It's how you frame it: Transformational leadership and the meaning of work

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Abstract   Transformational leadership has emerged as one of the most important approaches for understanding and influencing employee effectiveness. Inherent in this approach is the belief that transformational leaders inspire employees to greater levels of motivation and performance. Recent evidence has shown that this effect is accomplished by managing the *meaning of work* for employees, yet it is often unclear exactly *how* leaders may influence perceptions of work for their employees. Consequently, in this article, we present behavioral and verbal cues leaders may use to enact positive change in their employees.
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1. Effective leadership is necessary

Companies recognize the need for effective leadership. The 2008 IBM Global Human Capital Study cited lack of leadership capacity among the most significant workforce-related issues facing organizations. Indeed, 75% of the firms in their study reported building leadership talent as the most significant challenge facing organizations today. These findings are not unique. The 2009 annual Corporate Issues Survey of Ken Blanchard and Associates reported that the development of potential leaders is consistently among the top challenges organizations face. Not surprisingly, these organizations reported leadership development as the most likely area of training investment in future years.

At the same time, scholars have actively pursued research on the most effective leadership approaches, and *transformational leadership* has

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emerged as perhaps the most important and influential framework for leadership (Avolio & Bass, 1988; Bass, 1985). Transformational leadership occurs when leaders inspire and motivate employees toward new ways of working and thinking. However, the logistics of this process are often unclear, and leaders continue to struggle with the notion of becoming transformational.

Notably, some leadership approaches tend to emphasize developing oneself and inspiring others with a vision of the organization's destiny. It is clearly important to understand and transmit a mission of where the organization is going. Nevertheless, most leaders are not in the upper echelons of an organization but rather in the trenches. They suffer not from lack of vision but a lack of resources and an inability to effectively motivate employees under ever-increasing demands for productivity. Thus, leaders need tangible advice on navigating the gritty reality of modern work and positively influencing worker outcomes, including performance.

Rather than focusing on leader or employee characteristics, recent research has highlighted the role of *work* itself as a critical mechanism through which transformational leaders enact positive change (Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006). The literature points to the concept of *framing*, which involves influencing and managing employee perceptions of the work they perform. Thus, in this article, we explore the process through which transformational leaders frame work to enact positive change. We begin by introducing an approach to transformational leadership rooted in *work itself* followed by a discussion on the paths a leader may take to positively influence his/her employees. It is our hope that readers will find this new perspective useful as they design or enhance their leadership development programs and strive to become transformational in their own right.

2. How transformational leaders manage meaning

"The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality."

—Max De Pree (n.d.)

The traditional view of transformational leadership suggests a social influence process between a leader and an employee. This premise is widely supported by empirical research, showing transformational leaders are able to inspire and motivate employees to greater levels of performance. Transformational leaders realize heightened performance by exerting personal power over employees to share a vision of the organization,

encouraging them to work harder at tasks, and persuading them to search for new and innovative ways of doing their work. However, how do transformational leaders exert personal power, encourage others, and persuade employees to work harder? The evidence has shown that transformational leaders shape the meaning of work through framing.

Framing is the process of selecting and highlighting certain aspects of a situation while minimizing or excluding the importance of others such that one meaning is accepted over another (Fairhurst & Starr, 1996). The effects of framing are well established. For example, the direction of comparison effect demonstrates that the order in which objects are presented for comparison influences how people perceive them. For instance, 45% of respondents blamed traffic for pollution when asked "Who is more to blame for pollution: traffic or industry?" However, when the direction of comparison was reversed (i.e., "Who is more to blame for pollution: industry or traffic?"), only 24% of respondents blamed traffic. Similarly, respondents reported higher satisfaction with their current relationship after they compared their actual partner with their ideal partner than vice versa. Simply switching the subject and referent in these questions was all that was needed to make a significant impact on comparison ratings.

Scholars have described leadership as a language game (Pondy, 1978) and a process of symbolic action (Pfeffer, 1981). Indeed, evidence suggests that transformational leadership does involve redefining the nature and quality of work for employees. Transformational leaders use words, actions, and/or symbols when talking about work to enhance its significance and meaning.

All jobs require at least some activities that are routine, monotonous, and seemingly unimportant to the mission of the organization. Employees' perceptions regarding the nature of their jobs are shaped by what they see, hear, and experience at work. Through acts of framing, leaders have the opportunity to highlight the particular aspects of work that enhance its meaning and minimize those that do not.

In their book *The Art of Framing: Managing the Language of Leadership*, Fairhurst and Starr (1996) discuss how leaders may use framing to shape the meaning of work. They discuss metaphors, jargon, contrasts, spins, and stories as potential tools for framing as well as high impact opportunities in which potentially talented framers might capitalize on special framing opportunities.

When a leader is successful in reframing a follower's view of his/her job, the follower gains a