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**PORTRAIT OF A TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADER: THE LEGACY OF DR.  
MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.**

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# **PORTRAIT OF A TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADER: THE LEGACY OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.**

## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This paper explores the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in relation to four characteristics of transformational leadership

**Methodology:** It draws upon excerpts from archival sources of personal correspondence and statements by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stored at the King Center, Atlanta, Georgia.

**Findings:** The research finds that Dr. King personified the four characteristics of transformational leadership. It also illustrates King's leadership legacy through modern works on leadership.

**Practical Implications:** The analysis presented assists our understanding of the qualities of and the way we think about, transformational leaders. It emphasises the importance of building follower confidence; challenging taken-for-granted assumptions; developing follower needs and upholding high moral values.

**Key words:** Martin Luther King, leadership, transformation, change

# **PORTRAIT OF A TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADER: THE LEGACY OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

“Mother Dear” a young 11 year old Martin Luther King Jr., turned to his mother one day and said, while listening to a man speak in church, “someday I’m going to have me some big words like that.”

Few individuals have made such a significant contribution to the advancement of modern society as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Born into a family of Baptist ministers in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1929, Martin Luther King also became a Baptist minister and rose to national prominence through the organisation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and as leader of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States from the mid- 1950s until his death by assassination in 1968. Awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1964, his leadership was fundamental to that movement's success in ending the legal segregation of African Americans in the southern states, and other parts, of the United States. Inspired by Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence, King promoted non-violent tactics for social change such as the massive March on Washington (1963), although he never witnessed his dream of a United States in which all Americans would have racial and economic justice. King’s vision of racial justice and love, provided hope and opportunity to African Americans beset by daily hardship and injustice and the impetus to initiate far-reaching social and political change. His ability to transform the struggle for racial equality into a vision with understandable, concrete and actionable goals sustained and empowered the civil

rights movement. Furthermore his strong convictions and moral courage in challenging the status quo were matched by a value system of rejecting material trappings and conventional symbols of success.

As the founder of a movement of non-violent resistance that challenged the status quo and transformed the lives of Americans in the 1960s, King is widely acknowledged as a leader who initiated social and political change through a vision of racial justice and love. The purpose of this paper is to revisit the remarkable example of transformational leadership that King provided and deconstruct the constituent components of his leadership to arrive at a better understanding of the qualities and characteristics, and effectiveness, of transformational leadership. While King has been widely lauded as a transformational leader, few, if any studies have examined whether King possessed all four characteristics of transformational leadership. From the literature, four characteristics of transformational leadership emerge, namely: idealised influence; inspirational motivation; intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration (Burns 1978; Zaleznik 1977; Posner and Kouzes 1988; Bass 1990; Seltzer et al. 1989; Keegan and Den Hartog 2004). We undertake our analysis in reference to archival sources of personal correspondence of, and statements written by, Martin Luther King. The excerpts utilised in this paper were collected by the first author during a visit in early 2004 to the private archives of the King Center for Non-Violent Change in Atlanta, Georgia, USA.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the literature on transformational leadership. This is followed by an examination of the identified four characteristics of transformational leadership and the extent to which King exemplified these qualities as indicated by reference to excerpts from personal writings of the civil rights leader. The excerpts drawn primarily from personal correspondence also reveal something of

the private side of King which co-existed alongside his high profile public persona. The paper concludes with a discussion of how a revisiting and deconstruction of the transformative change initiated by King aids our understanding the characteristics of, and the way we think about, transformational leadership.

## **TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The concept of transformational leadership has altered our notions and understanding of leadership and its effects on individuals and organisations. While in the past, leadership models and research focused upon leader characteristics and behaviours (Keegan and Den Hartog 2004), such approaches have been displaced by a more subtle dynamic view of social change where leaders are not expected to know every answer and bear full responsibility for problem-solving (Heifetz 2004). Such views modify our perceptions of modern leaders from authoritarian decision-makers to instrumental facilitators. Indeed, research into transformational leadership shows that this leadership style converts followers into leaders and results in the motivational and moral elevation of both followers and leaders (Burns 1978; Pawar 2003).

The appeal of transformational leadership lies in the ability of the leader to inspire followers to transcend their own interests and work towards the benefit of all (Nadler and Tushman 1990). For this reason, Bass (1990) suggests that transformational leadership is closer to the prototype of leadership that people have in mind when they describe their ideal leader. He identifies four characteristics of the transformational leader: *Inspirational Motivation*, where leaders enthuse followers, build confidence and empower them to face difficult challenges; *Intellectual Stimulation*, which encourages the challenging of norms and assumptions as well as divergent thinking and development of innovative strategies; *Individual*

*Consideration*, which identifies and caters for the developmental needs of followers through coaching, mentoring and growth opportunities; *Idealised Influence*, which encompasses the ethical and moral standing of leaders and engenders both trust and loyalty between leaders and followers.

The successful management of change requires transformational leaders to display appropriate behaviours and accomplish certain tasks. Tichy and Devanna (1990) argue that transformational leaders bring about change through a three-stage process: recognising the need for change; creating a new vision and institutionalising change. For his part, Nye (2006) argues that transformation requires leaders to perform several tasks: (1) correctly intuit the direction and pace of events (2) devise appropriate and feasible strategies (3) Win the support of diverse audiences at home and abroad (4) find the right mix of hard and soft power to implement the policies. In relation to the final task, hard power relates to mobilisation of resources and assets in forcefully trying to bring about change, while soft power involves the creation of alliances, mergers and coalitions to achieve a valued goal.

Transformational change is regarded as a frame-breaking process which results in radical changes to the organisation/society (Zhu et al. 2005). Two types of organisational change are apparent from the literature (1) Developmental and motivational changes in followers (2) Institutional and organisational change (Pawar 2003). Through employing developmental processes, transformational leaders empower followers helping them become more autonomous and competent individuals who reach self-actualisation and higher levels of morality in the pursuit of valued outcomes (Popper and Mayseless 2002; Burns 1978). Likewise, Schriesheim et al. (2006) argue that transformational leadership is associated with higher levels of subordinate motivation, effort, satisfaction and performance.

In terms of institutional and organisational change, Eisenbach et al. (1999) argue that transformational leaders can bring about large scale organisational transformation through creating an organisational system or organisational culture that is neither too rigid nor too chaotic. Tierney (1999) found that the quality of work relations that employees experience through transformational leadership can create a positive psychological climate for organisational change. However, as Pawar (2003) points out, there has been little systematic research on the relationship between organisational level outcomes and transformational leadership.

Figure 1 examines the inter-relationship between the characteristics of transformational leaders, the tasks performed and the resulting outcomes.

The rest of the paper focuses primarily on the four characteristics of transformational leaders and how Dr. Martin Luther King Jr embodied these characteristics. The legacy of Dr. King is examined through quotations from modern business leaders and recent research articles.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF MARTIN LUTHER KING AS A TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADER**

### **Inspirational Motivation**

The transformational leader requires more than a vision in order to enact change; they must have the skills to translate abstract and intangible concepts of a broad vision and ideas into understandable and concrete goals for action with which followers can associate and identify (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Conger & Kanungo, 1998). Javidan and Waldman (2003) argue that a transformational leader's vision needs to project a set of values and beliefs that resonate with followers. Owen (1999) also emphasises the importance of what he describes as the "visioning process",



regarding it as one of the most important functions of leadership. Moreover, he views leadership as the evocation and alignment of spirit and suggests that the purpose of vision is to pose the question that creates the space into which spirit flows and becomes powerful. Sosik (2000) argues that effective leadership requires making goals and objectives meaningful for followers, leading to the overall formulation and articulation of the vision, which must relate to the socio-cultural environment and the experiences of both leader and followers. He identifies self-concept, social and political activism, altruism, individual values and religion and spirituality as sources of personal meaning and providing the building blocks in allowing leaders construct the vision. For his part, Dr. King articulated a vision based on personal meaning that he was able to translate to his followers. Indeed, his relationship to his community lies at the heart of King's visions as noted by his referring to his "beloved community" based on a vision of love and racial and human justice without boundaries of race, class or nation (Huggins, 1995). The following extract communicates King's vision for America and his attempts to motivate followers not alone through political activism but also through cultural events,

We have tried to promote as many projects as possible to bring Negroes and whites together. As you know, cultural events have a way of bringing people together on a level of brotherhood far beyond many other areas...As you know, it is my firm conviction that brotherhood will come to America precisely at that point that we allow the question of color to pass away as a determinant of one's character. Last week, I was down in Jamaica to deliver the commencement address at the University of the West Indies and I was so deeply moved by the motto

of that great island: “Out of many people, one people.” This must be our goal in America and this is what your presence in Atlanta would help us to realise.”

*Letter sent on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1965 from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to*

*Sammy Davis Jr.*

In order to inspire followers, transformational leaders need to frame their message in meaningful ways. Tan and Wee (2002) maintain that framing is an important aspect of how transformational leaders’ uses language to create meaning that translates into an ability to motivate people to work together for change. They argue that frame alignment links an individual and leader interpretative orientations in such a way that the follower’s interests, values and beliefs and the leader’s activities, goals and ideology become congruent and complementary. Moreover, Bass (1985) argues that effective leaders identify and articulate serious threats faced by their followers, while raising their level of conscious awareness concerning potential threats. King not only bravely faced threats to his own safety and well-being, but also was successful in diffusing the dangers posed by adversaries, as noted in the following extract,

One anonymous phone caller, whose voice I have come to recognize, has been calling me for months to insult and threaten me and then slam down the receiver. Recently, he stayed on the phone for half an hour, giving me the opportunity to discuss the whole underlying problem with him. At the end of the call, he said “Reverend King, I have

enjoyed talking with you, and I am beginning to think that you may be right”

*Article written by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for Liberation Magazine,*

*December 1956*

The importance of motivating and inspiring followers to greater things is recognised by modern business leaders and in academic writing. Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, describes the importance of leadership communication skills in arguing that, “leaders need an overarching message, something big, but understandable...every idea you present must be something you could get across easily at a party with strangers. If only aficionados of your industry can understand what you’re saying, you’ve blown it” (Welch, cited in Kakabadse & Kakabadse 1999: 200). Likewise, Marx and Frost (1998) recognise the importance of connecting with followers on an inspirational level. Using the example of Dr. King, they write:

Many management educators who have used video as a teaching tool have been impressed with its impact in “connecting” students and managers in classroom and training settings to the essence of management concepts. In the first vignette, the meaning of leadership could be more fully explored after students had seen and heard the enormous throng gathered in Washington, DC on that hot summer day in 1963. The ministerial cadence and passion in the voice of Dr King could arouse the emotions in a way that helped the students to be present in that moment. Video can convey meaning that is difficult to match with traditional lecture and reading assignments. (p. 243)

## **Intellectual Stimulation**

The transformational leadership characteristic of intellectual stimulation provides depth and solidity to change efforts within organisations and society. Bass and Avolio (1994) argue that intellectual stimulation encourages within followers greater searching for new approaches to old problems, a questioning taken for granted assumptions and the development of problem-solving skills. Research indicates that intellectual stimulation leads to increased independence and autonomy amongst followers, encouraging them to come up with their own approaches to solutions and problems (Graham 1987; Coad and Berry 1998; McClelland 1975).

Intellectual stimulation also involves transformational leaders forming a connection between the overall vision and their follower's own personal challenges (Javidan and Waldman 2003). By doing this, leaders create a substantial pool of intellectual and emotional energy and a high level of intrinsic motivation. The following extract reveals King's attempt to stimulate his followers as to the overall vision, but also to educate them regarding the risks and challenges ahead:

Freedom is never given to any body, for the oppressor has you in domination because he plans to keep you there and he never voluntarily gives it up. That is where the strong resistance comes. Privileged classes never give up their privileges without strong resistance. It would be fortunate if the people in power had sense enough to go on and give up, but they don't do it like that. It is not done voluntarily. It is done through the pressure that comes about from people who are oppressed.

*Sermon entitled "The Birth of a New Nation" delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, April 1957.*

For all his intellectual capabilities, Carson (1998) argues that King was a leader full of self-doubts, keenly aware of his limitations and human weakness. He suggests that King was at times reluctant to take on the responsibilities suddenly and unexpectedly thrust upon him. Yet, far from perceiving this as a weakness, it is arguable that King's self-awareness actually formed an important strategic filter through which the long-term consequences of decisions could be assessed. Kouzes and Posner (2002: 393) support this view of King's character and argue that all great leaders have wrestled with their souls. They maintain that such personal searching is essential to the development of leaders and that all leaders must resolve dissonant internal chords.

Transformational leaders must possess strong intellectual capabilities. Grisham (2006) argues that the challenge for leaders is to engage their followers and provide an interactive intellectual opportunity. He argues that followers must understand and internalise the conceptual idea behind the leader's vision and message. Goleman et al. (2002) emphasise the importance of intellectual willpower in the following terms:

All leaders need enough intellect to grasp the specifics of the tasks and challenges at hand. Of course, leaders gifted in the decisive clarity that analytical and conceptual thinking allow certainly add value. We see intellect and clear thinking largely as the characteristics that get someone in the leadership door. Without those fundamental abilities,

no entry is allowed. However, intellect alone will not make a leader; leaders execute a vision by motivating, guiding, inspiring, listening, persuading and most crucially, through creating resonance (p. 26).

### **Individualised Consideration**

The development of close relationships between transformational leaders and followers is critical to bringing about successful change. By demonstrating trust through understanding the struggles, needs and capabilities of followers, transformational leaders show that they care and value their followers (Gillespie and Mann 2004; Conger et al. 2000; Jung and Avolio 2000). Zucker (1986) maintains that social similarity between leader and follower can form the basis for a relationship based upon trust, while Shamir et al. (1993) maintains that transformational leaders often point to similarities in background and experience in order to demonstrate belonging to the same collective and to portray themselves as a representative character or role model to that community. For their part, Howell and Avolio (1995) maintain that many transformational and charismatic leaders have a value system that distains the material trappings of success in favour of a higher moral plain that prevents them from straying down the wrong path. Much of King's ability to realise change stemmed from his day-to-day access and involvement in community and church institutions. His ability to work towards his macro picture for national social change within the context of meeting the micro needs of his followers was critical to developing a mass civil rights movement. This is reflected in the speeches and statements he made:

I still have faith in the South. I still have faith in Montgomery, Alabama. I do not speak as any superficial optimist at this point. I'm

not sitting back in some ivory tower with a rosey-eyed vision. I speak as one who has stood in the thick of the struggle. I speak as one who has subjected his family to dangerous living. I speak as one who has to live every day under the threat of death. But in the midst of that, I come to you not with a message of despair, but a message of hope. I believe in the future, and I believe in the South and I have faith in it.

*Speech entitled "Some things we must do", delivered in Montgomery, Alabama on December 5<sup>th</sup> 1957*

I have come back home. I have come back, not only because this is home, not only because my family is here, not only because you are my friends whom I love. I have come back to rejoin the ranks of you who are working ceaselessly for the realization of the ideal of freedom and justice for all men. I am back to continue my work which was temporarily interrupted...the experience I had in New York gave me time to think. I believe that I have sunk deeper the roots of my conviction that non-violent resistance is the true path for overcoming injustice and for stamping out evil.

*Statement made by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on 24<sup>th</sup> October 1958 upon his return to Montgomery, Alabama, following a visit to New York which involved him being stabbed*

Understanding people and generating trust have become critical factors to achieving successful change. Bartlett and Groshal (1995) argue that trust is essential for change as change itself necessitates risk-taking and will not be successful without risk-taking by individuals. Essentially, the basis of trust lies in consistency between a

person's words and actions. Kouzes and Posner (1992: 483) argue that individuals are willing to take huge risks for their leaders if the individual practices what he or she preaches. Warren Bennis and Joan Goldsmith (1997) express the importance of generating trust in the following terms:

If you want to lead people, the first thing to do is to get them to buy into shared objectives. Then you have to learn how to generate and sustain trust. People want a sense that their leader is on their side, that he or she will be constant. They want to know that in the heat of battle, their leader will support them, defend them and come through with what they need to win. If you are a leader who is trusted, you care about the lives of the people with whom you work, you empathize with them and you care about the implications of your actions and the results of your decisions (p. 6).

### **Idealised Influence**

The identification by followers with the characteristics of the transformational leader is well recognised within the literature. The leader that serves as a role model to his followers generally imbues the followers with higher abilities to achieve the leader's vision than leaders who do not provide modelling behaviour for their people (Bass et al. 1987; House 1977). They are concerned with being respected, trusted and admired as well as showing their persistence and determination to their target audience (Charbonneau 2004; Bass 1997). Transformational leaders uphold the highest moral and ethical values and bring about change in follower's values through the merit and relevance of their ideas and commitment (Odom and Green 2003;



Howell and Avolio 1993). Indeed, House (cited in Bass 1988) maintains that leaders engage in impression management to bolster their image of competence, thereby increasing subordinate compliance of their group to strongly held values, ideals and aspirations. In support, Willner (1984: 9) maintains that it is not what the leader is, but what people see the leader as, that counts in generating the leader-follower relationship

As a role model, research by Lilley and Platt (1995) describe individuals' perceptions of King as falling within four broad categories: black leader, religious leader, non-violent leader, and a leader for democracy. The authors conclude that there is considerable perceived variation in the meanings King's leadership had for movement adherents. Even though he had appeal to a range of sub-cultures in American society, he was nonetheless a role model for each of these groups, as indicated by the two following telegrams sent to him by political leaders of the day,

I am pleased on the occasion of the sixth annual convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to take note of the excellent work being done by your organization in translating into reality the rights which all Americans possess. Yours is a difficult and at times dangerous undertaking, but the example you have set by your personal conduct and your dynamic leadership have gained for you and your organization the respect and admiration of the great majority of the people of the United States...I extend to you my wish that the Southern Christian Leadership conference will move steadily toward achieving true equality of opportunity for all without regard to race, color or creed.

*Telegram sent on September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1962 from President John F.*

*Kennedy to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*

My wife and I want to join with your countless friends in this country and around the world in expressing our very warmest congratulations to you on the award of the Noble Peace Prize. This honor symbolizes the extraordinary regard in which you are held by men of goodwill everywhere. It recognizes the fact that we as a nation are facing up to the responsibilities imposed upon us by our religious heritage and our national traditions. You lead the way in bringing this about and every American should be thankful that we have had and will continue to have your wise leadership in the cause of racial justice.

*Telegram sent on October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1964 from Senator Edward M.*

*Kennedy to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr*

As role models, transformational leaders show superior levels of commitment and dedication towards bringing about change. By displaying personal commitment and encouraging follower commitment, transformational leaders encourage a greater sense of ownership, empowerment and engagement by followers (Van Eron 1995; Kent et al. 2001). For his part, Kotter (1995) maintains that transformational leaders need to become change champions charged with the responsibility of assembling and motivating a group to lead the change effort. King's involvement with local groups on a daily basis as well as the high personal risks and costs he incurred in becoming the leading figure in the civil rights movement testify to his level of dedication. The sheer extent of the self-sacrifice that King made to the movement is evidenced in the following letter,

As you know, the problems of the south continue to mount, and as they continue to mount, the demands on my time grow greater and greater. The job of participating actively in the movement in the south, and going to communities outside of the south to raise funds to keep our organization going takes unbelievable tolls on my time and physical strength. I can see no let-up in the coming year. In fact, I can see nothing but deeper and deeper involvement. Because of the Albany movement, I have been thrown hopelessly behind in almost all of my responsibilities. Therefore, I have already had to make commitments for October and November to catch up on some of the fundraising that trailed behind as a result of my incarceration. This will keep me out of the city almost every week for the next two or three months.

*Letter sent on September 6<sup>th</sup>, 1962 from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.  
to Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, President of Morehouse College, Atlanta*

The importance of providing an example, empowering individuals and showing dedication to the cause is increasingly emphasised in the leadership literature. In many instances, the act of providing for followers and leading by example and self-sacrifice is described as servant leadership (Russell 2001; Joseph and Winston 2005). Nanus (1992) describes the importance of leading by example in the following terms:

The leader is a team builder who empowers individuals in the organization and passionately “lives the vision” thereby serving as a

mentor and example for those whose efforts are necessary to make the vision a reality. An outstanding example was Martin Luther King, who lived the vision (“I have a dream”) and provided a model for everyone in the civil rights movement (p. 14).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

That Dr. Martin Luther King was a great leader is without question. The more salient issue revolves around the qualities that King possessed that made him a transformational leader. Such a characterization ascribes a set of personal traits to King: that he enthused followers, built confidence, and empowered them to face difficult challenges; that he encouraged divergent thinking and innovative strategies and solutions; that he catered for the developmental needs of his followers and that he had a high moral standing and engendered trust and loyalty amongst followers.

As a transformational leader, King not only inspired legions of followers with his powerful rhetoric, but challenged the status quo and proposed a vision of a better, more inclusive, tolerant future for all citizens. By framing his vision of a “beloved community” in the social values and experiences of the people, King provided both hope and meaning to his followers. The importance of inspiring followers and carefully framing messages is clearly understood by modern business leaders. They understand that the message must inspire followers and the delivery of the message must be inspirational. Marx and Frost (1998) recognise the importance of choosing an appropriate media in delivering a message. Consequently, leaders need to be able to deliver big ideas, simply and with passion.

Transformational leaders need to demonstrate a capacity to recognise the need for change and devise innovative strategies to enable that change to occur. Through

questioning norms and assumptions and encouraging divergent thinking, transformational leaders stimulate increased autonomy and independence amongst followers. Through his speeches, King educated his followers towards the overall vision, but also the challenges and struggles facing them. His self-doubts and internal conflicts served to solidify his decision-making and add weight to the importance of his message.

The relationships transformational leaders develop with their followers are critical to successfully bringing about change. By understanding the struggles, needs and capabilities of followers, transformational leaders can develop strategies for progress. To effectively bring about change, leaders need to be representative and there should be social proximity between leaders and followers. For his part, King's closeness to local communities and institutions provided him with a unique insight into the experiences of local people which enabled him to develop a macro picture for national societal change.

The transformational leader often acts as a role model to followers through espousing high moral and ethical values and displaying personal commitment and self-sacrifice to achieving stated goals. By becoming champions for change, transformational leaders can show followers the way forward and make them believe that change is both possible and worthwhile. That King served as a role model to many is clearly acknowledged and he demonstrated an extraordinary high level of personal commitment and self-sacrifice towards achieving civil rights for all.

In conclusion, the example of the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by transformational leaders in implementing change in society. Further research is needed to examine in more depth the relationships between characteristics, tasks and outcomes as depicted in the

research model. In particular, evidence is needed showing how transformational leaders grow and develop from a particular social and economic context. One conclusion is however inescapable, namely that transformational leaders retain enormous power to realize substantial ground-breaking change for the benefit of individuals, organisations and society.

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**Figure 1: Model of Transformational Leadership Process**

