



## Transformational Leaders: Their Socialization, Self-Concept, and Shaping Experiences

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This study uses a developmental perspective to study transformational leadership in the Indian context. It focuses on significant life experiences that have shaped leaders who have successfully transformed organizations. The personal experiences shared by leaders offer valuable insights on the role of family and childhood experiences that have had a sustained impact on their lives. The paper suggests that leaders do not emerge as a consequence of events or incidents but a journey of distinctive life experiences and processes. It concludes with a framework that weaves the antecedents of leadership that have enabled leaders to accomplish professional growth and success.

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**L**eadership research on transformational leadership has focused on the content and impact of leaders. The emphasis has been on qualities and dispositions of leaders; how they influence change in organizations and how they inspire followers to increase their performance, motivation, and morale. The literature on leadership has been replete with the persona of transformational leaders. However, it is equally important to recognize how these leaders became who they are. With few exceptions, relatively less research has focused on the predictors of leadership. It would be pertinent to examine whether life experience or a genetic predisposition stimulates leadership. Is it incremental changes and day-to-day events that shape transformational leaders? Could specific events or crises be the driving force for leadership development? What is central to the life of a leader that makes him or her charismatic and inspiring? This paper uses a developmental approach to explain transformational leadership. Before examining the life experiences and changes that contribute to leadership development, it is appropriate to present a framework that differentiates transformational leaders.

### Transformational Leadership: Conceptual Framework

The past decade has witnessed a paradigm shift with the emergence of new leadership theories such as transformational and charismatic leadership (Bryman, 1992). Although the terms *charisma* and *transformational leadership* are often used interchangeably, Bass (1985) made a distinction between them with charisma forming a subdimension of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994). He presented a formal transformational leadership theory which, in addition to other things, also includes the models and factors of behavior. In many ways, transformational leadership transcends charismatic leadership because it is built around the notion that leaders and followers are held together by some higher level, shared goal, or mission rather than personal transaction. While charismatic leaders may not place emphasis on the development of followers and may also feel threatened by followers who become independent, transformational leaders support followers to develop self-reliance with the aim of transforming them. The notion of mission-driven leadership is at the heart of transformational leadership (P. V. Lewis, 1996). Transformational leadership is a far more complex process, the realization of which requires visionary and inspiring figures. P. V. Lewis asserted that the goal of a transformational leader is to transform people and organizations: change minds and hearts; enlarge vision, insight, and understanding; clarify purposes; make behavior congruent with beliefs, principles, and values; and bring about changes that are permanent, self-perpetuating, and momentum building. Avolio and Bass' (1995) classification of transformational leadership skills as the four I's follows.

Idealized influence represents followers' confidence and appreciation which form the basis for accepting radical change in organizations (P. V. Lewis, 1996). Leaders with idealized influence are honored, appreciated, and trusted. Followers admire them, identify with them, and try to imitate them (Halan, 2004). They do not use their position and abilities to achieve personal interests, but they direct them to use the potentials of their followers to achieve shared goals (P. V. Lewis, 1996). Bass (1998) emphasized that

transformational leadership does not stop with the successful elevation of followers (from lower levels to higher levels). A shared agreement is developed that bonds leader and followers in a moral commitment to a cause that goes beyond their own self-interests. (p. 26)

Inspirational motivation is the ability to inspire and motivate followers to demonstrate appropriate behavior. Such behavior includes implicitly showing enthusiasm and optimism, stimulating teamwork, focusing on positive results, and emphasizing aims to stimulating followers. It is that component of leadership that arouses followers' enthusiasm and sense of team spirit and appeals to often untapped human needs, values, and emotions (Kotter, 2001). By giving attention to their need system, they touch the collective imagination of the people and help their employees make that extraordinary effort (Kets de Vries & Florent-Treacy, 2002). They move those who could not perform up to standard to positions where they could.

P. V. Lewis (1996) reported that transformational leaders intellectually challenge their followers, encourage reexamination of existent assumptions, and stretch their competencies to drive change in their way of thinking about issues and their performance; referred to as *intellectual stimulation*. Rather than protecting people from outside threats, leaders empower them to experience reality and take ownership for solving problems. Leaders disorient them so that new relationships can develop. Instead of maintaining norms, leaders challenge the way we do business and help others distinguish immutable values from historical practices that must be

discontinued. This style of leadership demonstrates risk-taking ability and lends dynamism to the organization (Khandwalla, 1984).

Individualized consideration is the ability to analyze followers. It is the ability of the leader to observe, analyze, and predict the needs and wishes of followers. The leader believes in people and is sensitive to their needs (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). The emphasis is on empathy and compassion balanced with honesty for the sake of the employees and their teams (Dayal, 1977; J. B. P. Sinha & Sinha, 1990). By their behavior, transformational leaders demonstrate acceptance of individual differences and assign the tasks in accordance with their personal affinities (Tichy & Devanna, 1986).

### **The Study**

Although multiple forces at sociocultural levels influence the growth of an individual, development of the psyche is the product of the socialization process preponderantly. The socializing agents could be parents, friends, or peers and mentors in the workplace. Implicit in these forces is that individuals respond to life experiences according to their worldview or meaning-making system (Kegan & Lahey, 1984). This study examines the life experiences that have shaped the lives of leaders who have transformed organizations to build frameworks that exemplify the development of transformational leaders. Based on different leaders' own perspectives, it seeks answers to the following issues: (a) How do leaders develop? (b) Do life experiences or specific events/circumstances make a leader? and (c) What are leaders' self-perceptions and the drivers for their success?

This study was based on certain assumptions. First, positive parental influence lays the foundation for developing leadership. Second, life's challenges make transformational leaders resilient. Third, transformational leaders are self-driven and resourceful and have the capacity to leverage opportunities.

### **Method**

From a published list of top leaders in the country, a sample of 20 leaders who are in service and have demonstrated outstanding contribution for organizational growth in corporate and nongovernment sectors was selected. An important criterion was to select leaders who were either based in Delhi or could be contacted during their visits to Delhi. A group of 5 academics and managers were asked to suggest 3 leaders from the selected list who they considered have been change masters. Thirteen names were finalized based on the following criteria: responsible for significant change in the organizations, leading by example, exhibiting strong ethical values, and demonstrating successful professional growth through their own efforts.

Each of the leaders in the final list was contacted through mail and telephone, drawing attention to the purpose and proposed outcome of the study. Affirmative responses were received from 10 leaders. Using an interview schedule (see Appendix), in-depth interviews spanning approximately 3 hours each were conducted. In a few instances, a second round of interviews was needed to obtain additional information or to seek clarifications. The interviews were recorded, and transcripts were sent to the respondents to determine any gaps in the data as well as to get their approval for using the information in a published form. As the focus of the interview was on sharing personal experiences, the identity of respondents has not been disclosed. Respondents included 5 CMDs of large public sector enterprises and banks, 4 CEOs of

private enterprises, and 1 director of a nongovernment organization. The group included 2 women and 8 men between the ages of 42 to 76 years. All respondents are first generation leaders who belong to middle class, service families; 6 were raised in joint families. Four of them had lived in small towns or villages during their formative years where the medium of instruction in their schools was Hindi. While 3 respondents have engineering degrees, 2 are graduates, 1 is a chartered accountant, and the remaining are postgraduates.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

While the findings reinforce earlier research on the development of transformational leaders, there are certain differences that would perhaps be attributed to the cultural context that is unique to Indian managers. An analysis of the qualitative data based on the personal experiences of respondents offers valuable insights on leadership development. These have been classified into nine broad areas as enumerated as follows, supported with excerpts from the interviews with different respondents.

#### *Supportive Parenting*

According to Harris (1998), “parents are the most important part of the child’s environment and can determine, to a large extent how the child turns out” (p. 15). The study of 100 extraordinarily successful young athletes, musicians, and students in the USA revealed that they became extraordinary performers because of powerful parenting (careful attention, guidance, and support) which helped build the belief within them that they could be special. It is only subsequently that they began showing overt signs of talent in their chosen arena of work (Robbins, 1996). The belief in self (inculcated through parenting) thus preceded their achievement. Good parenting thus empowers and prepares them in their odyssey towards higher consciousness and self-actualization, integral parts of the leaders’ profile.

Coopersmith (1981) summarized that children with high self-esteem exhibit more independence, outspokenness exploratory behavior, and assertion of rights. Children’s positive perception of parental disciplinary practices was significantly positively correlated with self-esteem and negatively correlated with dependence proneness (Katyul & Verma, 2000). Protective behavior of both parents positively contributes to high self-esteem (Ojha & Pramanick, 1995).

Research has indicated that the higher the parental expectations for the child, the greater the level of success achieved (Whiting, 1971). Findings of the study by Manley (1977) indicated that a high degree of nurturance and affection from the mother was related to high achievement patterns in the children. Erikson (1968) reported that the need to excel in life is implanted in early childhood when expectations from parents initiate a strong motive to achieve.

Data have shown that the motive to succeed is rarely developed in traditional Indian joint families (Dayal, 1999). In a joint family system, the influence of parents is not critical to the achievement motive. According to literature, the affiliative and emotional aspects of personality come from early intimate relationship with the mother (Kakar, 1971). In a joint family, female members of the family tend to look after the children. Later in childhood, the role model may not only be the father but any male who is close to the child. Baumrind (1967) reported that children brought up in a democratic environment characterized by liberal childrearing practices coupled with rational explanations by the parents develop self-reliance, independence, achievement

orientation, and risk taking. On the other hand, when parents are authoritative or controlling, the children become prone to dependency and have less achievement orientation.

Respondents received encouragement and positive reinforcement from parents and significant family members. There was relatively low direction on achievement of long-term career goals and aspirations (also perhaps due to lack of awareness) and greater emphasis on family values and discipline that seem to have had a lasting impact. This finding confirms Baumrind's (1967) findings that children brought up in a democratic environment characterized by liberal childrearing practices coupled with rational explanations by the parents develop self-reliance, independence, achievement orientation, and risk taking. Parents of high achievers give their children more praise and approval (Richard, 1954) and are closer to their children (Kimball, 1953). The findings of the present study suggest that the focus was on building inner strength and confidence. Parents were approving and trusting of their children and encouraged them to achieve without pressure. The parents seemed to enjoy their children's acceptance of parental standards. Respondents were given freedom to make decisions on their choice of career and job and encouraged to experiment. Self-reliance and adaptability as a consequence of parental support and upbringing led to building confidence. The data suggest that parents' informality and nondiscriminatory attitude allowed their children to think in a different manner. It made them less opinionated. Those raised in joint/large families learned to absorb diverse experiences, became more adaptable, and understand the richness of relationships. Perhaps, these experiences also prepared them to face the ups and downs in life.

The majority of respondents claimed they were not ambitious during childhood but they were given the space to think for themselves. One respondent noted, "There was not much pressure felt to pursue a particular career. Family tradition or parental desires were not imposed on us." Unlike what is prevalent today, parents of respondents did not voice any long-term aspirations for their children. Rather, they had a short-term perspective with a dictum of "whatever you do, do it well; and I am with you." Choice of career was primarily influenced by older relatives and friends of the parents and, in most cases, was not planned for.

The socialization process was characterized by a blend of nurturance and discipline. Family played an important role in the upbringing where warmth and support extended by family members helped in developing respect for elders, tolerance, and adaptability. Most of the respondents did not exhibit a clear sense of purpose with respect to their career aspirations during childhood. They did not experience family pressures to achieve academic excellence or follow any one else's expectations. The primary concern was to get a good job, whatever that may be. Respondents were given diverse exposure. There was less hand holding by elders, and expectations were for developing a holistic personality. The sense of worth and intrinsic confidence developed during the formative years possibly created the foundation for the drive to achieve and excel which became evident in the early years of their professional pursuits.

### *Inspiration of the Father*

Interviews with leaders in business, academia, and the arts (Wetlaufer, Prokesch, Magretta, & Howard, 2000) indicated that many of them credited one or both parents with teaching them the principals of good leadership. A significant finding of other research studies that has implications for the parenting process is that the fathers played a vital role in the indoctrination of values (R. S. Pandey, 1977; D. Sinha, 1981). Anne Mulcahy (as cited in Collingwood, 2001), the president and CEO of Xerox shared:

I learned some of my valuable lessons on leadership at the family dinner table, where my father presided over night debates with me. My father, a teacher and writer, knew exactly how to extract independent thinking and creative ideas from all of us. My father encouraged us to turn our words in action. (p. 10)

The role of the mother cannot be relegated to the background. Jack Welch (as cited in Collingwood, 2001) asserted that his mother was

the greatest leadership teacher I ever had, even though she was never in a formal leadership position herself. (The truth was she did run the neighborhood.) My mother taught me about unconditional love, and at the same time set very tough standards for achievement. That combination of hugs and kicks brought out the best in me, and I used it myself to bring out the best in others. (p. 4)

In the present study, most of the respondents asserted that a key role was played by their fathers in their upbringing and in the inculcation of core values. They recollected the importance of the principles for which their fathers stood. Respondents were inclined to observe their fathers' behaviors, the words they frequently used, and the subtle ways in which they indoctrinated those values held close by their fathers. One of the respondent reminisced:

I learnt very clearly in life from my father who was very good at Vedanta [sacred scriptures based on the Vedas] that life is going to have its up and downs. He made me understand the importance of developing inner strength to absorb life's discomforts and being prepared for any eventuality. I don't nurture grudges. I try not to remember the past even when people have not been fair to me.

These findings underscore the need for fathers to concede the powerful influence that their positive identification has in building a child's values and individuality. Child rearing in India is considered to be the mother's prerogative even when mother works outside the home. As a result of their preoccupation with work, fathers often tend to neglect the significance and impact that they have on their children, particularly in the early years. This finding demonstrates the need for fathers to shift from primarily being family providers to sharing the nurturing and recreational roles as well.

### *Relentless Pursuit of Values*

Transformational leaders formulate a set of essential values which are to be achieved and show behavior in accordance with the values (P. V. Lewis, 1996). They are able to articulate their core values which guide their behavior. Value formation is primarily through the process of imitation and learning from significant others. The degree of control used by parents influences the values that children imbibe. There is wide acceptance that parental control; when coupled with warmth; promotes the development of qualities such as social responsibility, independence, and high esteem (C. C. Lewis, 1981).

The values and convictions that have steered the respondents through their life journey include respect for people (regardless of class, money, or status), adaptability, contentment, sacrificing to achieve, a strong sense of duty, hard work, education, compassion, and integrity. The fear of doing wrong, a belief in divine powers, and faith in the Indian scriptures as their guiding principles are overwhelming. To quote two of the respondents:

I am a God-loving person, not God-fearing as is popularly claimed. I don't think there is anything to fear from God. I believe in doing my work honestly and putting in my best efforts.

I do my best and leave the results to God. I read the Bhagwad Gita [holy book of Hindus] at the age of 22, and it has been a guiding force. It taught me the importance of working with the right motives and not focusing only on the results.

The sample of respondents represents a wide range in terms of their age, yet the values that guide them can be categorized as humanistic values. This seems to be a departure from what guides many aspiring managers (MBA students) who place more importance on instrumental values of ambition, competence, achievement, and money (A. Pandey & Sahgal, 2005).

While their closely held values have been ingrained either by the father or other family members; in some cases, they were inculcated on account of early life experiences and the hardships they encountered. A CMD of a bank shared his experience of facing injustice and “crude discrimination meted to my family. I have ever since felt strongly and protest against inequality and discrimination of any kind.”

### *Curiosity to Learn*

Transformational leaders have a strong inclination to learn and absorb new ideas (Dayal, 1999). They construct meaning out of circumstances and experiences and draw lessons from them for future situations. When required; they are prepared to bring changes in their attitudes, approach, and behavior (Tichy & Devanna, 1986). Bennis and Nanus (1985) emphasized that leaders create information networks and initiate special efforts to gather information needed for strategic planning. In order to facilitate learning for other members in the organization, leaders encourage subordinates to set longer time horizons and provide exposure to learning interventions that help to develop planning skills and build greater awareness of environmental changes and business trends.

Respondents demonstrated the curiosity and eagerness to gain knowledge and expand their horizons by pushing themselves out of their comfort zones, as aptly stated by one respondent:

Leadership is continuous learning. One has to be humble enough to learn. I have constantly tried to work with a lot of different people in different ways. I have made many mistakes and continue to make them. I only try not to repeat the mistakes I have made. You can make a new one though!

Unfailing in their own efforts, they also display the capacity and zeal to read about new developments and are not wary of increasing their knowledge through interactions with their colleagues and subordinates. A CMD acknowledged, “I must meet five juniors every day. It is part of my diet. I get new ideas when I talk to people.” Being receptive to others prevents these leaders from becoming arrogant or getting into the trap of believing that they know it all by virtue of their position.

There is a striking similarity amongst this group of respondents on the use of the terminology *hard work* while describing their professional journey. They emphasized a continuing desire to stretch themselves to improve their capabilities and competence. Those who were deprived of good schooling acknowledged their struggle to overcome their inadequacies:

Because of my village background, I had difficulty in communicating in English. But till date, I seldom refuse an opportunity to deliver a lecture. I told myself early in life that perhaps people would laugh at me a couple of times, but I would develop the skill and ultimately will have people listening to me.

Another respondent noted:

Till today, I have a sense of inadequacy. I fear incompetence because I thought I did not go to a good school which I compensate with working hard. I struggle to learn because rigor is very important for me. I cannot take any situation for granted. Internal struggles bring out the best in us. Even if I have to give a farewell speech to a colleague, I prepare for it mentally. My colleagues think I have a gift of the gab, but they are not aware of the effort that goes into anything that I say or do.

The data suggest that leaders have relentless drive and energy to pursue their own growth. While they did not display high ambitions in their early school years; once they had chosen a career, their untiring efforts and passion to learn has contributed to a great extent to what they have accomplished.

### *Dissenting Status Quo*

One skill that sets leaders apart is their uncanny knack of questioning the given. While organizations are replete with people who are competent, intelligent, and skilled; only a small number are confident in expressing their views at the cost of moving against the tide. Their self-assurance along with their convictions about critical issues have made these leaders comfortable in questioning the status quo and have grown their courage to voice their concerns and pursue what they consider important for the overall good of the organization.

Respondents shared their distinctive ways of coping with social disapproval if they believed in a cause or an issue. Some were activists and rebels in their youth, and their protest against injustice continues until now. For others who were unable to influence a situation that disturbed them, they would resort to writing about it in in-house journals to ensure a wide dissemination of their concerns. Early in their careers, when many were mere cogs in large systems, these leaders voiced their opinions for suggesting improvements in work methods. A CMD of a large public sector enterprise conceded:

As a newcomer in the system, I could see things from a fresh angle. Most people get scared to speak out because they cannot communicate what they want to. I think I had the ability to put my views across and hold my ground. But, it is important to be honest and forthright.

However, there were several reports of instances of speaking their mind that backfired. However, such incidents did not deter these leaders in pursuing that to which they had set their minds.

### *Valuing the Boon and the Bane*

Self-awareness is the key to leadership (Bennis, 1994; Megerian & Sosik, 1996). It involves a capacity to monitor and control the strong but unintentional biases that most people harbor that can skew decision making. It also incorporates sensitivity and openness to the purpose of life, their values and motivations, how and why they respond to situations in a particular manner, as well as their own strengths and drawbacks. Being conscious of these aspects also requires the ability to seek and internalize feedback from others. Andrea Jung (as cited in Wetlaufer et al., 2000), CEO of Avon Products, described the importance of being sensitive to one's own characteristics and style as the most important of all leader competencies. Self-awareness, according to her, is the key to regulating one's own emotions and intuitively understanding how others feel.

Respondents exhibited different leadership styles that encompass their unique strengths as well as their predispositions. They acknowledged their attempts to seek feedback on their strengths and limitations from people with whom they associate and shared their characteristic approach to leverage their own and the potential of others. The styles ranged from being tough, task-oriented superiors who can comfortably cut off emotions in a situation to being team players who are conscious of the fact that they cannot make decisions without others' support. While it is appropriate to delineate the different styles that the leaders adopt, it also draws attention to their awareness of the consequences of the approach they adopt.

For the task-focused leader, although the primary concern is to drive results, the style appears to be a departure from the typical autocratic boss. These leaders make efforts to jointly discuss issues based on facts or on the overall outcome desired by all concerned. The key issue for them is not to let emotions overlap business judgment. They like to stretch people and are willing to accept others' mistakes if their intentions are right. They give credit to deserving colleagues; and, because they are conscious of being fair in their decision making, they believe that subordinates do not misconstrue their approach. For those who consider teamwork to be important, their chief concern is to hire the right people. Such leaders also demonstrate a commitment to focus on the larger perspective which may become an obsession that they transfer to others in the organization. They share information with colleagues because they believe it is the only way to involve people and get their contributions. They have a preference for a hands-on, problem-solving approach rather than an advisory mode with a belief that they know it all.

One of the respondents described himself as "a person in a hurry." He tends to be impatient, emotionally charged, and "rearing to go." His overriding concern as head of a media company is the quality and speed of ideas that his team members are able to generate. Being aware of these traits in himself, he gives paramount importance to the selection of employees to ensure that they are willing to be pushed to their limits and last the course.

### *Seeing the Big in the Small*

It is often believed that chance and luck play a role in a person's career evolution. People may have similar competencies and skills, yet some achieve more than others do. Could it be their destiny or that they were lucky to be in the right place at the right time? Does opportunity come one's way, or does one have to respond differently when faced with such situations? Bennis and Thomas (2002) succinctly stated, "luck favors those who are prepared" (p. 171).

What did the term *opportunity* mean to the respondents? How did they leverage an opportunity that came their way? Their responses indicate an intrinsic need to stretch, to test themselves, and to take risks to face new challenges.

Participants conceded that their accomplishments are on account of their ability or propensity to take advantage of variety of situations. Whether related to an opportunity to overcome their own limitations or bring change in the domain of work, they attributed their success to not missing a chance or occasion that placed high demands on them. As pointed out by one respondent, "I think every day brings new opportunities, and those who succeed are people who grab opportunities." Despite the fact that there is a preponderance of externalism in the Indian culture and that many of the leaders did express their faith and the role of divine powers, they are not fatalistic or complacent. On the contrary, they have the drive and energy to pursue what they consider important as well as give opportunities to those who are associated with them at the workplace.

*Rising Above Adversity*

Unique to each individual are a set of achievements along with disappointments and losses. Some people are predominantly driven by their achievements; they derive recognition and motivation to perform based on their success and triumphs. There are others who are equally or even more driven to manage crises and setbacks. They derive satisfaction in facing challenges to accomplish what is important to them. Leaders also bring with them an accumulation of such experiences. Bennis and Thomas (2002) observed that “everybody enters the list with a burden, a preconceived reason for not succeeding” (p. 18) and affirmed that a key difference between leaders and others is “the ability of leaders to transmogrify even the negatives in their lives into something that serves them” (p. 18). It is a thornier path where one has to confront one’s emotions, deal with feelings of helplessness, and manage conflicts and disillusionments. If this capability is not learned within the family, leaders often learn it by choice or necessity at a later point in their life.

How did the respondents deal with setbacks? How did they cope with failure, loss, and humiliation? Respondents shared their anguish in personal limitations like competing with colleagues who were more educated than them, coping with their village/small-town background, learning to communicate in English, overcoming financial constraints in the family, and facing the trauma of losing loved ones in early life. Some were required to face unfair practices at work, overlooked for their promotion, humiliated by coworkers, and denied recognition for their work. They also accepted that they have faced a lot of criticism, particularly from coworkers. However, these experiences did not appear to deter them nor did they resign to their fate. On the contrary, they faced them as learning opportunities and challenges that they were determined to overcome. These leaders were able to withstand the pressures because of their inherent confidence, risk-taking ability, unwillingness to compromise with injustice, and strong belief in the value of hard work. For many of the leaders, it is a never-say-die spirit and their resilience that has made them confident and forceful.

*Empowering Superiors*

Superiors can play a significant role in shaping an individual’s personality in terms of his or her life vision, values, and style. In grooming a protégé, seniors have the opportunity to accelerate their learning and growth. A superior-subordinate relationship is designed to challenge subordinates to develop their own leadership competencies. The focus is on educating and guiding the protégé to evolve a holistic vision of life and not merely exist as a competent performer.

On the other hand, Bhandarkar and Singh (1999) proposed that many transformational leaders did not have a guru or mentor to groom, educate, and guide them. They became their own motivators; constantly searching, observing, and learning from different people. Their objective in life was an intense desire to prove themselves and become something. They pushed themselves to strive hard to achieve their goals.

Over half the respondents recollected with pride the invaluable contributions of their superiors in inspiring them through the initial stages of their careers and how they continue to emulate those superiors. They consider it fortunate that they had superiors at different stages of their careers who gave them room to experiment and created opportunities to learn. One leader asserted that she “was thrown in the deep end to swim or sink. I would not be here if I had not

got the grounding.” Another respondent claimed that the CEO of his company gave him “the confidence to try things out. BPOs would never have happened in India. I thought of the idea, but he allowed us to take it to the next level.” One respondent recollected the rigorous training he was exposed to during his early years in the organization that gave him hands-on exposure. Another respondent valued the people management skills and the qualities of “simplicity, humility, integrity, and being upright” in one of his superiors. Working closely with people whom they revered, these leaders have inadvertently imbibed characteristics and values of their superiors that have had a lasting impact on their personal and work life.

### *Downside of Success*

Did the leaders have to make sacrifices to achieve success? Do they have any regrets at the professional or personal front? Reflecting on their lives, is there a feeling of satisfaction? What do they see in the future? Reminiscing on issues such as these brought forth some misgivings as well as unfulfilled desires to be accomplished in the future. There were strong sentiments expressed regarding their inability to balance their work life with the needs of the family. Some were absentee fathers for a long stretch of time on account of their professional demands. For the majority of male leaders, family responsibilities and child rearing were largely left to their wives. They missed being part of their children’s growth or participating in their academic and other pursuits. One male respondent was repentant of having taken his wife for granted. He believed he was “self-centered,” “insensitive,” and “short-tempered” and gave little attention to his wife’s needs because of his intense involvement and preoccupation with his own career advancement. One respondent shared the trials and conflicts of leaving her family for outstation postings. At one point, she almost quit her job because she had to leave her family for a long period of time. Professional demands often left her no other option but to relegate her family’s needs. In hindsight, she acknowledged that despite all odds, the support and understanding from her family propelled her to move ahead in her career.

Over half the respondents were rueful of not being serious about achieving academic excellence or pursuing further studies. However, at the professional level, they expressed a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment accompanied with a passionate desire to grow and contribute to public service. Their dreams compel them towards creating a better future for the country. Their concerns and passions range from pollution, the power market, the scope of banking across international borders, technology in the global marketplace, and sustaining BPOs in India. They articulated their dreams with the hope of inspiring themselves and others to act.

### **Synthesis**

Life experiences play a significant role in the development of leadership. However, specific experiences do not necessarily result in developing a leader. It is a consequence of a life process of change that intricately weaves life experiences to develop the predisposition and attributes of transformational leaders. Figure 1 represents the antecedents and core attributes that have been the mainstay for achieving professional growth and success of leaders in this study.

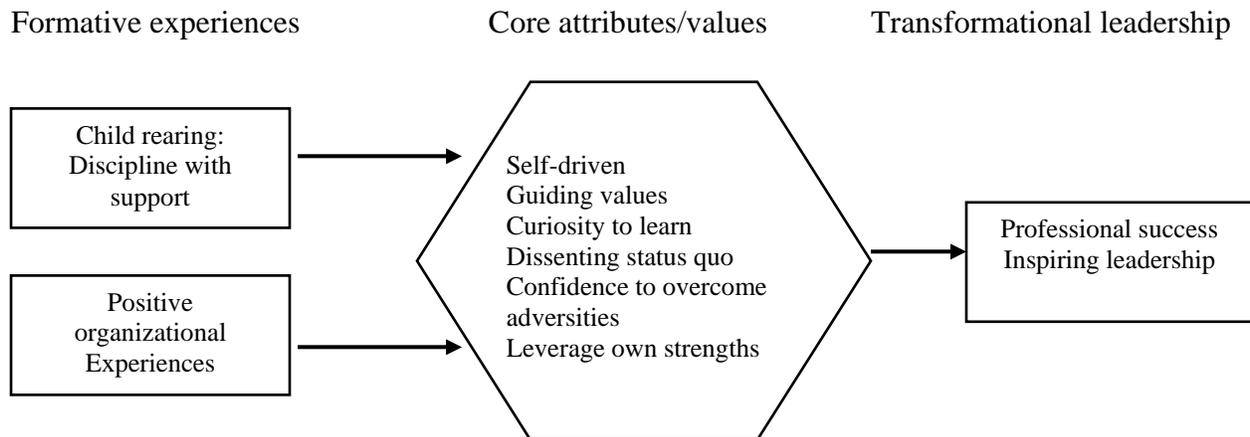


Figure 1. Model of life experiences and attributes of transformational leaders.

Early childhood experiences influence and nurture individual differences that remain stable through childhood and early adolescence. Preceding leadership and achievement were the unstinting support and encouragement from the family that led to enhancing self-confidence and independence in making decisions. Being raised in joint families or with extended family members added its own flavor of instilling characteristic Indian values of respect for others, adaptability to different people and situations, and deep faith in the divine power. Leaders have stood by these values which they believe are the cornerstones of their success.

Leaders mostly credited their fathers with teaching them the principals and values that govern their lives. Organizational life was equally gratifying with respect to rigorous training and gaining diverse exposure. They had the opportunity to work with superiors who, while keeping the interest of the subordinates in mind, challenged them to move beyond defined boundaries and simultaneously offered their guidance and support. Leadership develops in an environment that fosters risk taking coupled with an understanding and sensitivity amongst organizational decision makers that investments may not always yield the desired result. People can slip up, make mistakes, or even have idiosyncrasies; but if they have superiors who have faith in their capabilities and their intentions, they can contribute and achieve even in the most difficult of situations.

It would be appropriate to conclude that the group of leaders in this study are characteristically high on both task and people relatedness. They exhibit a developmental orientation but the manner in which it is expressed varies. They are humane in their approach but tough while making decisions. They display the courage to raise issue and challenge people's assumptions at the risk of their own goodwill. There is consistency with respect to facing challenges and accomplishing what they believe. Their personal magnetism and ability to enthuse others is demonstrated through their unique styles that range from being effective team leaders to hard drivers. They are conversant with and candid in sharing their distinctive styles, preferences, and limitations.

To sum up, it can be argued that leadership can be developed. Life experiences play a significant role in building capabilities that make it possible for an individual to achieve professional success in addition to leading and inspiring others. Furthermore, leadership development would be augmented if organizations invested in building a culture where seniors

place greater emphasis on their developmental role and provide opportunities to subordinates to learn, experiment, practice, and apply what they learn without fear.

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### About the Authors

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## Appendix

## Interview Schedule

Leadership is a lifetime process. The present study seeks to understand the power of significant life experiences that have impacted you.

1. What role did your family play in your development?
2. What specific experiences have had a transforming effect on you? How did these incidents impact you as a person?
3. Describe your early memories of your school life.
4. Who have you admired/emulated? Where did you get inspiration from?
5. What do you consider to be your major opportunities/breaks?
6. Your journey into work: What did work mean to you? What kind of experiences do you treasure? How were your relationships with your superiors and colleagues?
7. Describe the most testing times of your life. Major setbacks/failures that you experienced? How did they impact you? Was there any learning from them?
8. Share your early memories of displaying leadership qualities/skills? Did people around you believe that you would be an achiever?
9. Have you at any point of time felt a threat to your survival as a leader? When did you start feeling comfortable in a leadership position?
10. Describe yourself. What efforts did you make to develop certain positive qualities in yourself? To overcome your weak points?
11. What is your characteristic style of dealing with people, making decisions, and handling uncertainty? What has been your driving force?
12. Any unfulfilled dreams? Regrets?