

Dr. Billy Graham: A Case Study in Cross-Cultural, Transformative Leadership

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Abstract

According to Perucci (2009), today's leaders seem incapable of earning the trust of their employees or the support of society. To tackle that issue, transformative leadership has been proposed as a new standard of ethical leadership, integrating six other well-regarded leadership theories – Level 5 Leadership, Charismatic, Principle-Centered, Servant, Transformational, and Covenantal (Caldwell et al., 2011). Transformative leadership is defined as, “an ethically based leadership model that integrates a commitment to values and outcomes by optimizing the long-term interests of stakeholders and society and honoring the moral duties owed by organizations to their stakeholders” (Caldwell et al., 2012). Caldwell et al. (2012) admit that many will perceive transformative leadership as “idealistic, impractical, and unrealistic.” Yet, one leader, Dr. Billy Graham, has not only earned the trust of society and the members of his organization, but, also of every United States President from Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush, most of whom looked to Dr. Graham for spiritual leadership. Six decades of the leadership and ministry of the 20th century's most influential evangelist, Dr. Billy Graham, are explored in light of the core principles within each leadership perspective to determine if Dr. Graham meets the criteria of a transformative leader. The case study uses the reflections of various “followers”, including Graham's Crusades' audience, his organizations, the media, and the U.S. Presidents he served.

Keywords: Transformative, Level 5 Leadership, Charismatic, Principle-Centered, Servant, Transformational, Covenantal

Introduction

Transformative leadership has been proposed as a new standard of ethical leadership, integrating six other well-regarded leadership theories – Level 5 Leadership, Principle-Centered, Charismatic, Transformational, Servant, and Covenantal (Caldwell et al., 2011). Transformative leadership is defined as, “an ethically based leadership model that integrates a commitment to values and outcomes by optimizing the long-term interests of stakeholders and society and honoring the moral duties owed by organizations to their stakeholders” (Caldwell et al, 2012). By the time of his NYC Crusade of 2005, Dr. Billy Graham had preached to nearly 215 million people in person at 417 evangelistic crusades in 185 countries (Carnes, 2005; Wacker, 2009). More than 1,400 churches across 82 denominations provided volunteers for his 2005 NYC crusade (Carnes, 2005). Between 1955 and 2006, Graham, the 20th century’s most influential evangelist, can be seen on the Gallup Organization's roster of "Ten Most Admired Men" 50 times, with the next two most mentioned men, President Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II, appearing 31 and 27 times respectively (Wacker, 2009). The U.S. government has awarded him the two highest honors a civilian can receive: the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1983 and, along with Ruth Bell Graham, his wife, the Congressional Gold Medal in 1996 (Wacker, 2009).

Dr. Graham has had unparalleled access to the White House and has served in a pastoral confidante role for almost every U.S. President since Dwight D. Eisenhower (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007). His international appeal is widespread, being the first Christian to publicly preach behind the Iron Curtain post-WWII, culminating with large crusades in Hungary (Budapest, 1989) and the Soviet Union (Moscow, 1992). He has also been invited to and has conducted crusades in other Communist countries, including China (Beijing, 1988) and North Korea (Pyongyang, 1992) (Martin, 1995). While Dr. Billy Graham’s accomplishments are impressive, can his leadership be considered transformative? Caldwell et al (2012) admit that many will perceive transformative leadership as “idealistic, impractical, and unrealistic.” This case study will explore the soundness of Dr. Billy Graham’s leadership as weighed against core principles key to the six integrated leadership perspectives that compose transformative

leadership.

Level 5 Leadership

Jim Collins' (2001) economics research into what drove only 11 out of 1,435 companies to make the leap from "good to great" led to a conclusion that his team of 22 researchers didn't expect – a special type of leader. Collins (2001) coined this leadership perspective "Level 5 Leadership," characterized by a paradoxical combination of personal humility and unrelenting, professional will. Collins (2001) identified humility as the differential between good leaders, such as Lee Iacocca, former CEO of Chrysler and great leaders, such as Darwin Smith, CEO of Kimberly-Clark, in building organizations that sustain performance (Collins, 2001). Level 5 leaders are characterized by "an almost stoic determination to do whatever needs to be done" to make their organizations great (Collins, 2008). One of Graham's follower, Harold Myra, former CEO of Christianity Today, specifically alludes to Graham being a Level 5 leader, combining "extreme passion for [his] cause with deep humility and a sense of teamwork" (Myra, 2006).

Humility

As one of the bedrock values consistently found within varying perspectives of ethic leadership, humility can be defined as treating others with respect, avoiding special privileges and status symbols, admitting limitations and mistakes, modesty about achievements, and emphasizing the collective contributions of others (Yukl, 2013). Servant leadership, Level 5 and participative leadership perspectives specifically pinpoint humility as being critical for leader effectiveness (Owens & Hekman, 2012). Humility is the crucial attribute, since humble people are "freed from the tyranny of their ego" (Gunn, 2002). Humble people know that no matter what you accomplish, you are merely one among the billions of people alive on this planet, making it feasible to grasp that you can serve a larger purpose, providing a joy and energy to attempt great things (Gunn, 2002).

Almost all visitors to Graham's home in Montreat, N.C., including his critics, found him to be warm, humble, and sincere (Wacker, 2009). Gibbs and Duffy (2007) likened his sincerity to "paint stripper, removing any pretense and pride". Martin (1995) observes that is "commonly noted that Billy

Graham is a humble man.” Humility has a lot to do with how a person handles success. Historian David Aikman judged that Dr. Graham’s achievement is not attributed to his handling of adversity but lay but in his humility when successful (Wacker, 2009). Olsen (1987) remarked that Graham is a man of “sincere humility” and that success of his ministry can only be explained by God’s grace. Chuck Colson, a key figure in the Watergate scandal, who would go to prison, become a Christian, and establish a prison ministry, states, “Graham never lost his sense of awe. A friend of mine said one of the great miracles of the twentieth century is that Graham remained a humble man” (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007). When asked about the book, *The Leadership Secrets of Billy Graham*, Graham was complementary and humble, “You’ve done a tremendous amount of research. But I’m afraid you’ve made me out to be more than I am.”

Professional Will

Perhaps, Graham’s greatest leadership strength was his fierce resolve, his singularity of purpose. Collins (2001) writes that fierce resolve (professional will) demonstrates an unwavering tenacity to do whatever must be done to produce the best long-term results, regardless of difficulty.” Graham worked with anyone who would work with him provided they did not expect him to alter his message of faith (Wacker, 2009). In 1977, Graham went to Hungary for his first preaching inside the Iron Curtain. Although many of his followers disagreed with his preaching in communist countries, Graham realized that the Gospel needed to be preached wherever and whenever possible. If the KGB were there, then that was fine. They needed to be told of the Good News, also (Lotz, 2006). Despite his own political hue that included strong anti-Communist views and the White House fears of Soviet propagandist intent, Graham accepted an invitation to visit and preach in the Soviet Union in 1982. Dr. Graham simply said that he was thankful he could preach the Good News to the many who needed God the most, “I will have my own propaganda—the Gospel—and it’s more powerful” (Plowman, 1982). Graham also supported normalizing Sino-American relations, believing it would “foster channels for religious contact and evangelizing,” while rekindling missions in China, the land Ruth Bell Graham was born and raised (Showwalter & Tu, 2012).

Graham would partner with anyone who would ensure that the campaign was workable. “Theological hue” was secondary (Randall, 2010). Only on rare occasions did he take on a theologically dividing issue. His singular purpose was the “peaceful ecumenical cooperation” essential for a successful crusade (Martin, 1995). However, Dr. Graham risked discord at his 1953 Chattanooga, TN and 1952 Jackson, MI crusades by personally removing ropes designed to segregate the audience. Graham told his Jackson audience, “The ground at the foot of the Cross is level, and it touches my heart when I see whites standing shoulder to shoulder with blacks at the Cross” (Myra & Shelley, 2005).

Most importantly, however the text varied in the beginning, every sermon settled on John 3:16: “whoever believes on him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” Graham’s taped and published sermons, stretching over nearly six decades, reveal the “perennial clarity of his message.” His messages always commanded a decision (Wacker, 2009). Even his critics, as illustrated by Apel’s (1979) critique of his theology, acknowledged, “[Graham] recognizes the world a fit topic for discussion only to the extent that it sheds some light upon the individual’s future and his need for salvation.”

Although he demonstrated great resolve, Graham was not perfect. His love of politics and deep friendship with and trust in Nixon, shifted his focus from a pastoral, spiritual role to more of a political one (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007). By the late 1970s, Graham admitted, with repeated remorse, that in times past he had exhibited political partisanship (Wacker, 2009). After Watergate, Graham focused more on his role as pastor to later presidents and, for the most part, stayed out of politics (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007).

Graham elucidates it best with these words found on the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) website, “My one purpose in life is to help people find a personal relationship with God, which, I believe, comes through knowing Christ.”

Principle-Centered Leadership

Caldwell et al. (2012) defines principle-centered leadership (PCL) as “a values-based and principle-centered foundation for governing oneself and honoring relationships with others that views leadership as a highly ethical obligation to honor implicit duties owed to others.” Excellence must be attained by adhering to moral principles and values that promote society (Caldwell et al., 2012). Stephen

R. Covey, who established the PCL perspective states, “If leaders don’t build their value systems on bedrock principles and try to live by them—acknowledging that they fail much of the time, but striving to get back in alignment—they’ll have dysfunctional cultures” (Shelton, 2011).

Integrity

Integrity is a foundational determinant in PCL (Covey, 1992). Commitment to integrity has been universally recognized by extensive leadership research as the critical component possessed by leaders in forming personal trustworthiness (Kouzes & Posner 2010). Graham’s financial transparency (including establishing an evangelical financial accountability organization), simple lifestyle, and lifelong faithfulness to Ruth are indicators of his integrity (Wacker, 2009). During his Australian crusades, the transparency of financial arrangements and the fact that “not one penny of Australian money would be spent on the expenses” impacted the Australian audience. Furthermore, Graham and his team stayed at a hotel described with the term “non-licensed austerity.” (Smart, 1999)

Billy Graham’s integrity coupled with his bedrock principle, love. The more trouble a President on either side of the political spectrum was in – Johnson with Vietnam, Nixon with Watergate, Clinton with the Lewinsky scandal -- Graham always publicly stood by their side. In 2005 at the NYC Crusade, former President Clinton, who as a boy went to see Graham preach and decided to tithe his allowance to the BGEA said, “This man I love, who I have followed, is about the only person I have ever known who has never failed to live his faith” (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007).

Again, Graham was not perfect. His political ties and hobnobbing led to some ugly remarks about the media and Jews, secretly recorded in President Nixon’s office in 1972. When they came to light in 2002, Graham apologized to Jewish leaders. Those comments, along with his supportive position on the Vietnam War and defense of Nixon tarnished his record with many people (Wacker, 2009).

Charismatic Leadership

Charismatic leaders are often seen as advocating a principled purpose potentially ascending to the level of a “calling” (Caldwell et al., 2012). One theme of charismatic leadership that applies best to transformative leadership is, “Inspire a shared vision in pursuit of a grand ideal to touch hearts, to create

a personal relationship that brings out the best in others, and to change the world” (Caldwell et al., 2012). McLaurin and Amri (2008) share that views on charisma differ and definitions vary. Some authors denote that charisma signifies the ability to affect strong influences over the followers’ beliefs, values, behaviors, and performance via the leader’s vision and example, while others propose that “charisma is the ability to influence others positively by connecting with them physically, emotionally, and intellectually.”

Inspirational Influence

Following McLaurin and Amri’s (2008) characterization of the charismatic leader’s inspirational actions greatly influencing followers, Graham’s leadership of BGEA shows little evidence of charismatic leadership. Instead, spiritual leadership, defined by Yukl (2013) as enhancing “the intrinsic motivation of followers by creating conditions that increase their sense of spiritual meaning in the work”, appears to be what drove the BGEA leadership team since its founding. They are doing God’s work, not Graham’s.

Yet, it’s hard to deny the inspiration Graham had on his audience. Many said he was the most charismatic man they had ever met (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007). Charismatic leaders generate a transformation in people’s hearts and minds that empowers them “to become passionately committed to a great ideal” (Caldwell et al., 2012). Martin (1995) describes Graham as a “charismatic and catalytic figure who was able to gain the confidence and cooperation of a wide range of church leaders almost everywhere he went, often overcoming considerable initial resistance.” Wacker (2009), attending a crusade at Madison Square Garden at the age of 12, remembers him as “witty and charismatic”, resulting in thousands “surging forward to give or recommit their lives to Christ.” Olsen (1987) noted that his “winsome personality attracts loyalty from associates, interest and awe from followers, and respect from critics.” His appeal is international, filling stadiums around the world, including over 1M for a service in Seoul (Stoddard, 1986). Smart (1999) reported that the Australian crusade averaged 4-5% responses “provid[ing] the necessary orgasmic discharge or release for the whole arena, in recognition of Graham’s charisma.”

Hillenbrand (2010), relaying the personal story of Louie Zamperini’s redemption, tells of Graham preaching to “a half-empty tent” at the beginning of the 1949 Los Angeles Crusade. However, with the newspaper magnate, Hearst’s instructions to “Puff Graham”, Graham was soon preaching to 10,000 or

more nightly (Hillenbrand, 2010). The former Olympic distance runner and WWII POW, Louie was “lost in alcohol” with “plans to murder the Bird,” his Japanese tormentor. His wife, Cynthia, arranging for a divorce due to Louie’s alcoholism and despondency, convinced Louie to join her to listen to Graham preach. Working through much anger, guilt and anguish, on the second night, Louie accepted Graham’s invitation. That night he destroyed his supplies of alcohol and pornography. For the first time in five years, he did not dream of the Bird. He believed he was a new creation and wept. (Hillenbrand, 2010)

Transformational Leadership

Scholars disagree in the extent to which transformational and charismatic leadership perspectives are similar, compatible and overlap (Yukl, 2013). Caldwell et al. (2012) for their transformative leadership perspective posit that transformational leadership is “grounded in moral foundations” and empowers leaders to respect “synergistic duties owed to both individuals and organizations by inspiring followers to raise the bar for their own personal development while also improving the performance of their organization.” McLaurin and Amri, (2008) posit that key behaviors include empowerment, role modeling, creating a vision, acting as change agents, and making norms and value clear to all. Yukl (2013) points out that the role of transformational leadership is “provide support and encouragement when necessary to maintain enthusiasm and effort in the face of obstacles, difficulties, and fatigue.” This case study investigates how Graham led by example, transforming the BGEA leadership team into doing more than what was originally expected in the face of obstacles and fatigue.

Role Model Leadership and Adaptability

As previously noted, Graham role modeled the principles of financial transparency, marital fidelity, simplistic lifestyle, integrity and humility. Graham’s fortitude, adaptability and personal sacrifices inspired BGEA to go well beyond original plans. Graham had an intuitive sense about people and set the bar high for the leadership teams of his various ministries (Myra, 2006). He set the example. Randall (2010) conveys Graham’s capacity for travel and work that would typify his ministry. While ministering with Youth for Christ, Graham visited 47 states in 1945 alone. United Airlines designated him

as their top civilian passenger. At the 1957 Madison Square Garden Crusades, Graham “lost 18 pounds and says he felt that every night was a spiritual battle” (Carnes, 2005).

His dedication was unwavering. Hillenbrand (2010) describes his schedule in Los Angeles as “7 days a week” from 5:00 AM until late at night delivering booming sermons “punctuated with broad gestures.” His weight dropped, circles darkened his eyes, and he didn’t even recognize his own daughter when brought to him on stage (Hillenbrand, 2010).

Graham could also adapt as well when needed. In England in the 1950s, Graham adapted to situations and used conduct very different from his Bible Church background, including references designed to assure British church leaders (Randall, 2010). When preaching at Cambridge University, Graham attempted unsuccessfully for three nights to use material put into an intellectual basis. He adapted and preached a simple message on the Cross. Four-hundred students committed to Christ that night (Randall, 2010). By the 2005 NYC Crusade in Flushing Meadows, the mix of the event’s counselors showed the adaptability of his ministry over the sixty years. Counselors embodied more than 20 languages, including Arabic, Armenian, Korean, Portuguese, Punjabi, Russian, Tamil, and Mandarin Chinese (Wacker, 2009).

Servant Leadership

Yukl (2013) writes that the focus of servant leaders is the nurturing, development and protection of followers. However, as Shekari and Nikooparvar (2012) highlight, this perspective defies simple definition – “it is multi-dimensional, rich in hues and wide-ranging in its meanings.” Research indicates that emphasis is placed on increased service to others; a holistic approach to work; promotion of community; and empowerment (Shekari & Nikooparvar, 2012). Characteristic of the overlapping nature of ethical leadership perspectives, servant leaders, like principle-centered leaders, are value- and character-driven people oriented towards both performance and process (Shekari & Nikooparvar, 2012). Yukl (2013) posits servant leaders “must empower followers instead of using power to dominate them.”

Nurture and Development

Greenleaf (1977) posits that servant leaders place the needs of their subordinates before their own needs and center their efforts on helping subordinates grow to reach their maximum potential and achieve optimal organizational and career success. If “subordinates” mean U.S. Presidents and fellow evangelists, then certainly Graham placed their needs in front of his own and helped them grow spiritually. Graham was consistently involved in equipping current evangelists in the developing world, while growing the next generation of evangelists. The BGEA ministry held three enormous conferences in Amsterdam -- known as Amsterdam 83, Amsterdam 86, and Amsterdam 2000. Formally titled the International Conference for Itinerant Evangelists, these conferences brought thousands of evangelists from hundreds of countries together for training and encouragement (BGEA Website). With regard to the U.S. Presidents, Gibbs and Duffy (2007) outline numerous examples of Billy Graham traveling to the White House to attend to the spiritual needs of the President. From baptizing Dwight D. Eisenhower to comforting Lyndon B. Johnson during the Vietnam saga to praying with Bill Clinton during the Lewinsky scandal, Graham was always true to his message of forgiveness and love, viewing each of the Presidents as friends (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007).

Covenantal Leadership

The keystone principle of covenant leadership is empowerment. People freely choose to be in covenant, to be held accountable, and to care for one another (Duby & Fischer, 2011). Leaders are called to share in mutual accountability and employee empowerment, inducing consensus on vision, processes, goals, and operating agreements by everyone in the covenantal relationship. The organizational culture is one of mutual support and care (Duby & Fischer, 2011). Covenant relationship is apparent among the BGEA leadership team. With the exception of those who have died, the founding members have worked together for over 60 years.

Empowerment

While many articles and books have been written about Graham, the literature search conducted for this case study revealed little information about Graham’s leadership of BGEA. With Graham now well into his 90s, his succession provides some testimony that empowerment is evident at BGEA. As

questions continue about the future of BGEA in the wake of Graham's aging, the singular purpose that Graham professed and lived is now echoed by the current CEO, his son, Franklin, "If I'm around 20 years from now, I'll be doing the same thing—telling people about Jesus Christ" (Garfield, 2009). In Graham's autobiography, *Just As I Am*, the chapter "A Team Effort" makes plain that he did not view himself as the leader of BGEA. It was a partnership -- decades of working together -- serving the singular purpose -- to spread the Gospel -- each with his own part to play.

Conclusion

While transformative leadership, as defined by Caldwell et al. (2012), may be a leadership perspective more strived for than achievable, the over six decades of Dr. Billy Graham's leadership and ministry demonstrate that the major principles of transformative leadership are attainable. The majority of Graham's ministerial life reveals a bona fide Level 5 leader -- the paradoxical blend of deep humility and intense resolve. In addition, one cannot deny the vast evidence of charismatic leadership from the statistical accounts of over 3.2 million people (BGEA website) accepting his invitation to accept Jesus Christ during his crusades to the personal story of Louie Zamperini's redemption. As an exemplar, Graham models transformational leadership with his boundless energy and self-sacrifice for the cause of Christ, propelling those around him to greater commitment. His pastoral relationship with the U.S. Presidents, serving as spiritual leader to most of them since Dwight D. Eisenhower, reveals a servant leader's ethos -- nurturing and protective. He exhibits covenantal leadership with the men he created the BGEA in 1950 -- each of whom is still leadership team members over 60 years later, (except those who died).

However, current leadership perspectives tend to neglect the one word that best describes Dr. Billy Graham's spirit -- love. During his final interview with Gibbs and Duffy (2007) for their book, *The Preacher and the Presidents; Billy Graham in the White House*, Graham begins by sharing how he loves all five of his children, despite "their own temperament, their own ideas". He went on to say, "I haven't hated people. I haven't felt that I needed to take revenge on somebody. I never was jealous of people that I can remember. That was a gift from the Lord. Jesus spent a great deal of his ministry talking about the

need for love and working together and that's why he died on the cross—because of love. He loved sinners, people who didn't deserve it, that's what grace is" (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007). For Graham, the bedrock leadership principle has always been love.

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