

# Transformational and Transactional Leadership: a false dichotomy of leadership in schools

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The interview for the principal's position at the new school was drawing to a close, and the panel Chairperson moved her empty coffee cup to one side, and then asked the applicant for a short summation of what he would bring to the role.

Applicant: Thanks for allowing me to tell you about my leadership philosophy and successes. I believe I have been a transformational leader all of my life and that I have inspired staff and the community to do great things. I have never had to use transactional strategies because my vision and relationships ensure that I always win commitment, not compliance in respect to the school's operations.

The applicant then stood, thanked the panel, and moving around the table he shook the hands of the panellists with a firm two-handed connection.

The door closed, and the chairperson turned to the other members of the panel and said with a wry smile, "School leadership is never that clean and defined!" and turning to the deputy principal she asked, "Jane did you get commitment from staff about the early start next term, and what will it cost us in terms of relief teachers?"

## Introduction

Much has been written on the topic of leadership in general, and leadership in schools, specifically. While there is a fuzzy agreement about the definition of leadership in a general sense, many educational writers are committed to the distinction between leadership and management, in which leadership is about changing the status quo and management is about maintaining the status quo. However, we maintain that school leaders must both manage and lead, which then becomes the essence of the principal's role in a modern school setting.

The literature on business management and educational administration is replete with material on leadership: parallel leadership, curriculum leadership, feminist leadership, distributed leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, instructional leadership, servant leadership, situational leadership, ethical leadership and so on. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004, p. 8) warned against what they called, lead-

ership by adjective. As can be seen with the proliferation of research on leadership over time, the relentless promotion of leadership is a logical extension of western society's idolatry of individuation at the expense of the development of community. In this paper, the authors

argue that leadership has a quicksilver-like, catalytic quality that is influenced by changes in the dynamic equations that describe the ever-changing, multi-levelled relationships between those who lead and those who are led.

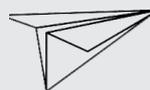
There are some key understandings that explain leadership. Firstly, the use of positional power is not leadership, and the distinction between control and influence is worth considering. A person can be a principal, yet exist in a leadership vacuum. Positional power can enforce change, but the followership group has to wait for the temporary autocracy to be lifted so that they can go back to doing things the way that they see is more appropriate. Secondly, school leadership may start with the power of one, but it must be developed so that a champion team can evolve.

**The Second World War** saw the rise of leaders who were more persuasive with the troops they led as opposed to the blind obedience that was more characteristic of WW1

## Transaction vs transformation



**Transactional leadership** occurs when followers are moved to enact their roles as agreed upon with the leader in exchange for reward or avoidance of punishment.



**Transformational leadership** moves followers to an increased awareness about what is important, transcending their own self-interests for the greater good



School leadership literature is filled with the stories of the hero principal riding into town, saving the failing school, riding out of town and the teachers, students and parents returning to their previous practices. Thirdly, leadership is always about change, otherwise it is simply management aimed at preserving the status quo.

**The Roots of Transactional Relationships: Reciprocity**

The concept of leadership is constantly evolving. Ciulla (2003, p. xii) examined changes in beliefs about leadership in the last Century, and the influence of the World Wars on this is clear in her model. The photographs of troops in the First World War running under orders at enemy machine guns changed forever society’s views on leadership. As a result, the Second World War saw the rise of leaders who were more persuasive with the troops they led as opposed to the blind obedience that was more characteristic of the First World War. Currently, there is a greater recognition that the relationship between the leader and the follower is one of transactional reciprocity. In fact, the leadership quality that extends beyond positional power is an unstable equation that constantly balances commitment against mental and material rewards.

In all groups and organisations, leadership cannot exist without followership. However, there is a simplistic understanding that the followership is always passive and an un-empowered group, but realistically that is not the case. The term followership gave meaning to the leader-

ship archetypes. Leadership, followership and change are closely connected with leadership seen as a relationship based on differential rewards for both parties. People enter the leadership-followership equation in the belief that change will improve the lot of all parties involved. However, the leadership-followership relationship is a dynamic, unequal and at times unstable process, and therefore it is not surprising that often the followers may opt out of the relationship when their support is not recognised or rewarded.

**Transformational Leadership: Theoretical Framework**

Max Weber proposed three types or grounds for his leadership model (Eisenstadt, 1968, p.46): rational, traditional and charismatic. The charismatic grounds of leadership are generated by “... devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person”. Further adding to this was Douglas McGregor’s Theory X and Theory Y, which pushed leaders into thinking that they were faced with two leadership model alternatives. Transformational leadership is the modern-day variant of the charismatic/Theory Y leadership, and with the passage of time, transactional leadership has been discredited, and seen as the lesser alternative for the more charismatic and inspiring transformational leadership. Such is the attraction of the concept of transformational leadership, that almost all aspirant principals will claim to be transformational leaders in their job applications, and none will

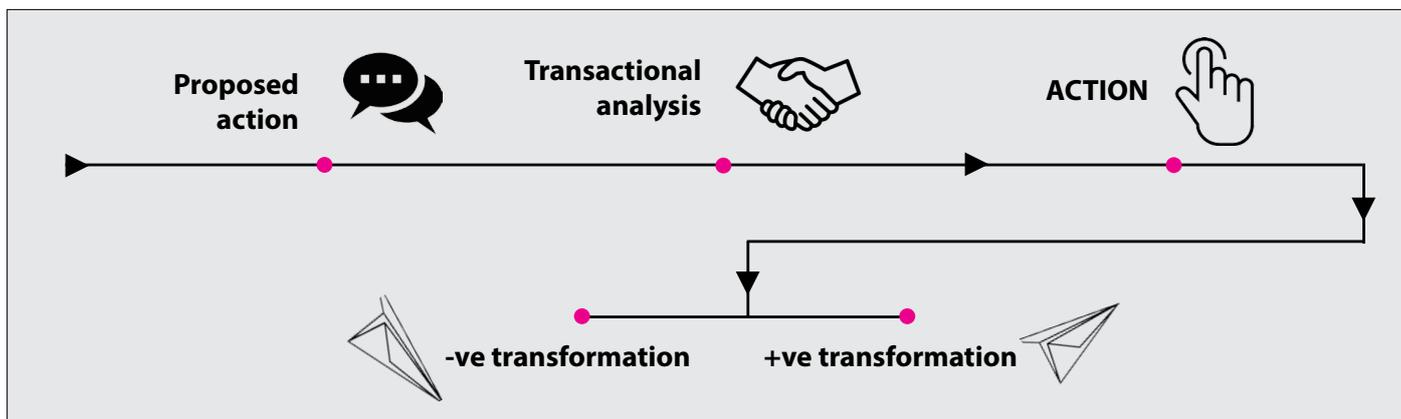
confess to being a transactional leader.

The belief that leaders are either transactional or transformational is a false dichotomy. Bass and Avolio (1989, p. 510) set out Burns’s original differentiation of the terms:

Transactional leadership occurs when followers are moved to enact their roles as agreed upon with the leader in exchange for reward or avoidance of punishment. Transformational leadership occurs when followers are moved to an increased awareness about what is important, to a higher level on Maslow’s need hierarchy and to a transcendence of their own self-interests for the good of the group, organization or society.

With the passage of time, transactional leadership is now seen as tawdry, being driven by rewards (Higgs, 2003, p. 276), and as a lesser substitute for the more charismatic and inspiring transformational leadership. The artificial quality of this distinction was recognised by Leithwood and Jantzi (2005, p. 178), who noted: “In contrast to Burns’s (1978) original view, Bass also claimed that transformational leadership does not substitute for transactional leadership. The best leaders are both transformational and transactional; transformational behaviors augment the effects of transactional behaviors”.

It remains simplistic to believe that transformational leadership is not about rewards, and as Weber pointed out in his description of pure, early stage charismatic leadership: “Pure charisma is specifically foreign to economic considerations” (Eisenstadt, 1968, p. 52).



**Figure 1:** Transformational leadership is a subset of Transactional leadership

However, the pure form of charisma has a conditional shelf-life, and Weber is forced to acknowledge the concept of Routinization: in relation to charisma. If one accepts that leadership is a part of an equation that balances a leader's actions against the followership's need for intrinsic or extrinsic reward, then transformational and transactional leadership match those reinforcement protocols. In a simplistic sense, transactional leadership deals with overt, extrinsic reward, while the more charismatic transformational leadership elicits more intrinsic rewards. The teaching profession and schools, private and public, are filled with people driven by the moral dimension of doing good for others. This means that intrinsic rewards (doing something good for the students) rank as highly as improving teachers' work conditions (extrinsic rewards) for most teachers, and as a result, transactional leadership is more likely to occur than in many other professions.

### Discarding the Erroneous Model of Transactional- Transformational Leadership

In life it can be argued that in the initiation of a leadership act the motivation is always transactional in nature, which is the point that Ciulla (2003) reached in her description of the development of understanding leadership. Altruism can be regarded as a myth because the doer of the altruistic act will always get a physical or mental reward. The question that is always asked, but may not be verbalised, is, "What is in this proposition for me?" See Figure 1..

Furthermore, while education seems to have become obsessively focussed on the transactional-transformational di-

chotomy, other theorists have moved past this obstruction by accepting alternative models of leadership relationships such as LMX theory (Leader- Member Exchange). In their paper, Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) clearly set out the transactional bases of all leader-member exchanges, and they note that:

The leadership structure is not formally designed; it emerges from the enactment of formally defined roles by organizational members. In order to carry out these roles and complete tasks, organizational members develop a network of relationships based on mutual dependencies (p. 234).

### Conclusion

The artificial demarcation between transactional and transformational leadership does not hold in the real world of schools. Transformational leadership, although often surrounded by high ideals, still needs to attract a followership by offering rewards, which torpedoes the mythical dichotomy. It therefore appears that transactional leadership may well be defined by extrinsic, material rewards; however, every individual makes judgements about the personal benefits of every change, and this ever-changing equation is constantly reviewed by participants over time. It is clear that in every motivational move to action, transactional leadership is the key factor, and the transformation is based on the outcomes of that action.

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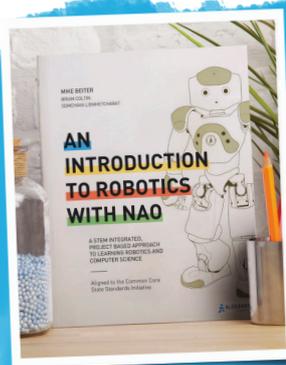
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