Leadership and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in unprecedented uncertainties in all aspects of people's lives. During such times of crisis, effective leaders are able to create a sense of calm and openness that results in collaboration and receptivity to solutions. These *transformational* leaders impact others' behavior because they are seen as trustworthy. Research on transformational leadership identifies behaviors that facilitate a leader's impact: individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence. These behaviors allow for the development of trust between leader and followers. Through examples of transformational leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, this essay will discuss how such leadership facilitated compliance with helpful pandemic behaviors and cultivated a shared a sense of togetherness rather than an individualistic sense of "everyone for themselves." Lessons learned and directions for future research will be discussed.

Keywords: transformational leadership, individualized consideration, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, transcendence of self-interest; trust; empathy

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The devastation of COVID-19 took the world and its leaders by surprise. The virus spread faster than scientists and government officials could learn about it. It became clear quickly that many people were going to die, while details on how the virus spread remained unknown. All of these unknowns led to uncertainty and hysteria. Many societies around the world cried out for bold leadership to save them.

Crises are an important opportunity to reveal key factors of effective leadership which can affect outcomes such as how quickly the pandemic ends and how many people perish. In this essay, we will demonstrate that the most successful leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic were able to influence others to forgo their self-interests for communal benefits. This notion of leadership has been labeled in the academic community as transformational leadership.

Transformational Leadership

Leadership research spans various fields such as management, psychology, political science, and sociology. The existing leadership models are categorized into two groups: transactional and transformational. Transactional leadership models are focused on the leader and grounded on the assumption that the leader's impact depends on an exchange relationship between the leader and a person. These early models identified leader qualities and behaviors to predict leader effectiveness (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Recognizing that leadership effectiveness could also depend on the situational context, research evolved and produced complex contingency models that were of great theoretical but little practical value.

Eventually, leadership scholars completely shifted their focus away from the leader and toward a focus on the followers. It became clear, leading is about influencing, and influence involves trust and authentic relationships that go beyond merely "exchange" and "transaction." This shift from transactions to trust and authenticity led to models of leadership referred to

collectively as transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). These transformational leadership models are at the core of today's conversation about leadership.

What is Transformational Leadership?

A transformational leader is attentive to the needs and motives of the followers and helps them reach their fullest potential (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Most importantly, such leaders not only transcend their own self-interest but also inspire others to transcend their self-interest for the benefit of the community.

What does a Transformational Leader Do?

Four sets of transformational leadership behaviors have been discerned (Avolio et al., 1998; Bass & Riggio, 2006). The first set of behaviors represents *individualized consideration.* Effective leaders truly know and care about each of their followers. Followers know that they play a role in reaching shared goals, that they are important to the "mission." The leader communicates such care by sincerely wanting to know their followers' needs and values. Once identified, transformational leaders respond in a way that honors these needs and values (Bass & Riggio, 2006). As such, interactions with the followers are personalized. Therefore, leaders portraying individualized consideration are empathetic and practice good listening, provide learning opportunities, and delegate tasks to develop follower skills.

The second set of transformational leadership behaviors relates to the leader's ability to be a role model for the followers and is referred to as *idealized influence.* The leader is seen as principled - following high ethical standards - and as charismatic (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The leader "walks the talk" and exhibits behavioral consistency, resulting in follower trust and respect for the leader. At the same time, the leader is confident, assertive, and takes risks. Based on the desire to emulate the leader who they admire, these characteristics and behaviors shape

followers' own values and morality! When a leader reflects individualized consideration and idealized influence, followers know they are valuable and are motivated to act morally.

However, these two behavioral sets are insufficient on their own to motivate followers to act. So, how do transformational leaders motivate followers to act? *Inspirational motivation* behaviors, such as creating team spirit and optimism, enable the leader to communicate meaning or value in the task to the follower. The inspirationally motivating leader must create a sense of community and a common goal (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In addition to inspirational motivation, an effective transformational leader will *intellectually stimulate* their followers and allow for an environment in which followers can be creative and perform at the top of their ability. Intellectually stimulating behaviors include encouraging followers to question and challenge assumptions, reframe problems, and refrain from criticizing novel ideas (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Leadership during COVID-19

Right at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, attempting to reduce uncertainty, worried people began searching for answers to their questions about the disease using any available information sources. The power of today's technology and its impact on information accessibility differentiates the COVID-19 pandemic from any prior crises.

In order to build trust and alleviate uncertainty, timely and transparent communication became a leader's primary task. This task proved to be extremely difficult as much misinformation about COVID-19 was distributed online and created mass confusion (see Chapter # for more about COVID-19 and misinformation). Misinformation, information that is false or out-of-context but presented as fact, was widespread. Intentional misinformation, referred to as disinformation, caused serious harm. Due to a vacuum of factual information regarding the disease, people swarmed to nontraditional sources of information with the hope of

learning new information to protect themselves. Disinformation campaigns were intended to divide, place blame, and create chaos and confusion. This led to decreased safety guideline adherence and an environment that perpetuated selfish and destructive behaviors. Misinformation and disinformation became so problematic that the World Health Organization declared that we were fighting an infodemic alongside the COVID-19 pandemic.

This infodemic further intensified the need for leaders who could remain calm and focused, maintain integrity, admit when mistakes were made, and consistently provide relevant and credible information. In the following sections, we will first summarize research on leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic and then provide specific examples of leaders to demonstrate the implementation of transformational leadership behaviors and how they potentially affected the outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 Leadership Research: Relevant Findings

The nature of COVID-19, a deadly airborne disease, and its global scope required a level of collaboration and coordination among individual people, organizations, and countries and their governments not seen in over a century. Managing and finding a solution to the pandemic meant prioritization of common interest over self-interest, requiring a shift from self-enhancement to self-transcendence. Therefore, during COVID-19, it became a leader's most important responsibility to get people to understand that the pandemic can only be managed and solved if all people focus on the common interest. This requires an inspirational shift from self-interest toward collaborating and working together (see Chapter for more about self-interest and COVID-19).

The leaders who effectively managed the pandemic did exactly that. To determine how they did this, we reviewed several 2020 peer-reviewed leadership articles regarding the COVID-

19 pandemic. The majority of these articles were in medical, public health, health care, and management journals. Two primary themes emerged: (1) the need for transparent, frequent, and timely communication; and, (2) consistent leader behaviors that instill trust in their followers, foster collaboration, and build a sense of community. These two themes align with the core transformational leadership behaviors and the unique infodemic induced requirements.

Nearly all of the articles specifically address the value of communication during this crisis. Beilstein et al. (2020) describe "good" communication as empathetic, honest, transparent and understandable, able to build trust, and foster resilience. Effective communication should clearly differentiate between assumptions and facts. Information updates and timely redirection are also considered critical. These comments are echoed by Lagowska et al. (2020) who add that leaders should publicly defend their staff and show bounded optimism. The idea of tampered optimism is also mentioned by Crayne and Medeiros (2020) who differentiate between charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic leadership in response to COVID-19, using Angela Merkel (German Chancellor) as an example for a pragmatic leader. They quote Merkel as saying, "It is true that the latest numbers … as high as they are, very cautiously give a bit of hope. However, it is definitely too soon to recognize a definite trend..." Nicola et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of communication for planning and coordination purposes. They specifically remind leaders to be mindful of the importance to continually inform, update, and promote its population on the existence of known, proven, and recommended guidelines and interventions to protect the general public and speed recovery. Furthermore, they stress that "they must refrain from communicating any false or non-evidence-based scientific information that may lead to panic and negative health outcomes."

Collectively, these authors describe communication that reflects transformational leadership behaviors. For example, Beilstein et al's (2020) description of "good" communication aligns well with *individualized consideration* and *idealized influence*. Similarly, recommended tempered optimism, admission of mistakes, defending staff in public, and repeated emphasis on transparency are examples for *idealized influence*. *Intellectual stimulation* is represented by Nicola et al.'s (2020) assertion that communication needs to be science-based and accurate. These types of communications reduce uncertainty and increase trust in the leader, resulting in an increased willingness to follow the leader's recommendations.

Consideration of Longstaff and Yang's (2008) warning is appropriate here. They assert that all attempts to distribute information are in vain if people do not trust the message or the sender of the message. They suggest that building trust requires repeated and consistent engagement over time. Therefore, leaders who had a "trust deficit" at the start of the pandemic were at a disadvantage regarding communication effectiveness.

The second theme emerging from research on leadership during COVID-19 relates to leader behaviors that instill trust, foster collaboration and a sense of community in followers. Ajzenman et al. (2020) found strong support for the importance of the leader's modeling the expected social distancing behaviors. This "walking the talk" behavior had a strong effect on followers' social distancing preferences and is a perfect example of an *idealized influence behavior*. Providing another example for *idealized influence*, Bleich et al (2020) found that, as the pandemic started, leaders were clearly held to higher standards and were expected to shift their attention from simply implementing public policy to formulating policy. Several of the articles explicitly addressed *inspirational motivation*, emphasizing the leader's responsibility to

get people to collaborate and transcend their self-interest by showing empathy and engaging in self-sacrificing behavior (Haslam et al., 2021; Lagowska et al., 2020; Shingler-Nace, 2020).

Articles on gender differences in COVID-19 leadership showed that women and men differed in their approach. Coscieme et al. (2020) found that countries led by women fared generally better than countries led by men. The reasons mentioned for women's leadership success during the pandemic are that they listen to health experts, they act quickly if necessary, and they are generally more engaged in social equality and well-being issues. Similarly, Sergent and Stajkovic (2020) concluded that women did a better job, including the female U.S. governors, because they had more empathy and emphasized communal needs. Haslam et al. (2021) integrate those results into their identity leadership framework by focusing on shared identity and considering followers to be partners and thinking of power as power through others rather than power over others. In contrast, however, Windsor et al. (2020) argue that the effectiveness of female leadership is not about gender, but about culture, including cultural attitudes about women in power. Specifically, they found that having a woman leader in power did not make a country fare better during the pandemic unless the country also had the cultural values that support female leadership. Hence, it was those countries that respect feminine traits such as caring for and nurturing others that fared better.

COVID-19 Leadership Examples

In addition to presenting empirical evidence in support of the effectiveness of transformational leadership during COVID-19, much anecdotal evidence exists. For example, Adam Silver,[1] the commissioner of the National Basketball Association, took the bold and challenging decision to suspend the professional basketball league season on March 11th, 2020, the same day the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic. This action was

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[1] https://hbr.org/2020/04/what-good-leadership-looks-like-during-this-pandemic

early, decisive, and sent a message to Americans how serious the situation is and that safety considerations outweighed the profits of entertainment. By this action, he was *modeling* the importance of transcending self-interest, making money, for the benefit of securing safety. Rachael Bedard,[2] a physician who works as the senior director of geriatrics and complex-care services at the Rikers Island jail complex in New York City, used Twitter to garner attention to the prison systems' vulnerability to the deadliness of this disease (see Chapter # for more on the effects of the pandemic on prisons). Her actions heightened awareness of the dangers COVID-19 brought to the prison system, and likely helped bring the concept of depopulating the prison to the forefront of conversations across states as a possible response to reducing spread of the virus among the prison populations. This action exemplifies *individualized consideration* and demonstrates that a transformational leader is concerned with all followers and their needs.

Despite numerous examples of transformational leadership during this time of crisis, we decided to focus on a few leaders that enacted such notable change that lives were impacted for the better because of their transformative prowess. One such leader is Katie Porter, a first-term Democrat House Representative from the state of California. Her actions during COVID-19 led to various headlines such as, "How Rep. Katie Porter, at a coronavirus hearing, may have saved your life" in the *Arizona Republic*[3] to, "Katie Porter Grilling the CDC Chief Is the Leadership We Desperately Need" in *GQ.*[4] Katie Porter is a true exemplar of transformational leadership. On March 12, 2021, Katie Porter was provided a 5-minute opportunity to question the Director of the Center for Disease Control, Dr. Robert Redfield, during a House Oversight and Reform

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[2] https://fortune.com/worlds-greatest-leaders/2020/rachael-bedard/

[3] https://www.azcentral.com/story/opinion/op-ed/ej-montini/2020/03/12/how-rep-katie-porter-covid-19-hearing-may-have-saved-your-life/5039363002/

[4] https://www.gq.com/story/katie-porter-grilling-cdc-chief

Committee hearing. In short, her tenacity, empathy, and preparedness led to free COVID-19 testing for all Americans, regardless of whether citizens had insurance or not.

During this hearing, as well as many other hearings, using her white board and marker, Katie Porter reflects *intellectual stimulation*. She broke down complex issues, questioned assumptions, and clarified otherwise unclear concepts to challenge whoever she was facing during these hearings. Rep. Porter also reflects *individualized consideration*; she was well-versed in the role, authority, and responsibilities of the person she was speaking to inspire consequential actions. During her questioning of Dr. Redfield, she came prepared – she had found an obscure federal statute that provides the CDC director the authority to immediately waive the cost of COVID-19 testing for everyone.

Rep. Porter also enacted inspirational motivation and idealized influence. *Inspirational motivation* was demonstrated through her appeals to both reason and empathy. Through reason, Rep. Porter explained to Dr. Redfield his ability and power to save lives through the statute (42 CFR 71.30). Through empathy, Rep. Porter highlighted the fear many Americans harbor regarding prohibitive costs of testing and obtaining treatment such as with her statement to Dr. Redfield, "fear of these costs are going to keep people from being tested, from getting the care they need and from keeping their communities safe." Lastly, Rep. Porter demonstrated *idealized influence* through her tenacity to fight for what is right. When Dr. Redfield's answer was evasive, suggesting his team was looking into the issue, she would reclaim her time and insisted on a response. Dr. Redfield eventually responded, "I think you're an excellent questioner, so my answer is yes." Rep. Porter followed this answer with the following response, speaking to Dr. Redfield and the American people, "Excellent! Everybody in America hear that -- you are eligible to go get tested for coronavirus and have that covered, regardless of insurance."

Mike DeWine, the Republican Governor of Ohio, also exemplified transformational leadership. Many leaders in the Republican Party rallied against science, safety, and health protocols during this pandemic. Governor DeWine had to face extraordinary challenges to balance support of his Party and the lives and well-being of his constituents. In fact, DeWine issued a statement called, "Open Letter to Ohioans," urging citizens to put aside their political divisions and rise to higher ground to fight COVID-19. Mike DeWine was the first Governor in the country to close schools, based on the advice of scientific leaders, and to declare a state of emergency, which enabled resources for the state to react and respond to the virus more quickly.

Mike DeWine engaged in *intellectual stimulation*, through his actions as one of the first state leaders to start live daily coronavirus updates to keep citizens informed. During these updates, DeWine reflected a sense of calmness and control, announcing new policies while explaining the decisions he and his team made. Governor DeWine would even occasionally use humor as an outreach of human connection and relatability during an incredibly difficult and serious time for all. In a time of misinformation, DeWine even tweeted daily about false rumors regarding COVID-19 to clarify the truths and evidence.

Mike DeWine exhibited *individualized consideration* by acknowledging that a "one size fits all" model would not work in the state of Ohio. He delegated and requested local leaders, including county commissioners, mayors, local hospital leaders, health commissioners, business and religious leaders to come together, calling them "COVID defense teams," to develop strategies appropriate for their communities to reduce community spread. In addition to the "Open Letter to Ohioans" initiative, Governor DeWine demonstrated *inspirational motivation* by regularly reaching out to leaders in areas of high-spread such as in Cuyahoga County, offering to

help in any way that was needed. He stated,[5] "We'll bring people together. And we'll just kind of talk and we'll exchange ideas. I'll be there. My team will be there to listen to your concerns, listen to where you need us to help you."

Lastly, Governor DeWine exhibited *idealized influence* by serving as a role model and adhering to ethical principles and standards. He regularly wore his mask during press briefings except when he was speaking. When many conservative states were ending their stay-at-home orders, DeWine provided the science-based argument about why these orders were necessary and had to continue. He closely listened to the recommendations of Dr. Amy Acton, who served as the Director of the Department of Health throughout the early months of the pandemic. Due to conservative opposition to public health safety guidelines, Dr. Acton became the target of the growing animosity of these restrictions. Some of these people began protesting outside of Dr. Acton's home and threatening her and her family's lives. DeWine did not tolerate these attacks, stating, "I'm the elected official who ran for office. I'm the one who makes policy decisions. Members of my Cabinet work hard, but I set the policy." Regarding the threats, he stated, "To bother the family of Dr. Acton, that's not fair game. It's not right. It's not necessary. The buck stops here. I'm the responsible person."

In addition to these examples of exceptional leadership in the US, there are many leaders who exhibited transformational leadership across the world. The Prime Minister of New Zealand (Jacinda Ardern) and Chancellor of Germany(Angela Merkel) have both earned much respect from their citizens due to their competence and transparency. In the middle of March 2020, Ardern provided an 8-minute televised speech, implementing a four-level COVID-19 alert system. This four-level system was familiar to citizens as it was modeled on the fire risk system

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[5] https://www.cleveland.com/open/2020/10/gov-mike-dewines-new-plan-to-encourage-local-leaders-to-make-community-plans-to-cut-coronavirus-spread.html

in New Zealand. This allowed quick clarity regarding the guidelines of how the government would respond and what was expected of citizens. At the time of her speech, there were 52 confirmed cases, and the country was placed at the second alert level. When the confirmed infection rate nearly quadrupled in four days, the alert level was raised to the highest level of four, and the country went into lockdown. Infection rates dropped quickly, even the *Washington Post*[6] headlined an article, "New Zealand isn't just Flattening the Curve. It's Squashing it."

In March 2020, Merkel gave a live and unscheduled address. In her speech, she expressed that she trusted Germans to listen to the science and clarified that everyone had a responsibility to follow the recommendations, reflecting *intellectual stimulation*. By referencing World War II, Merkel reminded the German people that Germany was able to recover from the devastating consequences of the war by working together and persevering. She provided further *inspirational motivation* when she stated that "I firmly believe that we will pass this test if all citizens genuinely see this as their task." Sentiments like these allowed the country to enter lockdown as a community in solidarity. Lastly, Merkel demonstrated *idealized influence* through transparency, sharing what she and the scientific community did and did not know about the virus throughout the pandemic. This level-headed, honest approach provided the German people with a sense of calmness and togetherness during a frightening time.

Lessons Learned: Preventing Leadership Failures

One "lesson learned" is that leaders who effectively addressed the pandemic did so by engaging in transformational leadership behaviors. This implies that it may be time to reflect on the potential or current leaders in our organizations, communities, and societies. Would they be

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[6] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/new-zealand-isnt-just-flattening-the-curve-its-squashing-it/2020/04/07/6cab3a4a-7822-11ea-a311-adb1344719a9_story.html

the people who could bring their followers together during a crisis? Are they transformational leaders?

A second "lesson learned" focuses on understanding that leadership during a crisis is about reducing fear and uncertainty through gaining followers' trust. Trust is to believe despite uncertainty (Misztal, 2001) and is defined as the willingness to be vulnerable (Mayer et al., 1995). Therefore, everything a leader says or does has to be evaluated in terms of its potential impact on people's trust in the leader. The specifics learned here are that the four sets of transformational leadership behaviors (individualized consideration, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation) facilitate trust and must be practiced and cultivated.

A third "lesson learned" involves one of the idealized influence behaviors, modeling the desired behavior. Based on the COVID-19 leadership research and the examples provided in this essay, it is very clear that it was extremely powerful and important that leaders consistently engaged in the mitigation behaviors they condoned. The lesson learned is to not underestimate the importance of behavioral integrity. Leaders who make promises or statements that are not followed by actions, or leaders who do not "walk the talk," cause permanent damage to trust.

A fourth "lesson learned" is that the leader's primary task is to reduce uncertainty through providing accurate, frequent, and reliable information. Pre-empting mis- and disinformation, the leader must stay ahead as the primary source for transparent, relevant, up-to-date information (see Chapter # for more on 'pre-bunking' misinformation).

A final "lesson learned" is that the leader must remember that societal problems can only be solved through collective action. This is quite a challenge for leaders, because as they work to inspire their followers to a shared goal, they must address their followers' motivations to act

egotistically and based on self-interest out of fear and uncertainty during times of crises. The leader must be the first to demonstrate self-sacrificing behavior in favor for the community and inspire others to also transcend their self-interests for the good of all.

Future Research: Leadership Preparedness

Many strengths and weaknesses in leadership were uncovered through the challenges associated with the pandemic. We encourage scholars to conduct research that supports the development of leaders who are prepared to lead effectively during a crisis such as a pandemic. In the following, we present some general research questions that may shape future research.

How to Recognize People with Transformational Leadership Potential

Although the research on transformational leadership is extensive (Judge & Piccolo, 2004), much of it focuses on the impact of such leadership rather than its antecedents. Charisma, extraversion, and emotional intelligence have been among the few characteristics studied and shown to be related to transformational leadership or transformational leadership emergence (Barling et al., 2000; Judge et al., 2002).

Transformational leaders are identified by their behaviors. Bass and Avolio (2000) developed a leadership assessment tool that includes thirty-six behavioral statements, the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). This is the standard instrument used in transformational leadership research. The challenge is that currently there is no proven way to early on identify individuals who may have the potential to become a transformational leader. This is an obstacle to ensuring that the "right person is in the right place at the right time." Any research that could provide insights into transformational leadership predictors would be extremely helpful!

What are Best Practices for the Development of Transformational Leadership Behavior?

Transformational leaders are effective because they engage in behaviors that gain followers' trust. These behaviors can be developed. But how to cultivate behaviors related to, for example, idealized influence? Some interesting research on novel ways for leadership development has gained momentum, including programs based on mindfulness and identity (Ibarra, et al., 2010; Kuechler & Stedham, 2018; Stedham & Skaar, 2019).

What is Unique About Transformational Leadership Communication?

Leadership and communication are intimately intertwined, yet interdisciplinary research across these two areas is scarce. We encourage collaboration between scholars to explore how transformational leaders can ensure efficient and effective utilization of the communication technology available today. For example, Mifarti and Statovci (2018) explain that transformational leadership communication has undergone rapid changes with social media but fail to elaborate what the specific implications of these changes are.

Conclusion

The leadership challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic offered an important opportunity to reveal key factors of effective leadership that have potential to affect the outcome of the pandemic (e.g., number of deaths). The uncertainty-induced fear people experienced resulted in unbridled self-interest and called for leaders who would be able to inspire people to come together and focus on the well-being of all by engaging in the recommended mitigation processes. Such transformational leaders were able to gain followers' trust by acting with integrity and transparency, engaging in self-sacrificing behavior, "walking the talk," and communicating accurately and frequently. Future research should focus on how the world can be better prepared for the next crisis by having such transformational leaders in place and ready to act.

For Further Reading

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