TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION: CONCEPT ANALYSIS[1]

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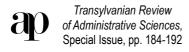
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Abstract

Leadership has been one of the most studied concepts in the last 50 years in Western countries but has become a buzz word in social sciences in the former communist countries only recently. Transformational leadership theory is of high interest for social researchers especially because of the argument of achieving performance beyond the expectations that it promises. The present paper is focused on offering a short theoretical framing of transformational leadership and discusses from a theoretical standpoint the possibility of a transformational change of the Romanian educational system starting from the transformational leadership paradigm.

Keywords: transformational leadership, transactional leadership, education, educational reform, Romania.

Introduction

Leadership is probably one of the most (scientifically) studied and least understood concepts of the last 50 years. Stogdill (1974) had the same opinion at the beginning of the 70's when he stated that 'there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept' while Bennis admits of the difficulty of understanding the concept (1959, p. 259): 'of all the hazy and confounding areas in social psychology, leadership theory undoubtedly contends for the top nomination. And, ironically, probably more has been written and less known about leadership than about any other topic in the behavioral sciences'. Still, social scientist seem fascinated by the concept, one of the reasons being probably that it is directly linked to some kind of 'performance' or 'results' – in the sense that leaders have a great influence over getting results. This is probably the element that has drawn the most attention long before the scientific study of the phenomenon. In his writings around 2300 B.C., Ptahhotep mentioned the three essential qualities that a Pharaoh has to have – *authoritative utterness in thy mouth, perception is in thy heart and thy tongue is the shrine of justice* (Lichtheim, 1973). Confucius also wrote about the moral qualities that leaders have to promote and encourage. Closer to Europe, Homer portrayed leaders as being respected because of a set of special qualities like integrity, integrity of reasoning, wisdom, courage. Plato in his famous work *The Republic* thinks that philosophers are the best suited leaders because of their 'true understanding' of the world around them. Going forward, Machiavelli can be seen as one of the founding fathers of modern political thought and his work *The Prince* can be seen as the first modern leadership 'manual'. Besides introducing a certain level of reality (or even cynicism) Machaivelli also acknowledges the numerous challenges and great responsibilities leaders usually have to face in order to maintain their position. Starting from the twentieth century the phenomenon of leadership has been studied scientifically but after more than 100 years of study there is still large debate even regarding its actual meaning. We can reasonably say that we are in front of a social phenomenon that has followed mankind right from the beginning but still raises challenges regarding its true understanding.

In this paper I will focus on three essential aspects of leadership: meaning – I will try to offer a simple but usable meaning of the concept; theoretical frame – I will focus on a popular theory, transformational leadership; context - I will place this approach (transformational leadership) in the context of education. The purpose is to see whether transformational leadership can be a viable approach for a positive change in the educational system.

2. Leadership defined

Leadership has been defined in numerous ways based on the interest of scientists in particular elements of the concept, thus creating approaches focused on traits, behavior, process of influence, organizational context, power mechanisms or role attribution. Garry Yukl (has managed to select a number of definitions that basically cover all the

elements above (Yukl, 2010, p. 21):

- Leadership is 'the behavior of an individual…directing the activities of a group toward a shared goal' (Hemphill and Coons, 1957 *apud* Yukl, 2010, p. 21).
- Leadership is 'the influential increment over and above mechanical compliance with the routine directives of the organization' (Katz and Kahn, 1978 *apud* Yukl, 2010, p. 21).
- 'Leadership is exercised when persons mobilize institutional, political, psychological, and other resources so as to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers' (Burns, 1978 *apud* Yukl, 2010, p. 21).
- 'Leadership is realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeed in attempting to frame and define the reality of others' (Smircich and Morgan, 1982 *apud* Yukl, 2010, p. 21).
- Leadership is 'the process of influencing the activities of an organized group toward goal achievement' (Rauch and Behling, 1984 *apud* Yukl, 2010, p. 21).
- 'Leadership is about articulating visions, embodying values, and creating the environment within which things can be accomplished' (Richards and Engle, 1986 *apud* Yukl, 2010, p. 21).
- 'Leadership is a process of giving purpose (meaningful direction) to collective effort, and causing willing effort to be expended to achieve purpose' (Jacobs and Jaques, 1990 *apud* Yukl, 2010, p. 21).
- Leadership 'is the ability to step outside the culture...to start evolutionary change processes that are more adaptive' (Schein, 1992 *apud* Yukl, 2010, p. 21).
- 'Leadership is the process of making sense of what people are doing together so that people will understand and be committed' (Drath and Palus, 1994 *apud* Yukl, 2010, p. 21).
- Leadership is 'the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organization' (House *et al.*, 1999 *apud* Yukl, 2010, p. 21).

If we analyze the above mentioned definitions we can argue the following:

1. *Leadership is a process of intentional influence*. The fact that it is intentional is relevant because successful leaders are those that are capable of influencing their followers towards achieving certain objectives and goals. Unintentional influence happens frequently (even in leader follower relations) but leadership is concerned with the process of influence with purpose.
2. *Leadership means having followers*. It is no use talking about leaders without followers. We could say that we recognize a leader by the number of followers that he or she is able to gather. Thus a leader without followers is purely 'a lone nut'.
3. *Leadership is about inspiring people.* Things like sense making, framing and defining reality, creating a vision, enable others to have a meaningful contribution are essential to leadership, as they differentiate it from management. It is more than

a formal relationship based on the possibility of sanction or reward. Leaders become role models for their followers.

4. *Leadership is about achieving results.* No matter how inspirational and charismatic a leader may be without 'success', the leaders capacity to inspire and influence is doomed to fade. Leadership makes sense if it can achieve the expected results or even more. The appeal of the concept lies also in the capacity of true leaders to achieve more than what is expected of them. We could say that this is probably the most important criteria that differentiate leaders from 'non-leaders'.

In light of all the above, I would propose the following definition of leadership: Leadership refers to a non-routine process of intentional influence, from an individual (the leader) towards a group of individuals, aimed at accomplishing certain predefined objectives relevant to both the group and the leader (Mora and Țiclău, 2012, p. 76).

3. Transformational leadership

We established that leaders are exceptional individuals, capable of inspiring others to do great things. In this light, we could say that another essential aspect with which leaders are concerned is change. As I have stated in another paper (Mora and Țiclău, 2012, p. 77) 'leaders are agents of change, be they at organizational level or at societal level; they represent the catalysts of social movements; they can fulfill this role by inspiring those around them, setting an example and creating a vision of the future that is both attractive and credible'. This is one of the assumptions of transformational leadership theory – that leaders are capable of creating meaningful change for the world around them.

Barnard M. Bass is considered one of the developers of the transformational leadership theory although his work was based on James Burns book on political leadership (1978) entitled *Leadership*. Burns (1978) defined a transforming leader as one who: '(1) raises the followers level of consciousness about the importance and value of designated outcomes and ways of reaching them; (2) gets the followers to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the team; (3) raises the followers level of need on Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, from lower level concerns for safety and security to higher level needs for achievement and self-actualization' (Bass, 2008, p. 619). In other words transformational leaders are capable to motivate their followers beyond self-interest and using more than extrinsic motivators. The transformational leader is put forward by contrast to the transactional leader which bases his or hers influence on the nature of a mutual-beneficial exchange between leader follower. Although different perspectives, Burns agrees that transformational and transactional leadership are not opposed but rather different sides of the same coin.

Bass developed the theory by empirically demonstrating that transformational and transactional leadership were positively correlated (Bass, 1985). Bass described a transactional leader as (Bass, 1985, p. 11) a person that: (1) recognizes what their associates want to get from their work, and tries to see that they get it, if their performance so

warrants (2) exchanges rewards and promises of reward for appropriate levels of effort and (3) responds to the needs and desires of associates as long as they are getting the job done. In other words a transactional leader understands very well his or her followers (and their needs), is capable of offering certain rewards or benefits in exchange for effort towards the organizational objectives. A transformational leader on the other hand is capable of delivering performance beyond expectations (Bass, 1985, p. 16) by (1) raising followers level of awareness of the importance of achieving valued outcomes and the strategies for reaching them, (2) encouraging followers to transcend their self-interest for the sake of the team, organization, or a larger cause and (3) developing associates' needs to higher levels in such areas as achievement, autonomy, and affiliation, which can be both work related or outside work related. Bass explains this performance beyond expectations through the fact that followers are motivated by the sacrifices the leader is making to achieve the mission and at the same time personally identify with the mission set forth by the leader (personal identification process) (Avolio and Bass, 2004).

Through this approach, Bass accepts and incorporates Maslow's idea regarding the hierarchy of needs and also the prepotency of self-actualization (Miner, 2005, p. 363). Although, as Miner (2005) shows, Bass's transformational model incorporates some of the elements of House's (1977) charismatic leadership, he does develop a more comprehensive model that goes beyond the 'observable and rational' aspects of charisma (on which House has focused) and includes emotional elements also (Miner, 2005).

The full range leadership model developed by Avolio and Bass (2004) includes three types of leadership behaviors which are part of a continuum on the one side having a passive leader and on the other the transformational one, with the transactional leader somewhere in the middle. According to the authors the characteristics of each of these leadership styles or types are as follows (Avollio and Bass, 2004).

Transformational leadership comprises 4 major elements:

1. *Idealized influence* – refers to the level of respect trust and admiration that leaders get from their followers. This includes idealized attributes (qualities that the followers identify in the leader as exceptional and that induce respect and pride) and idealized behaviors (specific behaviors that are highly regarded and valued by the followers). This is in major part what other authors called charisma.

2. *Inspirational motivation* – refers to the capacity of the leader to inspire those around him and to look at the future in an optimistic way. This raises both enthusiasm about what people are working on and confidence regarding the future achievements.

3. *Intellectual stimulation* – refers to the capability of the leaders to arouse followers to think outside the box, to challenge their assumptions and to come up with new ideas or solutions for the problems they face. In other words, transformational leaders encourage creative thinking and nurture a open minded environment.

4. *Individual consideration* – is seen when leaders understand the differences (in needs) between followers and adapt their behavior accordingly. Transformational

leaders are excellent coaches or mentors and constantly try to encourage personal development of their followers.

Transactional leadership consists of two major elements:
1. *Contingent reward* – refers to the way in which leaders are defining and clarifying what they expect from their followers and performance rewarding. This also implies sanctioning those that do not comply or aren't able to achieve the standards set out by the leader. Thus contingent reward basically means rewarding performance and sanctioning lack of it.
2. *Active management by exception* – means the leader is constantly monitoring follower activity and intervenes when established standards or protocols are not respected. Basically the leader is constantly searching for possible mistakes, errors and failures in an attempt to correct them before they get bigger.

Passive Avoidant leadership consists of two major elements:
1. *Passive management by exception* – is similar in goal with active MBE but differs in the point when the leader is intervening. In its passive form leaders intervene only when problems become critical and unavoidable. It is mostly reactive and leaders who manifest such a behavior are usually strong believers in the 'if it is not broken do not fix it' proverb.
2. *Laissez-faire* – is basically referring to a leader that has minimal or no interference in the group's activity. This is basically a non-leadership behavior because it declines all the major functions that leaders normally have.

Synthesizing the three approaches we can easily see that the passive avoidant leadership is almost the opposite of the transformational leadership. On the one side we have avoidance of involvement, commitment, taking responsibility while on the other we have total commitment, full responsibility and complete involvement in the group's activities. Keep in mind that transformational and transactional leadership complete each other (are not opposed).

4. Transformational leadership for a transformational change in education?

Leadership in educational settings is more or less in the same 'research state' as in social sciences in general – it is a crowded terrain both in quantity and quality; there is no universal approach to successful leadership in education. And, similar to other fields, the topic remains a hot one because of its relation to results – researchers try to link certain leadership types or models with better educational outcomes. It is not the purpose of this paper to analyze and discuss the validity of such models. Instead, I will try to put forward some questions regarding the possibility of adopting a transformational leadership paradigm and creating a transformational change in the Romanian educational system.

Romania has undertaken serious changes in the last 23 years (from a state administration perspective) coming from a communist dictatorship until 1989 to a full democracy and EU member state in 2007. Although Romania from 2013 is clearly

another country compared to what it was 23 years ago, it still faces an uphill battle to catch its other Eastern European countries in most important issues (economy, education, social services, and public administration). In this continually changing context, education has always been a major topic of debate for any party that has held power in the last 23 years, with the most ambitious promise being a common National Pact for Education signed by all political leaders in 2008 which aimed at reshaping the entire educational system in order to better face the challenges of the 21st century.

Unfortunately this has been understood differently by almost each political party, the constant changing especially regarding the legal framework as changes accord on the political arena proving that the guiding principle in public policy (including education) can be framed by the following axiom: 'what the others did was wrong but we are here to make it right'. What we are left with is the facts, pointed out by a Presidential Commission Report, and they are not encouraging (Romanian Presidential Commission, 2007):

- Romania is ranked last among EU member states at PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS rankings.
- Romania ranks amongst the last countries in EU on a knowledge based economy – Lisbon indicators.
- The Romanian educational system is highly inequitable, only 24% of children living in rural areas reaching to high school level, educational results for rural students at literature and mathematics being between 2 and 6 times lower compared to their urban counterparts.
- Only 18% of teachers in schools have had ITC training for use of modern technology while almost 75% percent of students until 8th grade declare that their teachers usually dictate the learning materials in class.
- In higher education, no Romanian University is in any international rankings amongst the first 500.
- The ratio of scientific articles produced (taking the total population as reference) is 11 times lower compared to OECD average and 4 times lower compared to Hungary, 2 times lower compared to Bulgaria.
- Promotion rate on Baccalaureate exam has been below 50% in the last 2 years since the introduction of video cameras for monitoring.

In conclusion, the report argues that the current educational system is ineffective, irrelevant, inequitable and of poor quality. It is clear that a change of paradigm is needed in dealing with these issues. This is where the transformational leadership paradigm can be a possible solution, or at least an alternative for the current approach. By this I understand a new type of approach in changing the current educational system but in a different manner than what it has been done since now.

Although some of the issues were kept in mind when elaborating and adopting the new Law of Education (Law no.1/2011) as mentioned earlier a change in political power at the beginning of 2012 has meant again several changes to this law.

A series of solutions proposed by Gabriel Bădescu (2010) can be linked to typical transformational leadership behaviors:

1. *Higher performance standards that are comparable to international standards* – one major issue with current performance levels is that we seem to 'perform' well when national standards are applied and very poor when more clear and strict standards are in place. A good example is the promotion rate for the final high school exam – Baccalaureate – which has halved in the last two years after the introduction of video cameras for surveillance. Going to research performance, most ISI articles are written in national journals that have very low impact factor and are hardly read. A change in this area would mean a change of paradigm - what we understand through performance at each educational level? Another important aspect is the ethics involved in evaluating performance. Both these are essential elements in a transformational leadership paradigm. It would translate into a new vision on what a performing educational system should look like.

2. *A better and more realistic definition of quality in education.* Although Romania ranks mostly last in almost all international rankings on quality of education, the general perception is that Romania's educational system is performing well – in a national study in 2009 the majority of respondents felt that the education children get in schools is solid. It's hard to imagine a change of a system that is generally perceived as doing well. A transformational approach should first be honest about the present level of quality in education and based on that propose new, long term solutions to tackle this issue.*A vision for the future.* The current paradigm in which we pride ourselves with a handful of Olympics, the classic success stories, although real has negative effects on the long term. Firstly because it backs up the idea that nothing is wrong and secondly because it is actually not true. If you take a filed like mathematics you will see we have no Romanian winners for the most prestigious prizes in the field – Fields Medal, Abel Prize and Wolf Prize (Bădescu, 2010). If we apply this formula to almost any other educational field we get more or less similar results. The question is whether we have the courage to face the facts and propose a vision for the future that is both ambitious but also realistic. Leadership plays a key part in such an attempt.

5. Conclusions

The present paper has explored the concept of transformational leadership and tried to link some specific attributes of this concept to the current Romanian educational context. Although this has been mostly a theoretical approach and even a philosophical one regarding the link between the transformational leadership model and the current educational system in Romania the main purpose was to raise a series of questions that can lead to more pragmatic endeavors in the future.

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