

What makes a leader great?

“Success is peace of mind which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best you are capable of becoming.”

– John Wooden, Basketball Coach

Leadership has been a very popular topic since 1950. There is an abundance of material available on leadership that can bring added value to people’s lives and advance their careers forward. Organizations seek to find information how to recognize and develop strong leaders to bring them economic prosperity and satisfied followers. Many important questions have emerged over the time: Who is the leader? What makes leaders effective? Are leaders born or made?

Several definitions of leadership have been developed over time. We could say that there are as many definitions of leadership as there are people. Historically, there were many leadership theories such as Great Man Theory, Trait Theory, Behavioral theory, Situational Theory and etc. However, most of the attention has been paid to Transactional and Transformational Leadership theory. Burns (1978) first introduced the concepts of transactional and transforming leadership (his title for transformational leadership) in political settings in his book "Leadership" Transactional leader motivates his followers by exchanging their services for direct rewards (and punishments) while transformational leadership is a mutual relationship between leader and followers in order to achieve higher morality and motivation. Burns assumed that transactional and transformational leadership are strictly separated concepts with no common attributes. Bass developed this theory and came to conclusion that most effective leaders are combination of both. He disagreed with Burns that transformational leadership has only positive outcomes and claimed it can have negative outcomes as well. Bass’ Transformational Leadership Theory has been one of the most influential leadership theories, first used in business environment. Research has demonstrated similar positive outcomes in other areas. Therefore, transformational leadership was later applied into military, education and sport.

According to Bass, transformational leaders encourage their followers to perform beyond expectations and inspire them to achieve extraordinary results. Transformational leaders have a clear vision that every follower can identify with. Vision serves as a driving force towards success.

In the last 30 years significant progress has been made in defining leader’s effectiveness. If we focus on leadership in sport, research has documented positive influence of transformational coaches’ behavior on athletes’ performance, team cohesion and well-being. Based on vision and support and challenge model, great coaches create a vision, support their athlete to achieve the goal while challenging them to reach that.

Transformational leadership theory focuses on the leader-follower relationship, determining motivation and emotions as a fundamental aspect. Charismatic leadership goes hand in hand with transformational leadership as both of these leadership theories emphasize emotions and values. Charismatic leaders behave in admirable ways that cause followers to identify with the leader. They exhibit confidence while also appealing to followers’ emotions. Several authors mentioned there is an inconsistency to what extent charismatic and transformational leadership overlap or they are two separated concepts. Bass suggested that it is necessary for a leader to be charismatic to appear as a transformational leader.

Nevertheless, there is ambiguity in the use of terms so that makes it difficult to clearly distinguish transformational and charismatic leadership.

Transformational leaders can adapt their behavior and treat everyone in a different unique way so it leads to followers' satisfaction. Followers trust, admire and show their loyalty to their leader by doing more than was expected.

Although transformational leadership has been proven as one of the most effective leadership styles, there is a fragment of leaders that can show characteristics of narcissistic behavior. They appear to be transformational leaders but over the time their charisma and influence fades. The theory behind that is called Chocolate Cake Theory. First bites are very rich but later on the sweetness can be too much to deal with for some people.

We have all heard stories about inspirational leaders and coaches such as Steve Jobs or a basketball coach John Wooden. We cannot clearly tell if leaders are born or made. Leadership is a very complex process, it is a combination of transactional, transformational, charismatic and many other leadership styles. Every person, leader or follower, is different. Great leaders are those who can adapt their behavior to their surrounding environments and they are very passionate about their job. We all share the same knowledge, so no matter what abilities and characteristics were given to us when we were born, we can work hard to become the best leaders as possible.