Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

A Transformational, Authentic, and Servant Leader

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What makes a person a true leader? Is it the ability to attain personal success? Is it an aptitude for driving organizational excellence? Or is it a talent for inspiring greatness in others? Definitions of leadership are as varied as the men and women who seek to embody them, but whether one defines true leadership as authentic leadership, servant leadership, or transformational leadership, the one thing that characteristic that all true leaders, of whatever stripe, share is the capacity to be a change agent: to turn “good” into “great” and “better” into “best.” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is an example of a true historical leader, one who exemplifies the best and brightest qualities of the authentic leader, servant leader, and transformational leader.

 In 1985, Bernard M. Bass articulated the traditional model of leadership styles, identifying three primary leadership types: laissez-faire leadership, transactional leadership, and transformational leadership. Laissez-faire leadership, as the name suggests, is the least active of the leadership approaches. A laissez-faire leader is decidedly hands-off, typically to the detriment of the organization and its employees. Most often, the laissez-faire imposes a system of rules and regulations on employees and then steps back from the day-to-day operations of the group, allowing the chips to fall where they may. Employees and organizations rise and fall of their own volition under laissez-faire leadership, a style often marked by apathy, a style that can scarcely be defined as leadership at all.

 On Bass’s leadership continuum, transactional leadership occupies a middle ground in regard to the agency and involvement demonstrated by the transactional leader. In transactional leadership, relationships between leaders and subordinates are based upon systems of exchange: each party gives something in order to get something in return. Often, however, transactional leadership is more punitive than reward-based: an employee transgresses in some way and is punished in exchange. However, some transactional leadership practices are based in positive reinforcement, such as in the granting of bonuses in exchange for superlative employee performance. Nevertheless, transactional leadership is far more reactive than proactive, and its focus is less on the organization as a cohesive whole and more on the disparate individuals within the organization.

 This, however, is not the case with transformational leadership, Bass’s most productive, involved, and effective leadership style. In transformational leadership, both the organization and every individual within it is elevated, transformed, and brought to new levels of success through empowered and empowering leadership. Transformational leadership differs from laissez-faire leadership in that it is engaged rather than apathetic and it differs from transaction leadership in that it is proactive rather than reactive. The efficacy of transformational leadership derives from the leader’s ability to cultivate a shared vision of success among all members of the organization, while also helping each individual within the organization to hone his/her sense of agency, autonomy, and investment in the organization. As Dabke (2016) has suggested, good transformational leaders are those with high emotional intelligence (EQ), which enables them to inspire in colleagues and subordinates a sense of their own value intrinsically and within the organization as a whole. As employees cultivate a sense of their own unique role in the organization’s success, motivation, buy-in, and innovation often flourish. The transformational leader, then, uses his/her high EQ to inspire employees to be and do more than they ever thought possible—and the organization and all involved in it reap the benefits of that success.

 Of course, transformational leadership is not the only highly effective leadership style: authentic leadership, servant leadership, and leader-member exchange (LMX) are all potent leadership styles, and while they diverge in some aspects, they also share many common characteristics, the most important of which is the elevation of something above the leader’s own personal self-interest. In authentic leadership, that thing is likely some ideal or grand vision which drives the leader’s actions and shapes his/her sense of self. The leader’s actions are shaped not by externally-imposed norms and requirements, but by internalized values: the leader does what s/he does because s/he believes in the actions and the vision so earnestly. This often inspires colleagues and subordinates to invest in those same values and that shared vision, uniting individuals in a common cause and a cohesive system of belief, both of which are instrumental to any organization’s success.

 Servant leadership and leader-member exchange are similar in that the leaders refuses to position him or herself in a superior position within the organization. The servant leaders, as the name implies, seeks fundamentally to serve. His/her focus is on elevating colleagues and subordinates, often to an even higher status than the servant leader enjoys. The goal is the betterment of others, which in turn leads to the betterment of the group and the organization as a whole. This brings servant leaders, colleagues, and subordinates closer to their shared vision of individual and organizational success. In this way, servant leadership aligns with the leader-member exchange style because hierarchies are dismantled in this style and the leader operates as colleague, peer, and partner; this is a leadership of equals.

 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. exemplifies the best attributes of transformational leadership, servant leadership, authentic leadership, and LMX. As the founder and head of the Southern Leadership Conference, Dr. King transformed colleagues and subordinates through a shared vision of a more just America. Through his transformational leadership, resistors became revolutionaries, and the oppressed became the liberators. Godwin, Houghton, Neck, and Mohan (2011) analyze Dr. King’s illustrious *I Have a Dream Speech* as representative of his transformational leadership style. They argue that the speech is “an outstanding illustration of the use of context, urgency, and resonance to create a transformational vision in order to energize and inspire followers to accomplish objectives and achieve goals” (30).

 Of course, Dr. King is not only a transformational leader: he is also an authentic leader and a servant leader, one who practices leader-member exchange as he builds trusting and productive relationships with peers and subordinates in order to accomplish collective goals, to drive the organization toward the dream its members share. In their exploration of courageous leadership styles, Sen, Kabak, & Yanginlar (2013) cite Dr. King as an exemplar of moral courage, defining courage as “the foundation of physical and nonphysical values which increase capacity of humans for reaching their maximum limits to do things under risky and difficult conditions” (94). This is precisely what defines Dr. King not only as a transformational and courage leader, but as an authentic leader and a servant leader. He genuinely believed in the religious and social values he espoused, and these shaped all attributes of his life, from his identity to his actions to his leadership style, making him an authentic leader. Further, because these values derived from an intrinsic sense of humility and service, a sense of the Christian doctrine of love and sacrifice, Dr. King exemplifies servant leadership as well. He devoted his life, and ultimately sacrificed it, for the service of others and the achievement of the dream they shared.

 The qualities of a strong leader have been debated for centuries. Leadership styles are diverse and ever-changing, but the most effective leaders are those who are able to transform individual and organizations through a shared vision of success. Strong leaders are authentic in their beliefs, ideals, and motivations. Strong leaders serve something beyond themselves—a vision, a community, an organization—and they also typically position themselves as colleagues, as leader-members, rather than as superiors. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. embodied all the traits of an effective leader, incorporating an array of leadership styles in order to remake the nation.

References

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