Is Transformational Leadership Universally Applicable?

A Reflective Research in Progress

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ABSTRACT
This reflective work in progress research paper describes the thought process of a manager in the public sector of a Caribbean Small Island Developing State. Questioning the applicability and effectiveness of transformational leadership, especially the use of intrinsic motivation as a tool for improving employees’ productivity and efficiency, the author describes the socio-political context and its effect on the influence process between leaders and followers. The thought process ends with a conclusion of the manager regarding the effectiveness of transformational leadership theory in the given context and the apparent mitigating impact of this context on effectively leading and developing leader-follower relationships. The paper ends with the identification and statement of possible questions for future research regarding the effect of socio-psychological elements of a Caribbean Small Island Developing State context on the influence process between leaders and followers.

Categories and Subject descriptors
J.4 Social and behavioral Sciences: Economics, Sociology, Psychology

General Terms
Governance, Leadership

Keywords
Transformational Leadership, Implicit motivation, Socio-Political context of Small Island Developing States, Caribbean.

1. INTRODUCTION
Learning to reflect on your behavior and thoughts as on the phenomenon under study creates a means for continuously becoming a better researcher. Reflexivity is thus considered essential, potentially facilitating understanding of both the phenomenon under study and the research process itself [14].

When personal observations are the means to gather data-as is the case in this paper-exercising reflexivity on the experience and processes serves several purposes such as making connections between theory and practice and attaining an awareness regarding the role of the observer’s own perception.

This article is the reflection of a manager who has worked in a public sector organization in a small Caribbean island. For years this manager had observed leaders come and go in the organization, all with their own leadership style, relentlessly putting in their utmost to apply what they thought were the best and most effective leadership styles. What they had in common was the honest effort to use the methods described in leadership theories to enhance follower effectiveness, efficiency and productivity such as: participation, delegation, coaching and empowerment. Another thing that they had in common was that they all failed in attaining the change they so much sought in subordinate motivation and behavior and an improvement in overall performance through their own non-autocratic leadership style. A fan of leadership theories and motivational theories himself, the manager was intrigued by the lack of applicability of motivational theories, and leadership theories in public organizations. The manager began to wonder about the applicability of these theories and why efforts to apply preferred methods to connect and create bonds with subordinates were in vain. Could it be that some of the most hailed and popular leadership theories favored because of their supposed universalism and effectiveness in different situational contexts just do not apply in certain national cultural contexts, the manager thought. Is transformational leadership really universally applicable?
The remainder of this article describes the thought process of this manager and how the manager got to the point of questioning the applicability of his own favorite leadership theory: transformational leadership.

2. RESEARCH CONTEXT AND FRAMEWORK RESEARCH

This paper is a work in progress and part of an exploratory study into the role of leadership in Small Island Developing States; the beginning of a trajectory aimed at formulating potential research questions on leadership in both the public and private sector set in a Caribbean Island context.

The intention of this text is to debate the role of transformational leadership in public organizations. Based on the premises that good leadership is one of the non-materialistic motivators this paper focuses on the intrinsic part of motivation within the transformational context because of its crucial role in enhancing the performance of civil servants in the public sector [13]. Increasing the performance of civil service in developing countries remains a current topic and the civil service in these countries continues to be characterized as frequently too large, too expensive, insufficiently productive and poorly motivated [10].

In the process of formulating new research questions for future study it is the goal to explore the workings of other concepts and theories - besides the transformational theory - within a small island developing state context such as: the implicit leadership theory (the perceptions on leadership based on culture related values and beliefs), organizational culture (the behavioral aspects) and emotional intelligence (with a focus on the psyche of a leader).

According to Easterby-Smith [8] “the appropriateness of a research approach derives from the social phenomena to be explored” and if peoples view about the phenomena (in this case a certain leadership style) is what matters than the philosophical foundation can be categorized as a phenomenological one. Both this text and the further study are based on this philosophical view where the world is seen as a social construct and meaning is derived subjectively through intuition and reflection driven by human interest. These subjective meanings given to occurrences by individuals are formed “through interaction with others (socially constructed) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives” [5].

The context in which observed individuals work and live is a major focus point in the study. Ideas developed during the study will be deduced from data collected through observations and interviews with the awareness that subjective interpretation based on the background of the observer is an influence factor too.

For this exploratory text, data regarding the behavioral responses of people to leadership styles in a public sector setting was gathered through observations and interviews during the many years that the manager was part of the observed setting. The interpretations and conclusion are the manager’s perception of leadership.

3. THE CONCEPT OF LEADERSHIP

Nowadays, it seems that everybody has a clear opinion of what leadership entails and when talking about the leadership concept, the discussions are lengthy and seem never ending. This can be explained by the complexity of the nature of the concept of leadership; the many existing taxonomies on this topic may differ in focus and scope however they are all legitimate ideologies.

As Stogdill [12] stated in 1974:

“There are almost as many definitions of Leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept.”

The vast amount of literature and research has resulted in an increased confidence of people when using the different theories to form and defend their opinion of effective leadership. Of course this manager also had an opinion about effective leadership, which he stated as follows: “if you look at some definitions of leadership in literature there is one thing that stands out in all definitions and that is that leadership is a human activity involving the interaction and interpersonal relationships between people. This – the human aspect - should be the focal point in discussions regarding effective leadership.

This point of view of the manager was nothing new and was shared by others who described the recent change in mindset about leadership as “the shift in mindset and practices and principles from the industrial era based on control, rationality and stability to principles of empowerment of employees and collaboration” [6].

So if formerly the key element in managerial theories was rationality and the assumption that successful leadership is purely based on learnable behavior (which led to managers using an impersonal approach), the new mindset suggests that the most important aspect of the new paradigm of leadership is the ability to use human skills to build a culture of trust, collaboration and performance [6].

The rationale behind this shift is that we live in a time where many external forces in the environment have led to an increase in organizational uncertainty and vulnerability. Coping with the fast moving environmental forces means that organizations need to be alert, and ready to quickly respond and adapt to these circumstances. Translated to the people working in the organizations this means that employees have to be more flexible and creative and own a mindset of collaboration. For leaders it means that they have to become more committed to building and fostering interpersonal relationships.

Ideally both humans skills (skills for interacting with human beings) or soft skills and hard skills of management (the know-
how to run a business, including knowledge and experience) should be applied in order to effectively guide an organization in a business environment.

In the new mind model leaders would, instead of using power and control, connect with people through the use of empowerment and open communication to generate motivation and commitment to the organization’s vision and mission. And as Daft [6] stated: “since humans cannot be separated from their emotions it is through emotions that leaders generate this commitment”.

No wonder the favored leadership theory of this manager was the transformational leadership theory; a theory that appeals to the values and emotions of subordinates, where subordinates stand central and where empowerment and intrinsic motivation of subordinates are the main elements in effectively leading subordinates towards performance.

According to Yukl [15] based on Bass [3], transformational leadership appeals to the moral values of followers in an attempt to raise their consciousness and the behaviors that are typically used by these leaders can be categorized as the following:

1. **Idealized influence** – the leader’s behavior arouses strong follower emotions and identification with the leader setting examples, self-sacrifice;
2. **Intellectual stimulation** - the leader’s behavior increases follower awareness of problems and influences followers to view problems from a different perspective;
3. **Individualized consideration** includes providing support, encouragement and coaching to supporters;
4. **Inspirational motivation** which includes communicating an appealing vision and using symbols to focus on subordinate effort.

The result of this behavior by transformational leaders is that followers become more aware of the value of their work and are willing to sacrifice their own interests for the sake of the organization and as was stated earlier empowerment and intrinsic motivation (through participation, delegation, trust, teamwork) are key elements in influencing this drive and loyalty of organization members.

As the manager went over the characteristics of his favorite leadership theory again to find the answers for the limited applicability of this theory in his ex-work environment, it struck him; all these purports made sound great however isn’t empowerment a two-way street where leaders influence subordinates through actions and their own behavior and followers (are supposed to) respond to that? Isn’t empowerment a process where the follower voluntarily chooses to be influenced by the leadership style?

The term psychological empowerment of subordinates describes how intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy of people are influenced by leadership behavior, job characteristics, organization structure, needs and values[15].

Research on follower perception of empowerment has shown that how a leader behaves and makes decisions plays a major role in creating a feeling of subordinate empowerment. For example participation and delegation are two methods that can be used to affect psychological empowerment of subordinates. However, the leader’s behavior by itself does not explain the phenomena of empowered subordinates. This reminded the manager of a fellow-manager the head of another department in the same public sector - who shared the following with him ”I want to be more of a participative leader and share decision-making, delegate more tasks but my subordinates prefer an autocratic leader, so now I am an autocratic leader…”

4. **UNIVERSALLY APPLICABLE**

According to Bass [3] [4] “transformational leadership is considered effective in any situation or culture and the positive relationship between transformational leadership and effectiveness has been replicated for many leaders of authority, in different types of organizations and in several different countries”.

Sure, universal relevance does not mean that a theory is equally applicable in all situations however some elements remain relevant, and more research on this is needed however, how can it be that the use of the basic elements of influence in transformational leadership such as empowerment and intrinsic motivation -which are usually effective techniques in connecting with subordinates and improving effective leadership- were not effective in reaching a (critical) majority needed to establish the change in this situation?

Why wasn’t it possible to impact the values and beliefs and the mindset, through transformational leadership in this organization? According to Daft [7]: Organizational culture is the set of values, norms, guiding beliefs and understandings that is shared by members of an organization and taught to new members as the correct way to think, feel, and behave. Theories on organizational culture emphasize the importance of managers understanding the organizational culture and their effects on employee motivation, employee morale, attitude, efficiency, productivity and quality of work.

Thinking of the leaders who came and went the manager reflected on the culture within the organization and wondered if there were other stronger elements than the leadership style that impacted the employees’ behavior. If the leadership style wasn’t effective in creating intrinsic motivation what other elements of the organizational culture could have had such a big impact that they
obstructed the change in the motivation level of the majority of the employees? The manager knew that there are several elements that determine organizational culture besides leadership style, for example the type of organizational activities, organization structure, the nature of interpersonal relationships and the national culture in which the organization is located [9]. Looking at these elements, the following question came to his mind: Could it be that the contextual effect was so significant that its impact was large enough to cause this distraction in motivation? Picture this: a small society with very tight knit social relations, where individuals interact frequently in the same social settings (Benedict [2]) creating a community that is very much relationship oriented and “where networking and relationships are important and supersede rules and procedures in every aspect of social, political and economic life even a high value to job performance” [1]. As a consequence, the application of impersonal standards in business relationships is difficult -even in contractual relations- and the measurement of efficiency in performance is challenging because the affective component of efficiency has to be as neutral as possible [2]. The close interpersonal relationships also have an effect on the relationship between leaders and followers because followers expect protection, guidance and supervision and leaders in return seek loyalty, resembling a paternalistic relationship [1]. Another result of the close personalized relationships is a lack of punishment system, a culture of non punishment and a risk of reciprocal punishment [13]. Also, in this environment officials in public office will be less able to avoid demands of friends and family to extend special favors [11]. In such a society sociological factors affect political structures (Benedict [2]) and the political influence on appointments of all positions in public sector organizations (in particular top management positions) is an accepted scenario especially in less meritocratic environments [11]. And finally “social norms might emphasize an individual’s allegiance to ethnic, religious or other collectivities over his responsibility to act as a rational bureaucrat in the Weberian mould” [11].

Given this context the manager had the following reflections:

- Since being politically appointed is a common phenomenon would this mean that the general perception created amongst subordinates is that ALL leaders appointed under a certain administration serve that administration (political party) and therefore their neutrality is denied beforehand?
- Would the typical tools of transformational leadership such as empowerment and intrinsic motivation deemed ineffective from the beginning because of the lack of (political) self identification with the leader?
- Could the shortness of the term served by political appointees (who often are replaced by others after a change in administration) hinder building close relationships with subordinates since subordinates may perceive it of no use to emotionally connect with a leader who will leave shortly anyways?
- Is the loyalty to the political party of preference a dominant factor in the motivation of employees in civil service? And if “their political party” was in the opposition would methods like ideological appeal and repeating an inspiring vision, be used in vain since the organizational leader will never generate an influence on beliefs and values especially when the political loyalty is deeply ingrained, sometimes from generation to generation?
- Would the fact that this mindset was commonly accepted and already allowed for a long time limit any successful impact on motivational change through transformational leadership?

An eerie feeling came over the manager: What if people could not be motivated at all in a certain national cultural context! So much for motivational theories? Could it be possible that subordinates in a given context cannot be influenced to feel empowered and intrinsically motivated to be efficient and productive? If this lack of empowerment motivation is directly related to the absence of the political identification to the organizational leader does that mean that those subordinates who politically identify with the leader are behaviorally empowered to be more effective producers? The intriguing part is that as the manager had observed himself: BOTH groups consisted of members who lacked motivation and resisted change! For the first group this might be explained by the fact that “their political party” was not in reign but what about the other group who did have their political party represented in the administration? What could be the reason here that the leadership style based on connecting with subordinates through the elements of intrinsic motivation and empowerment were not successful in impacting (a change in) motivation?

And then it hit the manager: Based on the premise that leadership is a non materialistic motivator and the influence process is correct, some people will not be intrinsically motivated to change because they have the right to say no to change. An example of the right not to change might be those who believe in the pater familias principle meaning that they think that they have the right to be taken care of by the pater familias, in this case their employer, the government; they assume that there is no expectation of a returned performance and apparently this behavior is independent of the political representation in the administration! And there you have it thought the manager; “the paternalistic deviation in motivation” as an explanation for the failure of basic transformational leadership elements in a certain context!

5. CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

So how applicable is transformational leadership in certain contexts?
The manager concluded that some of the basic ingredients of transformational leadership do not work in certain contexts and although subordinates make attributions about leaders’ competence and intentions based on the leader’s behavior, ideologies and actions, these attributions are very much distracted by other elements beyond the effect of the leaders. These elements have to be further specified and studied especially their limiting effect on an effective influence process.

The manager realized that the process of influence means affecting basic values and beliefs of a person and the attempt to impact any kind of internal process within a human being might not be effective since this process includes a voluntary change. In the meantime organizational leaders have to procure overall performance and they often do not have the luxury to wait for subordinates to choose change. Perhaps leaders in bureaucratic contexts need to first evaluate the effectiveness of new paradigm leadership theories, based on a thorough analysis of the context and especially evaluate the existence and impact of elements that moderate or mitigate the effects of transformational leadership. Who knows they might conclude that in a certain context the only way to strategic performance is through task oriented behavior with elements of an autocratic leadership style……

Is transformational leadership style still the preferred style of the manager? While on the one hand he still acknowledges the important contribution of this leadership theory because it has taught him that the emotional reaction of subordinates is an important factor to consider in the influence process (besides rational cognitive aspects of leader-follower interaction) and he now has a more comprehensive set of variables to explain effective leadership, on the other hand his view on the universal applicability of transformational leadership has changed and he admits that in certain contexts this leadership style might not be the preferred leadership style.

### 6. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The aim of the future study is to acquire an understanding of what people (leaders and followers) in the socio-cultural context of a Small (Island) Developing State and in particular former Dutch colonies located in the Caribbean, consider to be effective leader behavior. Specifically:

1. What constitutes effective leader behavior in private and public sectors organizations according to leaders and follower in these states?
2. Do the perceptions of the two groups match?
3. Is the current leader behavior in accordance with their view of effective leader behavior? If not, what (contextual) factors can be identified that explain this discrepancy?

Since perceptions play a major role in the future study it is the intention to delve deeper into the psyche of the leader and the mind processes affecting the behavior of the leader.

The qualitative research investigating complex and sensitive issues such as perceptions on leadership and mind processes affecting leader behavior will predominantly consist of interviews and surveys conducted on the above mentioned islands.

The study will be divided in two parts; one with a focus on private sector organizations, the other on public sector organizations and the first case under study will be that of Aruba. The goal is to complete the study within four years.

### REFERENCES


