

Transformational Leadership: It Rules... if employees want it

Summary

Transformational leadership is a popular form of management in contemporary workplaces due to its success in improving productivity and profitability. While many organisations benefit from this style of leadership, we look into the research that suggests implementing transformational leadership requires considering its suitability to the style of work as well as the culture of the workplace, as not all workplaces will benefit.

How far have we come in motivation?

Traditionally, human resource practices were focussed on managing employees, on the basis that employees were motivated purely by their own self-interest. Such self-interest would, it was presumed, motivate employees to gain the highest level of personal reward for the least amount of work possible. This approach led employers to use a high level of supervision through roles such as foremen and supervisors as well as managers. . But this began to change in the 1950s as researchers such as Selznick found that one of the main roles for leaders was to build value rather than merely to monitor employee production (Paarlberg & Lavigna, 2010).

Contemporary research on leadership has built on this foundation: the theory of transformational leadership focuses on how to create an environment where employees consider the mission of an organisation above their own self-interests, while managers focus on supporting employees to achieve their goals (Paarlberg & Lavigna, 2010: 711). Effective leadership also goes beyond simply managing employees, and focuses on issues such as challenging current ideas, inspiring and authorising action, acting as a role model, and helping employees to gain emotional connection to their work. The benefit to organisations of having transformational leadership is that teams achieve more, with greater commitment, lower turnover, and more credibility (Metscher, Lowe, Barnes & Lai, 2011: 127).

How leaders get to this stage, and the benefits

Transformational leaders play the major role of translating organisational goals into team efforts. . This can be particularly challenging when for example, the goal might be negative or controversial, and the leader needs to find a way to communicate the importance of the work by finding positive aspects of it (Paarlberg & Lavigna, 2010). Thus, leaders need strong skills and support to achieve their team-based goals. Dai & De Meuse (2007: 7) suggest a range of programs for leaders such as:

- New leaders' programs for those moving into their first leadership role so they can learn how to view achievement as supporting the achievement of their teams;
- Transitional programs for executives moving from one functional area to another; and
- Transitional coaching programs.

Employees managed by transformational leaders gain a number of beneficial perceptions about their work. They find their work more challenging and fulfilling; are more prepared to take initiative and suggest ways to improve team performance; are more committed to the team and less likely to wish to depart, due to the positive influence and inspiration that transformational leadership can create (Paarlberg & Lavigna, 2010; Metcher, Lowe, Barnes & Lai, 2011).

How leaders can begin to deliver

However, despite transformational leadership having a range of positive benefits for organisations, it is not a 'silver bullet' solution to managing employees. Influence over behaviour comes not simply from the hierarchical position a manager may hold but also from the informal strength of the manager/employee relationship. For those in remote service roles such as social workers or police officers, recipients of the service being provided can be highly influential (Paarlberg & Lavigna, 2010: 714). If the worker identifies highly with their work group, or the leadership is seen as 'prototypical' then the group has a stronger influence on the worker than the leader (Li, Chiaburu, Kirkman & Xie, 2013).

Paarlberg and Lavigna (2010: 716) "... argue for a 'silver buckshot' approach in which the identified tactics work collectively and reinforce one another. "Despite the value that transformational leadership can provide organisations, and its ability to produce a range of effective team-development, success-improvement and commitment-building results, it still must be viewed as a technique of leadership that may or may not be appropriate for any particular employer. Factors such as the nature of the work being undertaken, the style of the team, and the culture of the workplace can help or hinder the success of transformational leadership. But with it being such a pervasive theory of leadership, Human Resources practitioners need to understand its benefits as well as the factors that influence those benefits.

References

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