are enough. There is no standard in the literature, so I used three iterations of no more than a five percent (5%) increase in the number of descriptors. Stability was then attained after nine (9) iterations of adding blocks of additional studies. The first iteration included sources from the writings of James MacGregor Burns. A total of 160 sources describing leadership in business, government, education and non-profit organizations were included at the point of stability. (For a detailed description of the original study, please refer to Pielstick, 1996.) The original findings have been modified slightly to reflect my continuing learning about the process of leading.

Findings

James MacGregor Burns's *Leadership* (1978) transformed our thinking about leading. Since his seminal work, a great deal has learned about the nature of leading. The remainder of this paper presents a profile of the transforming leader. The research findings clustered into six major themes: (1) *shared* vision, (2) communication, (3) relationships, (4) culture, (5) implementation, and (6) character. These have been reframed into the following model. A shared vision of the future is supported by the four pillars of leading: communicating regularly with followers, building

a web of relationships with and among followers, creating a sense of community based on shared values and beliefs, and guiding achievement of the vision through empowerment and other actions. The pillars rest on a solid foundation of exceptional character.



Shared Vision—Kouzes and Posner (1993) found that there are four characteristics of an admired leader (those with over 50% response rate): (1) honesty and integrity—87%, (2) visionary—71%, (3) inspiring—68%, and (4) competent—58%. They compared this with a list of

characteristics that experts defined for credibility: (1) trustworthy, (2) expertise, and (3) dynamism. Comparing the two lists one finds three pairings: honesty and integrity → trustworthy, inspiring → dynamism, competent → expertise. The difference is *visionary*. Jim Kouzes has said, “Vision is what distinguishes leaders from other credible people.”

Vision emerged clearly as the touchstone of leading in the study. A vision is descriptive picture of a desired future of the organization. But vision by itself is not enough. It must be a *shared* vision. That vision may have originated with the person at the head of the organization, but often is an articulation of a collection of ideas shared by the leader and numerous other employees. By synthesizing these ideas and elevating them in a way that touches on the needs and dreams of these employees, the leader begins to elevate the vision to a moral level (doing the right thing), a vision for the common good (something bigger than one’s self). As George Bernard Shaw said, “This is the true joy in life, being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one.”

Over time the vision becomes a source of energy and even excitement for the group that gives meaning to their work. As the vision becomes embraced by the group, it begins to take on a life of its own. In the best cases it becomes a shared vision, elevated beyond the original concepts of either the leader or the led.

Several characteristics are ascribed to shared vision. It provides meaning for the employees and other stakeholders. It is inspiring and often exciting, motivating individuals to extra effort to achieve the vision. The shared nature of the vision is unifying, creating a sense of community.

Another characteristic of this theme is change or adaptation. The shared vision provides direction and focuses attention on the proposed changes. The changes are described as

opportunities, possibilities or potentialities, an adventure. The shared vision helps clarify new expectations for both leaders and followers. Individuals expect to make a difference, to create reform, to innovate.

Transforming visions are long-range, often 10 to 20 years, and may incorporate specific goals or key initiatives. Having a limited number of initiatives helps provide focus and set priorities. However, the goals or issues may also permit the organization to articulate a multi-directional, but related, vision of the future.

Communication—The first pillar supporting the shared vision is communication. This set of skills is widely regarded as critical to effective leadership. And *listening*, not speaking, is the most important component of communication for transformational leaders. The transforming leader listens so as to fully understand the perceptions of followers, their needs and concerns. This requires asking probing questions and being open to receiving feedback, as well as reflective thinking to enhance understanding. These leaders display a *willingness to be influenced* and to use their understanding to further shape the vision, ever increasing the shared nature and support for the vision. Gandhi traveled India for a year after returning from South Africa before becoming actively involved in the free-India movement. Kotter found that new general managers took six months to a year to establish their agendas.

The vision is first developed through dialogue. To keep the dream alive, it must be repeatedly articulated in many forms. Communicating the vision is a key to instilling shared meaning and purpose. Communication regarding the vision is used to excite, inspire, motivate and unify both followers and leaders. The communication is a two-way sharing that facilitates the

process of elevating the moral purpose of the shared vision, building relationships, and shaping the culture of the organization.

An important role of the transforming leader is the ability to clearly articulate the shared vision, values, and beliefs of the organization—repeatedly—in exciting and enthusiastic ways. The skilled leader inspires followers, provides encouragement and enhances motivation. Followers are mobilized to action.

Transforming leaders clarify and illustrate the vision, values and beliefs by using metaphors, analogies, stories, ceremonies, celebrations, rituals and traditions. They communicate high expectations. Emotional appeals and a sense of drama may be added to help provoke, influence and persuade others. “The world is moved by highly motivated people—people who believe very strongly or who want something very much” (Gardner, 1990).

Clichés such as “actions speak louder than words” illustrate the power of nonverbal communication. Transforming leaders consistently “walk-the-talk” and “lead by example.” These leaders are very aware that their actions are closely watched and interpreted for consistency with the spoken word. Consistency helps build trust. Symbolic actions are frequently used to make a point. I once worked for a college president who, without saying anything to the college community, moved out of his large office suite into a smaller area nearby in order to make room for the Opportunity Center, a faculty-run professional development program focused on teaching and learning. The symbolic message that teaching and learning were important rang throughout the organization. Every action (or lack thereof) by the leader is subject to symbolic interpretation by followers.

Relationships—The second pillar is building relationships. Interpersonal skills are also considered critical to effective leadership. This pillar reflects the interactive, mutual and shared nature of transforming-leader behaviors. A web of high-quality relationships makes it possible to communicate, to effect the shared vision and to shape the community that supports the vision. Shared values are important to the nature of the relationships and facilitate achievement of the vision.

These interactive relationships have been described as being shared, two-way, mutual, collaborative, and collegial. They cross boundaries. Transforming leaders tend to be friendly and informal. They treat subordinates as equals, give advice, help and support and encouragement. Transforming leadership clearly involves a relationship in which the leaders and followers are fully engaged with each other in achieving the shared vision of the organization.

Transforming leaders build trust through their actions. Walking-the-talk, role modeling and setting an example describe the consistency of actions critical to building trust among followers. In addition, these leaders trust followers. The trust of followers must be earned. Trusting them first builds credibility and leads to trust of the leader.

These leaders most often use participatory decision-making and build consensus. However, as Burns has noted, there is also an important role for conflict in transforming leadership. As previously noted, leading involves change. Change generates conflict. The leader may need to create dissatisfaction with the status quo to initiate change. Kotter (1996) talks about the need to create a sense of urgency. In addition, if there is no conflict in an organization, there is a danger of tunnel vision. On the other hand, excessive conflict can rip an organization apart. Therefore, the transforming leader “manages” the level of conflict.

At this point, we need to return to the fifth of our leadership dilemmas, charisma.

Charisma is generally regarded as an attribution to the leader, rather than a trait. It is an identification with the leader. In transforming leadership, the identification is with the purpose or vision of the organization. Among leadership scholars, there is much debate about the role of charisma with no clear answer. Additional study is needed. However, I suggest that charisma and leading may not be mutually exclusive, that is, it is possible that the follower may identify with *both* the leader and the purpose.

Community—The third pillar is creating a sense of community within the organization. Community is a form of organizational culture characterized by a sense of belonging. Organizational culture is the shared values and beliefs of the organization. “Edgar H. Schein has said that the *only* important thing leaders do may well be constructing culture” (Sashkin & Rosenbach, 1993). Shaping community contributes to building relationships and internalizing commitment to the shared vision. Leaders must be clear about their own values and ensure that their behavior consistently reflects those values.

Some key values identified with transforming leaders are:

- Dignity and respect for everyone
- Honesty and integrity
- Fairness and forgiveness
- Service above self
- Excellence
- Humility

Organizational policies and programs are directly based on its shared values and beliefs. Two of the popular metaphors currently in use to characterize a sense of organizational community are “family” and “learning organization.”

The primary means of shaping community is through interactive communication, including symbolic action, described above. As followers interact with leaders and others, tell the stories and myths, and participate in the rituals and ceremonies, the values and beliefs are reinforced and institutionalized. Just as all actions of a leader are subject to symbolic interpretation by followers, all actions potentially affect the nature of the organizational community.

Guidance—The fourth pillar of leading is guidance. Leaders conduct themselves and even communicate through their actions. These actions help build relationships and shape organizational culture. However, transforming leaders also guide implementation of the shared vision in addition to relying on the actions of empowered followers. One does not lead a team to the top of Mt. Everest by saying, “There it is...go for it.” This does not mean that they micromanage, or even manage, the organization in their leader role.

One common guiding action is to teach. John Gardner says that great leaders are great teachers. These leaders provide opportunities for their employees to learn and grow, often creating a learning organization, as described by Peter Senge. They practice lifelong learning—personally and organizationally. They mentor or coach their followers. As noted above, the relationship is friendly and informal. The leaders treat subordinates as equals, while providing encouragement for their personal and professional development. They see their role as servant leader and seek to serve their own followers, as well as other stakeholders inside and outside the organization. Transforming leaders also guide by engaging in moral reasoning and principled

judgment, as well as teaching these ideas to their followers. Symbolic actions, described above, also provide guidance for followers, an indirect but powerful means of teaching.

Guiding the process of strategic planning is one of the roles of the transforming leader. This is particularly true when the process includes a review of the mission, vision and values of the organization. The leader also helps guide the process by taking a systemic view of the planning to help ensure that plans synergistically support achieving the shared vision. In addition, the leader participates shoulder to shoulder with the rest of the team in the planning process.

Transforming leaders encourage taking reasonable or calculated risks, experimenting, and innovating. At the same time, transforming leaders are careful to assess the degree of risk and take steps to reduce the risk of failing by providing risk-takers with the necessary resources and connections to facilitate success. They monitor progress and may suggest modifications to avoid traps and pitfalls while they also resist directing or taking control. The process of leading is that of servant leader, not of micromanager. Followers are fully empowered with both the responsibility and the authority to do what needs to be done. Empowerment means giving power away. Lao-tzu said that giving power away is the way to get more power. This is certainly true for the transforming leader. It takes tremendous self-confidence for the leader to trust followers enough to give away their power in this manner.

Guiding actions also include team building. Transforming leaders seek to make the organization *the place to be*. One of the best examples was when Steve Jobs formed the team to create the Macintosh computer. There was a sense of camaraderie that energized the team beyond even the typical high-performance team. A similar phenomenon occurred with the Apollo space program to land a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s.

Finally, leaders today are always concerned with high standards of excellence and quality. They may support programs for total quality management, continuous improvement, benchmarking and so forth. The key is genuine support, not just verbal approval. They ensure that the resources are there and take an active interest in any efforts to ensure or improve quality and customer service.

Character—The foundation of our model of leading is character. As with shared vision and values, these leaders are principle-centered, believing in and demonstrating dignity and respect for everyone, honest and integrity, fairness and forgiveness, service above self, excellence, and humility. They are particularly noted as being ethical, perhaps even “noble.”

Transforming leaders are characterized as having self-confidence, but they check their egos at the door. That is, they have a humble self-confidence. These leaders are committed and motivated by a higher purpose. Furthermore, they are centered and have an internal locus of control. Transforming leaders exhibit self-understanding and are self-disciplined. They have a need for power but use it for empowering others, rather than for their own purposes. When it is used personally, power becomes a source of energy rather than a source of control over others. Transforming leaders gain power by giving it away.

Transforming leaders are passionate. They are focused and committed to the shared vision, a vision of the common good, a commitment to improving the quality of life of society at large. So strong is this passion that they may willingly give all of their time and energy to this cause. These leaders are disenchanted with the status quo and pursue their calling with a sense of giving. Yet transforming leaders view themselves and are viewed by others as servant leaders.

Intelligence, a quality that appears to be increasingly recognized as essential in a complex and ever changing world, is commonly attributed to transforming leaders. These leaders are known for having good judgment and have expertise in their industry, their profession, and leadership. Transforming leaders demonstrate cognitive complexity—the ability to understand and attend to complex and competing needs simultaneously—and approach challenges with a variety of perspectives and approaches.

Transforming leaders also practice and support lifelong learning. Such learning promotes personal renewal. On a larger scale, it also promotes organizational renewal. Transforming leaders use and promote the use of critical, creative and reflective thinking that supports the development of cognitive complexity. This provides a basis for multiple frames of reference, situational alternatives, or other forms of requisite variety.

These leaders have a broad perspective, including an awareness of complexities, systemic connections, patterns and situations, that helps them deal with the complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainties of the “permanent whitewater” in which we live. They are equally comfortable with the political, cultural and technical functions inside and outside of the organization. These leaders understand organizational history, gender and cultural sensitivity, and global issues. They are well-rounded, open, unbiased, and flexible with a tolerance for ambiguity.

In addition, these leaders exhibit a positive attitude. They are personable, energetic, resourceful (finding and giving the needed resources, helping make connections, etc.), giving, and most important show a sense of humor!

Conclusion

The most lasting and pervasive leadership of all is intangible and noninstitutional. It is the leadership of influence fostered by ideas embodied in social or religious or

artistic movements, in books, in great seminal documents, in the memory of great lives greatly lived.

—James MacGregor Burns

In summary, extraordinary leading means *engaging others to collectively achieve a shared vision of high moral purpose for the common good*. The process includes creating the shared vision, using an array of good communication skills, building a web of quality relationships through strong interpersonal skills, developing a supporting organizational community, guiding the process of implementation, and acting with exceptional character. Leading requires a relatively simple array of behaviors, yet leading in a complex world is not easy. Nevertheless, those who succeed have been documented to generate excellent results.

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.

—Margaret Mead

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Dean Pielstick is the Business Program Coordinator and associate clinical professor for Northern Arizona University -- Eastern Arizona. He has nearly thirty years of administrative and academic experience that includes six colleges and universities, as well as experience with state government, non-profit organizations, and private businesses. His current research is focused on differences between formal and informal leadership, including the role of power in leading.