

Transformational Leadership Theory: Why Military Leaders are More Charismatic and Transformational?

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Abstract

Military is an arm of government authorised to use lethal force and weapons, to support the Interests of the state and some or all of its citizens. Navy, Air force and Army are the branches of military which altogether form a huge group of people with diversified professionals and spending a good portion of the country's GDP. Military leaders, therefore, are very important assets of the military. In order for military commanders to be good leaders, they are supposed to follow a strict path of training and practical experiments for quite long time while in services. The need for the military leaders to be more transformational has been publicly discoursed in recent years; the aim is to allow more transparency in balancing the public spending without affecting the military efficiency and readiness. Are charismatic and transformation traits contradicting? Why military always produces good leaders and which leadership style is best fit into military situation were the main exploration in this paper. The results showed that, charismatic and transformational are not contradicting but rather overlapping and in fact, charismatic is one of the important traits of the transformational leadership style. Progressive, sophisticated and expensive trainings together with indispensable powers given to the military commanders are the main factors which make them good leaders compared to other leaders at the same level. Finally, the paper concluded that, the choice of the leadership style in the military is the discretion of the leaders taking into account nature of tasks, people, resources available and time needed to accomplish the task.

Keyword: Military, Transformational Leadership Theory, Charismatic Leadership Style, Transactional Leadership Style, Inspiration Motivation, Intellectual Simulation, Individual Consideration and Idealised Influence

Introduction

Leadership in military is like stocks in trade (Wong, 2003); it has to be always just right to keep the military moving and making a different (U.S. Army, 1999a, p. 7 as cited by Wong, 2003). The military is an arm of government, authorised to use lethal force, and weapons, to support the Interests of the state and some or all of its citizens. By its very nature, the military is a huge body of organisation. It consists of diversified levels of organisations, role, culture, and people. In terms of the size, the number of personnel and budget in the military is absolutely massive; for that reason, its controls and management remain a big challenge and need the best leaders (commanders) to keep it moving efficiently. In the U.S. military, for example, as in 2013, the active personnel were around 1.38 million with 0.9 million in a reserves list and it had an annually budget of about US\$ 620 million i.e. 3.8% of the U.S. GDP (Lubin, 2014). The Chinese army on the other hand, which is the world second largest military power after the U.S., has about 2.3 million active personnel while spending about US\$ 200 million (2% GDP) as an annually military budget (Chipman, 2014).

When thinking of such a big undertaking which employs more than a million staff, it is obvious that leadership skill is everything that military has to invest into. The leaders in the uniforms, i.e. commanders or Generals, are carefully selected, trained, and progressively promoted to take the posts in the military at all levels all the way down the line of the chain of the command. These expensive and time consuming trainings are specifically designed to make the military leaders physically and mentally fit;

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and ready enough to make a right decision at a right time which in contrary, could be a source of a catastrophe. The four star-Generals for example, once making a wrong decision, can not only destroy their own country but can also cause irreversible damages to other nations as well. The junior leaders, on the other hand, can make a difference between life and death of so many people by their decisions (Wong, 2003).

Behind the scene, the military organisation is in fragments which need gifted individuals to keep an eye constantly by lubricating and greasing the moving pieces in order to keep the whole military, as we see from outside, working as one unit. To keep the military moving, there are two proven leadership styles that the Generals can adapt to keep the military working: 1) Transactional and 2) Transformational leadership styles. Nevertheless, the author would like to stretch them further into three for clarity purposes by adding (3) Charismatic leadership style, though it is believed to be part and parcel of the transformational leadership style.

- a) The transactional leadership is a style whereby the commanders use rewards and punishments to make the soldiers (military personnel) comply with the orders (Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013).
- b) The charismatic leadership is a style whereby the commanders inspire and motivate the soldiers by using their “gifted talents”; in return, the soldiers offer an extraordinary trust to the commanders which eventually lead to the voluntary compliance to “the commanders’ mission” without considering a reward or fearing a punishment (Riggiois, 2012).
- c) The transformational leadership which is a bit extension of the charismatic leadership style, is a style whereby the commanders inspire, motivate, influence and simulate the soldiers to the extremely high level to the extent of building an extraordinary trust and believe between the two towards “the common goals”. This, in this case, should be a country’s missions and interests (Warilow, 2012).

It’s worthy to note at this juncture that, these theories haven’t been created specifically for the military purposes, but rather they are generic leadership styles which the militaries have adapted and customised to fit in their needs. The key factors that differentiate the charismatic leaders from transformational leaders are perhaps lying on how the two perceived the mission. More often than

not, the charismatic leaders are motivated by their own agendas; in contrary, the transformational leaders, pay much attention on the common goals by keeping their own interests behind the national’s interests, in case of the military.

From that end, it is the aim of this paper therefore, to shed some lights on what constitutes the contradictions between the transformation and charismatic leadership styles and how the military produces great leaders. Finally, the paper also tried to discourse about the choice of the leadership style which is best fit for the military.

What is the Transformational Leadership Theory?

The transformational leadership theory is the most current leadership theory that attracts many discussions for and against it (Yukl, 1999). As one of the merits of the theory, it is applicable virtually, on every sector including in the military (Bradley & Charbonneau, 2004). The theory is all about empowering followers to develop themselves and improving their performance beyond expectation (Taly et al., 2002). It has also been argued by William et al. (1995, p. 331) that “transformational leaders have charismatic leadership behaviour whereby they attempt to inspire their followers in return to faith and respect. They also have a clear sense of mission that they attempt to convey to their followers. It’s further evidenced that, such leaders also tend to have superior debating skills, technical expertise and persuasive skills”.

The transformational leadership theory’s platform is made up of the “4I’s” (Bass & Riggio, 2006, pp. 5-7; see also Warilow, 2012):

- a) Intellectual Simulation: The leader encourages the followers to explore new ways of doing things and new opportunities to learn. It is a degree to which the leader challenges assumption, stimulates, and encourages creativity in the followers by providing a framework for the followers to see how they connect to the leader, the organisation, each other, and to the goal. Therefore they can overcome any obstacle in the way of the mission.
- b) Individualised Consideration: Transformational leader encourages and gives support to individual followers to achieve their targets. It is a degree to which the leader attends and acts as a mentor or a

coach, and gives respect to and appreciation of the individual contribution to the team. The leader fulfills and enhances each individual team member's need for self-fulfillment and self-worth and in doing so, inspires followers to further achievements and growth.

- c) Inspiration Motivation: Transformational leaders have clear vision which they want to pass to their followers in order to help achieve target.
- d) Idealised Influence: It's also known as charismatic. It is the degree to which the leader behaves in admirable ways, displays convictions and takes stands that cause followers to identify with the leaders who has a clear set of values and acts as a role model for the followers.

The transformational leaders, whether in the military or elsewhere, are supposed to hold on a mirror to their followers so that the followers can see themselves who they are. Eventually, with the help of their leaders, they can change to the better toward accomplishing the missions ahead of them. In the militaries, the transformational leadership theory is fairly new; nevertheless, the application of the theory has been within the military for decades. Idealised influence and inspiration motivation for examples; are the traits which had been used by many Generals in the Second World War whereby, the military leaders had one-to-one sessions to their followers specifically designed to motivate them; although at that time it was under the name of military counseling, surely they are fully falling within the Bass's transformational theory parameters (Bradley & Charbonneau, 2004, pp. 9-10).

Despite its popularity, the transformational leadership theory is full of criticisms as well. From the opposing side of view, they criticised the theory that it is more of charismatic than transformational, and that the 4I's are basically not enough to support the theory properly (Marturano, 2004). Furthermore, they believed that it is absolute difficulty to train others to be transformational leaders. Nevertheless, the supporting team of the theory agreed and supported the idea that, the "4I's" are important transformational leadership theory attributes (Bruce & Robert, 2004), and that the theory is based on one-to-one individual and recognises the value and needs of followers (John *et al.*, 2002).

Can a Leader be Transformational without being Charismatic?

The critics of transformational and charismatic leadership lie on the ambiguity in differentiating between the two. With absolutely no doubt, the transformational leader is a "man-made"; it is rather not clear if the charismatic leader is "born or made" (Riggiois, 2012). Charismatic is derived from Greek word "*charisma*" which can be translated "*as gifted or favour*"; rare personal qualities whereby a leader is able to influence, inspire and motivate the followers beyond expectations. Only regret is, unless the charismatic leader is absolutely ethical, the chance of putting his agenda ahead of the organisation or country's vision is too high. Think about Hitler as an iconic charismatic leader who motivated and inspired the Germans to the extent of calling him a "father" pre-much like their "God" and kept them on fighting through the German empire's name while putting much of his personal agenda in (Doyle & Smith, 2009).

A transformational leader, on the other hand, is regarded as an "icon" to an organisation or a country where he did what was thought to be impossible (Mandell & Pherwani, 2003). The transformational leader is therefore, expected to upraise the followers to a higher level of achievement by his/her inspiration and in return, the followers will strive to the organisation's needs in expense of their own (Tucker & Russell, 2004). As opposed to charismatic, the transformational leader is always striving towards an organisation/country's needs by putting his own agenda behind. Bill Gates of Microsoft, Steve Jobs of Apple, Michael Dell of Dell Computer Corporation, Jeff Bezos of Amazon.com, Lou Gerstner of IBM, and Jack Welch of GE are considered to be the best examples of the world transformational leaders (Kreindy, 2000).

Many scholars have found a significant correlation of the charismatic and the transformational traits. Yukl, for example, stressed out that, '*charisma*' is a necessary component of the transformational leadership. He noted further, that a leader can be charismatic without being transformational (Yukl, 1999). Nevertheless, it is not clear whether a leader can be transformational without being a charismatic. The confusion is even mounting further when realised that both theories insist on follower's empowerment and trust but differ on the inner value and intention of the leader something that cannot be seen easily (Yukl, 1999).

Conger & Kanungo (1988, p.6) in their study on charismatic leadership, concluded that, “the development of charismatic leadership is assumed to be a transformational leadership process and transformational leaders are assumed to be charismatic as well....” From this end, it is even further clouded to get a clear distinction between the two as they are both playing on the same platform of leadership behaviours such as inspiration, motivation, and individualised consideration.

It was further argued by Conger & Kanungo (1988) that at the apex level of charismatic leadership, a leader is seen as demonstrating or addressing the individual needs of the followers (treating followers on a one-to-one basis) and tends to encourage followers to look at the old problems in new ways through intellectual stimulation. But it is rather confusing that, as at the apex charismatic leaders become transformational leaders as they use built-in behaviours of transformational.

At this juncture, it is evident and convincing that, charismatic is a very important part of the transformational leadership theory and the two are overlapping but not contradicting (Conger & Kanungo, 1994). The charismatic leadership includes among other things, a sensitivity to followers’ feelings which also becomes necessary in a transformational leadership environment in order to prevent resentment (Conger & Kanungo, 1994). It is worthy to agree with Conger & Kanungo (1994, pp. 441-442) who said that, “what distinguishes these two theories has little to do with any fundamental differences in the leader’s behaviours or tactics but rather with the perspectives from which the leadership phenomenon is viewed.”

Why Military Commanders are More Charismatic and Transformational?

Based on the above findings, the military leaders have to be more of charismatic and transformational due to the nature of the work they are into. More often than not, the Generals are getting some grey hairs fairly earlier than their counterparts in the business positions, even though they hold the fairly same responsibility. This is so obvious due to the level of responsibilities and commitments they are taking on daily basis of their works. The soldiers, for example, most of the times are prepared to trade their own interests and even their lives in extremes cases for the nation’s interests. If that is the case then, a high level

of inspiration and motivation is needed to elevate them to that level. For that reason, only transformational leaders who have high level of charismatic attributes can be able to spearhead that task.

Transactional Leadership Style

The alternative of transformational leadership style in the military is a transactional leadership. As it has been discussed previously, the transactional leadership which is also known as a traditional military leadership’s style, uses the existing organisational structures to build energy of the followers in return for rewards or punishments (Avalio & Garder, 2004). It is designed to promote (motivate) the follower’s compliance through reward and punishment (Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013, p. 358). The transactional motivations range from pay and rewards to punishment. The questions is how can you push a soldier too hard for a payment, reward or fear of a punishment while he might even not live enough to enjoy it following his fatal accident and in worst scenarios a death (Kolditz, 2012).

Factors leading to the Military Leaders to be Great

According to Colonel Kolditz, there are three main factors that influence the military to produce the great leaders; trainings, organisational powers, and self-sacrifice. Charam (2007) suggested six personal traits that can influence the military leader to be a very good leader; ambition, drive and tenacity, self-confidence, psychological openness, realism, and appetite for learning.

Training

The military leaders are subject to progressive and sequential series of careful planned training, educational and experimental events which are far more time consuming and expensive than similar training in other organisations. The time and costs needed to train a newly employed soldier (recruit) to a four Star-General are extremely high compared to the training given to a government staff up to the level of being an executive officer. As previously noted, the trainings are progressive, stage by stage involving practical experiments some in the real situation at wars or in very hard situations. Doing

all this, a trainee becomes mentally strong and physically fit to face any challenges down the line.

For instance, one Chechnya commander during Chechnya-Russian war between 1994 to 1996 commented that “The Russians are very good at fighting but when their commander died, all their strategies and plan ceased with immediate effects but Americans will keep on fighting even if they lose their leader, ... even corporal can lead others with no significant changes” (Colonel Homrig, 2001). The example is justifying that, through training, a chain of command can be applied all the way through to the very junior leaders.

Organisational Powers

Junior officers in the army, for example, are given extremely high powers in terms of the organisational structure proportionately to the task given. As they progress, the power is also increased gradually; something that makes them self-confident and emotionally motivated to discharge their duties perfectly. Two types of powers are needed in order for the military officer to be a true transformational leader; 1) from his/her personal characters that followers are emotionally happy to follow without any arguments and 2) is from organisational structure that allows indispensable authority and power to lead (Russell, 2004).

The massive powers given to junior leaders in particular, can sometime be abused and become disastrous. Talented leaders with special traits leave the followers with no way of accessing; consequently the follower's destinies are inescapably tied to the ambitions of their dominant leaders (Clark, 2009). Another concern arises when transformational leader uses powers, authorities, and trust given by the military to the followers in an unethical way benefiting himself/herself in the expense of subordinates in military (Parry & Proctor, 2002).

Self-Sacrifice

Most importantly, the military leaders and their followers are build-up on “a concept of duty, service and self-sacrifice” and this is supported by the oath which they take when they are commissioned, that they would always place the common interests and goals before their own. This is perhaps the most important trait that the military leaders have to openly demonstrate. High personal

qualities manifested by best code of conduct, can lead to a leader to be a superhero (Prior, 2011).

Which Leadership Style is Best Fit in the Military Situations?

It is absolutely unfair to advocate one leadership style over the others in the military. The commander through his series of trainings and experiences is expected to use any leadership style taking into account the situation on the horizon. For the simplicity, let us assume charismatic is part and parcel of the transformational leadership style; therefore, the case would be as follows.

Transactional Leadership

Under the transactional leadership style, the main motivators that commanders can use are rewards and punishments. The transactional leadership, therefore, is based on leaders and follower's self-interest; therefore, the style is suitable only for short-term and non-repetitive situations. A transactional leader is thus influenced under “this for that” scenario; therefore, if the followers did according to the commanders' order, they will be rewarded; if not, they will have to face some punishments.

One of the disadvantages of the transactional leadership style is that it does not build a good relationship between the commanders and the soldiers. For that reason, the trust is always not there and soldiers cannot do whatsoever, anything beyond what they are expected to do. The relationship between the commanders and the soldiers is of a short time and ends when the task is done.

Transformational Leadership

In the transformational leadership style, on the other hand, the relationship between the commanders and the followers is of a very long time and sustainable. The commanders take quite a long time to build trust and good relation with the followers. In return, the followers are inspired to the extent of trading their own personal interests for the national interest in extreme cases, sacrificing their own lives. In this case, rewards or punishments are not needed; the two are working as a team towards the mission. For that reason, for long lasting tasks, in particular military tactics and maneuverability, the transformational leadership style is the only option.

Which is the Best?

The choice of a leadership style depends on the situation, leader's ability to influence the followers, and a time span to deliver. For an emergence task, for example, which is normally not repetitive, it is suitable to use the transactional leadership style. Once done every one falls out, and that's it. Nevertheless, technically, tasks such as combating and tactical maneuvering require a precise and careful leadership style that can make the soldiers to feel that they are a part of the task and their contribution is mostly needed. For that reason, the transformational leadership is obviously good in this situation.

Conclusion

A transformational leader, who has some charismatic traits, can do miracles in the military; and unless the military has some of this gifted individuals, the chance of delivering is quiet slim. Since the act of motivating the soldiers for rewards and punishments has its limitation, therefore the followers need to be motivated and individually considered, in order for them to offer their trusts and be able to defend the nation at any costs. For that reason, the military has to invest in expensive, long and well schedule trainings and practical experiments so as to build a succession of leadership as sustainable as possible. Therefore, "the mission complete" of any military mission absolutely depends on how good the military commanders are motivating their followers toward that mission.

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