



Transcendent leadership

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Abstract

Leadership theories abound, but few have provided a means to integrate the depth and breadth of the vast literature available. Building on the research of Crossan, Vera, and Nanjad (who propose Transcendent Leadership as an integrative framework), we describe the key leadership challenges of leading across the levels of self, others, organization, and society. We argue that much of the leadership discourse has focused almost exclusively on leadership of others and occasionally on the leadership of the organization as a whole, yet little has focused specifically on the integral component of leadership of self. We provide evidence of the necessity of multiple levels of leadership, as well as some practical guidance, by drawing from in-depth interviews of six leaders in various contexts.

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“Mastering others is strength. Mastering yourself is true power.”

—Lao Tzu

1. Will the real leader please stand up?

The publishing industry in the United States produces over 5000 new business titles every year, selling billions of dollars worth of business advice for managers and would-be corporate leaders.¹ Of these five thousand titles, a large number are on leadership specifically. To make matters worse,

leadership advice is not restricted to the business shelves; recommendations can also be found in other sections: self-help, finance, home, career, and even religion. In their sincere efforts to lead effectively, managers may therefore become understandably confused by the plethora of new and fashionable leadership theories from which to choose the strategies that promise to make them successful.

Unfortunately, the discourse on leadership in academia is not much different. A recent review by Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, and Dansereau (2005) found at minimum 17 different leadership theories, ranging from the classical approaches (such as path-goal theory and Ohio State) to more contemporary forms (such as charismatic and transformational leadership). However, this study did not include other dominant streams of leadership such as upper echelon/strategic leadership or shared leadership perspectives. In addition, the field has also recently

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¹ Statistics gathered from <http://www.bookwire.com/decadebookproduction.html>.

seen an upsurge of research into new positive forms of leadership (authentic, spiritual, servant, moral, ethical, prosocial, responsible, Level 5, primal, etc.) which were not included in this discussion. This begs the question: How many different “effective” leadership theories are there? And could the real leader please stand up?

We argue, as well, that much of the discourse on leadership has focused almost exclusively on leadership of others and occasionally on the leadership of the organization as a whole, yet little has focused specifically on perhaps the most integral component of leadership: leadership of self. Managing in increasingly complex and dynamic environments, today's strategic leaders can benefit greatly from learning how to “master themselves” (in addition to others and the organization) by developing self-awareness and self-regulatory capabilities. By doing so, they would be less susceptible to following the latest management fads and fashions as propagated by the 5000-plus new business books and 17-plus leadership theories, through a better alignment of their internal values and beliefs with their strategic decisions and actions.

Our knowledge of how successful leaders master this level of leadership is virtually non-existent, however. The extant literature has focused instead on how these leaders have either transformed their organizations or their employees. There has been a notable absence in linking success at the organizational level to success in leadership of self. We concur with Crossan, Vera, and Nanjad (in press) that in order for long term sustained firm performance to materialize in today's dynamic business environment, today's leader needs to master leadership at all three levels – self, others, and the organization – a concept the previously-cited authors refer to as *transcendent leadership*. In fact, leadership at the societal level is also a likely requirement of transcendent leadership.

Crossan et al.'s use of “transcendent” is consistent with that of Aldon (1998) and Gardiner (2006), among others. Gardiner, for example, focused on the transcendent qualities of self and the transcending of the organization to the societal level. Aldon focused on the levels of self and others to bridge spirituality and science. As such, the term *transcendent* is ideally suited to a model holding that leaders need to transcend the levels, as it captures the quality of going above and beyond, within and between levels.

Building on the work of Crossan et al., we provide practitioners with some evidence of the necessity of multiple levels of leadership, as well as some practical guidance, by drawing from in-depth interviews of six North American business leaders in various contexts, both profit and not-for-profit. We

begin by reviewing what we know about leadership and what has changed in the business landscape of the 21st century that necessitates a different approach. We conclude by giving some practical advice on leadership at all three levels – self, others, and the organization – to help leaders ensure long term, sustainable firm performance in today's dynamic environments. Leadership at the societal level is also discussed.

2. What we know for sure

Many authors have put forth lists of “must-dos” for successful strategic leadership *in* and *of* the organization (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000). With regards to leadership *in* organizations, much work has been done on understanding dyadic and small-group level leadership, anchored heavily in a supervisor's transactional and/or transformational leadership roles. Transformational leadership is described as the ability to induce immediate followers to deliver performance beyond expectations through inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence (Bass, 1985). Transactional leadership focuses more on the exchange between managers and subordinates through constructive and corrective behaviors (Avolio & Bass, 2004). Both types of leadership, however, focus on the leader's immediate followers and define success in terms of positive follower outcomes such as increased employee commitment, job satisfaction, empowerment, task engagement, job performance, and extra effort (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004).

With regards to leadership *of* the organization, or strategic leadership, even more lists of required activities exist. For example, Ireland and Hitt (2005) state that strategic leadership in the 21st century is based on determining the firm's purpose and vision, exploiting and maintaining core competences, developing human capital, sustaining an effective organizational culture, emphasizing ethical practices, and establishing balanced organizational controls. In his competing values model, Quinn (1988) argues that executives must play eight competing leadership roles simultaneously: innovator, broker, facilitator, mentor, coordinator, monitor, producer, and director. Similarly, Hart and Quinn (1993) assert that CEOs play four roles – vision setter, motivator, analyzer, and taskmaster – to affect firm performance. House and Aditya (1997, p. 445) describe the main tasks of strategic leadership in both transactional (e.g., implementation of compensation and control systems) and transformational terminology (e.g., formulation of organizational goals and strategy).

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