Development and Execution of a Transformational Leadership Symposia Program in a Major Pharmaceutical Company – A Case Study

Wayne C. Shaw
Cairn University
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Abstract

As mid-level leaders in a research department of a large pharmaceutical company, we recognized the need for broad cross-organizational leadership development. To address this need, we developed and executed a program of lunchtime symposia focused on nudging leaders at all levels of the department toward more transformational practices. We established eight foundational principles for the program—all based on biblical values and transformational leadership practices—and weaved these principles into each symposium of the program. We conducted 20 symposia on varied leadership topics over 2 years. We concluded that: (1) the model was well accepted in the large secular organization, with participant feedback demonstrating considerable learning and application of the biblically based foundational principles in the workplace; (2) there is no reason that these foundational principles and transformational leadership practices could not be effectively communicated in a similar manner within any large secular organization; and (3) this case study provides a model that could be used in other organizations.

Keywords: transformational leadership, leadership development, case study, biblical foundation, pharmaceutical industry

Prior to the intervention in the organization described below, it was widely recognized among mid-level leaders that employees were under considerable stress, which seemed to be associated with situational demands being placed on them by managers and overall company decisions, namely

- restructuring to initiate research on new disease entities and treatment paradigms,
- cultural incompatibility due to merging workforces from different global locations,

- recent reductions in force from company decisions to strategically close and relocate workplaces,
- employee and manager stress due to the pandemic and expansion of hybrid work, and
- overall complexity of work in a highly regulated industry and VUCA environment.

Recognizing the need for broad cross-organizational leadership development in the department, we hypothesized that hosting structured discussions focused on leadership and employee development would be useful to promote dialogue, build better leaders, and enhance human flourishing. We established and executed a program of lunchtime symposia focused on nudging leaders at all levels of the department toward more transformational practices.

The Organization

At the time of the intervention, the organization was a 125-member medical research department in a major pharmaceutical company. Members of the department ranged from basic scientists to vice presidents and included MDs and PhDs (many with Ivy League and other prestigious credentials), with academic, clinical, and/or industry experience ranging from <1 year to more than 30 years. Within a few years following the intervention, the department was partially reorganized due to corporate-level decisions involving some reduction in force, and some specialty groups were divided among other departments.

The Principles of Transformational Leadership

The principles of transformational leadership were introduced by James McGregor Burns (1978) and further defined by Bernard Bass (1985). The principles have been recognized as:

idealized attributes: the leader's character, especially credibility and trust.

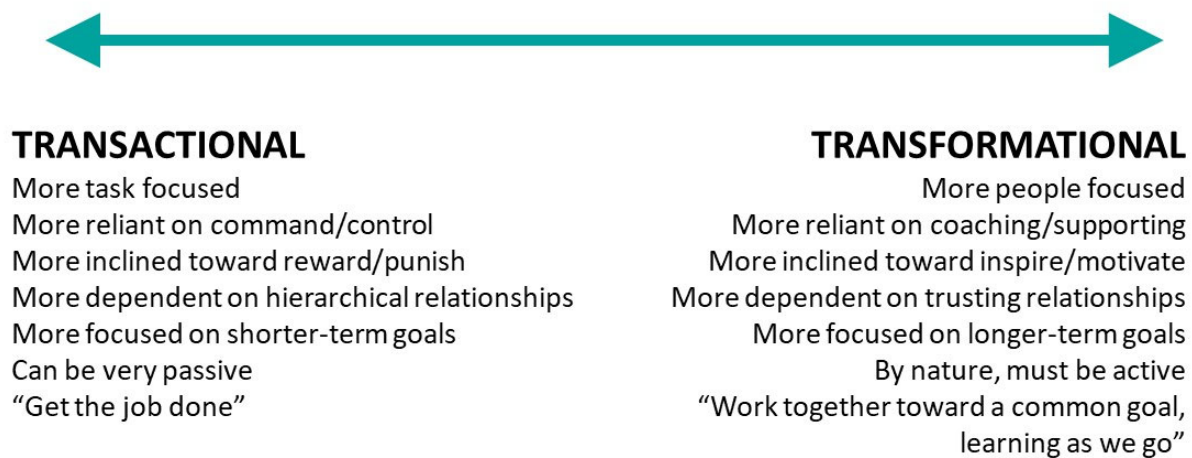**idealized behaviors:** acting with integrity, living out the attributes of trust, morality, and justice.

inspirational motivation: inspiring others, showing that there is more than simply reward or punishment.

intellectual stimulation: encouraging others to think innovatively, developing their wisdom as critical and discerning thinkers.

individualized consideration: coaching and supporting people with a focus on their growth and development, in a way that is most fitting for that individual follower, putting others before self in some ways. (Bass & Avolio, 1994)

Over the years, many authors have reinforced the importance of these elements in leadership, emphasizing the contrast between transformational and transactional leadership (Zaleznik, 1983, 1990). In any given leader/follower situation or relationship, we operate somewhere on the continuum between transactional and transformational approaches, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Transactional/Transformational Leadership Continuum and Key Characteristics of Each

TRANSACTIONAL	TRANSFORMATIONAL
More task focused	More people focused
More reliant on command/control	More reliant on coaching/supporting
More inclined toward reward/punish	More inclined toward inspire/motivate
More dependent on hierarchical relationships	More dependent on trusting relationships
More focused on shorter-term goals	More focused on longer-term goals
Can be very passive	By nature, must be active
"Get the job done"	"Work together toward a common goal, learning as we go"

As Burns pointed out, both transactional and transformational leadership have their place in contributing to human purpose. Both require a commitment to honesty, fairness, responsibility, and honoring commitments. However, even with such commitments in place, when a leader relies heavily on transactional principles, it becomes clear that they are not acting with the interest of their followers in mind. He likens what people often think of as leadership to a group of boys walking in front of a parade, no more leading it than tagging along for the walk. Burns notes that "transforming leaders 'raise' their followers up through levels of morality" (Burns, 1978, p. 426), emphasizing the value that transformational leaders have for their followers. When leaders value people, they work to help them develop and to care for them in the context of the workplace.

Winston (2008) related caring for followers to the biblical principle of *agapao* love, which is, in terms of a leader's behavior, the working out of concern and care the leader has for his or her followers. Agapao is the expression of *agape* love, a form of love that implies the leader is sacrificing some of his own interests to further the interest of his followers.

Christian leaders must understand this as a command from Jesus (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2003, John 13:34–35) and should be willing and eager to bring this into their workplaces. This kind of love reflects a deep transformation of the leader's heart in caring for others.

It was with a sense of caring about the people in the department that I and a small group of mid-level leaders with faith in Judeo-Christian values and demonstrated experience with transformational leadership principles came together to establish and execute a program of lunchtime symposia focused on nudging leaders at all levels of the department toward more transformational practices. The department conducts medical research as part of a large pharmaceutical company.

In terms of information in the literature about incorporating principles of transformational leadership into large organizations, such as major corporations, Bass (1985) noted examples of leaders, such as Henry Ford, who achieved transformational effects on their subordinates and organizations, but who also exhibited very transactional behaviors. Bennis (1983), discussing complex organizations, pointed out the need for transformational leadership, particularly in generating, articulating, and communicating vision in a compelling way that encourages commitment from followers. Zaleznik (1983), distinguishing between managers and leaders in large organizations, pointed out the importance of reassessing individuals' needs and developing leaders at different levels. He also described the value of mentoring in this regard. He noted that "only when the values of an organization also can be expressed as the personal values of those within the organization can they have any real meaning" (Zaleznik, 1983, p. 39). But in general, there is little concrete information in the literature about instilling transformational leadership principles in large organizations. Further, there is essentially no information about incorporating biblical values into leadership development programs in large secular organizations. Thus, we present this as a case study, which could be used as a model for other large organizations.

Methodology

Program Development

The program was constructed to cover a wide variety of leadership development topics in 20 symposia presented over a 2-year period. The program was originally proposed to include 10 symposia presented over 1 year, but after initial assessments demonstrated employee appreciation and learning, it was expanded to a second year with 10 additional topics covered.

For conceptual design, I worked with a team of four other mid-level leaders, each of whom espoused faith in Judeo-Christian principles and had documented success as leaders, as well as a genuine concern for the welfare of the people in the department.

The stated objective for the symposia program was to bring a discussion of contemporary leadership concepts and principles into the department, with the expectation of increasing understanding of what true leadership entails, building personal conviction for growing as leaders and team members, and modeling good leadership across the department.

Foundational Principles

Being faith-based leaders with an understanding of the elements of transformational leadership and recognizing a need to develop better leaders in our large secular organization, we defined eight statements (Shaw, 2019) that served as the foundational principles for the 20 symposia. The following foundational principles are consistent with biblical values and transformational leadership practices. True leadership:

- understands that people are critically important.
- is more than just getting the job done.
- requires self-awareness and essential elements of character, especially credibility.
- understands and promotes key values and knows how they determine the way people think and behave.
- understands and appreciates the importance of organizational culture.
- encourages people to use their intelligence to think innovatively, and provides individual coaching, mentoring, and support for their growth.
- involves transforming people into better leaders themselves, serving others before self, and understands the criticality of trust in building transformational relationships.
- requires humility more than power.

These foundational principles were communicated at the beginning and end of each symposium, and elements of the principles were incorporated into most of the symposia. They were core to the program. The emphasis on these foundational principles reflects the key underlying objective of the program—to nudge leaders at all levels toward more transformational practices.

Program Execution

Content for each symposium was gathered from landmark works by Bass (1985, 1990, 2000), Bennis (2003), Burns (1978), Taylor (2007), Edmondson (2019), Schein and Schein (2018), Kouzes and Posner (2023), Winston and Patterson (2006), and others,

supplemented with contemporary work from *Harvard Business Review* and other leadership resources. Each symposium was 45–60 minutes and included a mix of lecture, questions, and discussion. The symposia incorporated case studies and practical exercises, and we provided contemporary journal articles for pre-reading and discussion. Sessions were held monthly, except for August and December. I prepared and presented each symposium. The presentation schedule and titles are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Schedule and Titles of Symposia Presentations

Month	Year 1	Year 2
Jan	Fundamentals of Leadership	Followership
Feb	Organizational Culture and Change	Communication Basics and Complexities
Mar	Power and Influence in Leadership	Diversity and Inclusion
Apr	Complex Leadership Situations (VUCA, remote leadership, matrices, "wicked" problems)	Philosophies and Archetypes of Leadership
May	Conflict, Coercion, Powerlessness, and Toxicity	Navigating Organizational Politics
Jun	Humble (and Serving) Leadership	Motivation
Jul	Team Dynamics	Emotional Intelligence and Self-Awareness
Sep	Essentials of Feedback	Problem Solving and Decision-Making
Oct	Leadership Development	Adaptive Leadership
Nov	Board and Committee Leadership	Leadership Creativity and Innovation

Being a large commercial organization, formal approval was required. I and a small team of mid-level leaders shared the concept, objectives, foundational principles, and the proposed symposia schedule with top department management and human resources (HR). Approval was granted promptly, but prior individual personal discussions helped to pave the way. Detailed contents of the first few symposia were shared in advance with HR at their request.

Time slots were scheduled for the year in advance—all members of the department were invited, whether in leadership or not. The lunch period (Eastern time) was used so

U.S. and European colleagues could join; very few department members were located in the Far East, but some of them also attended. When scheduling the sessions, conflicts with major internal management meetings and external scientific conferences were avoided to maximize opportunities for attendance. The months of August and December were skipped due to vacations and year-end business activities.

As the presenter, I sent reminders to department members a week prior to each symposium noting the topic and providing a link to prior reading materials (usually *Harvard Business Review* articles or case studies that I developed). Early in 2020, sessions began as hybrid in-person and online meetings, but with the pandemic, all remaining sessions went online through Zoom or Microsoft Teams. All sessions were live. They were not recorded, but after each session, the presentation slides were posted into a shared electronic folder for access by all members of the department. Representatives from HR and interested employees in other departments were also granted access to the shared folder.

Evaluation

Formal and informal qualitative assessments were used to generate feedback. A formal survey was distributed in October of Year 1 to assess learning and an interest in continuing the symposia. Informal feedback was solicited after each symposium, particularly requesting suggestions for improvement and topics of interest.

Feedback

Feedback from the formal survey distributed in October of Year 1 showed overwhelming support for continuing to a second year. Responses to open-ended questions were generally favorable and, importantly, people provided specific examples that reflected application of the foundational principles. This was very encouraging.

Participants provided informal feedback after each symposium, which included suggestions for future symposia topics, and some of these suggestions were incorporated. Overall, comments were favorable and indicated learning and application.

People expressed concerns about the time limitations—they would have preferred more time in each session, and some asked about continuing into a third year. To help mitigate these concerns, I encouraged post-session dialogue with me and among other attendees. There was considerable follow-up dialogue, which evolved into coaching relationships between me and three mid-level department leaders. Two involved self-awareness and personal development coaching, and the third involved how to manage

a difficult employee. There was also evidence of ongoing dialogue and application within the department, but this was not quantified.

Observations

Attendance was tracked and averaged about 60% of the department in each session, less during the summer months. About 82% of department members attended at least two symposia. Given how busy people were, this was an encouraging level of participation. Top-level department management did not attend any of the symposia, which was disappointing, but not unexpected. HR representatives only attended a few of the sessions. The head of HR was given access to the presentations in the shared folder, and although she accessed them, she did not respond to my offer to conduct the symposia more widely in the company.

There was robust participation from mid-level leaders including several in director, senior director, and vice president roles, as well as people who were not in leadership. Discussions within the symposia were interesting but limited due to the time constraints and the large number of participants. As noted previously, I participated in several private spin-off discussions, including three that evolved into coaching relationships focused on specific leadership issues.

There was a very interesting and somewhat surprising observation—never once were the eight foundational principles challenged by attendees, including "true leadership requires humility more than power." They are not principles that are commonly discussed in the realm of commercial business. They are not statements that are reflective of contemporary corporate jargon. Yet, people understand them. They are basic principles of life and relationships. They are personally encouraging for people working in the corporate environment. At heart, it seems we want our leaders to demonstrate transformational principles. This should encourage us as Christian leaders who desire to see our followers flourish.

Shortcomings and Learning

Attendees expressed concern about limitations on discussion due to time constraints and large numbers of participants in the sessions. I mitigated this to an extent by encouraging offline follow-up.

Additionally, we were not able to conduct long-term follow-up to assess incorporation of the foundational principles into regular leadership practice. This would have been useful information but became impractical due to subsequent department reorganizations and reassignments.

If I were to advise someone who wished to implement a similar program in their organization, I would recommend that they use the foundational principles noted above as a basis and tailor the content for the needs of their specific organization. I would also suggest that they build in methods for long-term follow-up of the program's effectiveness.

Conclusion

It is impossible to know what the long-term effects of this intervention on the organization have been. However, based on qualitative feedback, the short-term results were remarkable. There was considerable discussion during and following the sessions, and several cases in which leaders who had attended the sessions documented application of the foundational principles in their relationships and interactions with their followers. Further, as a result of the symposia, I developed coaching relationships with three attendees.

In conclusion, the model was well accepted in this large secular organization, and participant feedback indicated that there was considerable learning and application of the foundational principles, which are consistent with biblical values and transformational leadership practices. It can also be concluded that there is no reason that these biblically based foundational principles and transformational leadership practices could not be effectively communicated in a similar manner within any large secular organization. Finally, this case study provides a model that could be used in other organizations, including large secular corporations.

About the Author

Dr. Shaw led global clinical research teams in the pharmaceutical industry for 52 years before retiring in 2024. During his career, he authored numerous scientific articles in peer-review journals. He serves as an adjunct professor at Cairn University near Philadelphia, teaching courses in leadership and research, and advising students on capstone projects. He is also an independent leadership consultant and coach, as well as an ordained ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church in America. He holds a Doctor of Strategic Leadership from Regent University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Dr. Wayne C. Shaw, 15 Cabana Dr, Silverlake, WA 98645. Email: waynecshaw@gmail.com.

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