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A Perspective on Transformative Leadership and African American Women in History

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The work of African American women as leaders historically has gone unnoticed or its impact has been underrepresented. This essay presents a discussion of transformative leadership and examples of three notable African American women who, through their work, provide illustrations of the transformative leadership framework.

Transformative Leadership as a Conceptual Framework

There is a tendency in the literature for the term “transformational leadership” to be used interchangeably with “transformative leadership.” However, the relationship between the two types of leadership is evolutionary (Shields, 2010). By way of definition, “transformative leadership is an ethically-based leadership model that integrates a commitment to values and outcomes by optimizing the long-term interest of stakeholders and society and honoring the moral duties owned by organizations to their stakeholders” (Caldwell et al, 2012, p. 176).

Transformative leadership is comprised of seven tenets which are considered to be the core components of the transformative leadership model (Shields 2011): In brief, they are:

- 1) Acknowledging power and privilege and their impact;
- 2) Focusing on moral purposes that are related to equity, excellence, public, and private good, along with individual and collective advancement;
- 3) Deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge frameworks;
- 4) Seeking to balance critique and promise which involves developing strategies to address inequities;
- 5) Bringing about deep and equitable change;
- 6) Working toward transformation (which includes liberation, emancipation, democracy, equity, and excellence); and
- 7) The demonstration of moral courage and activism (Shields 2011).

Six perspectives in leadership are identified as contributing to transformative leadership (Caldwell et al, 2012). They include: transformational leadership, charismatic leadership, level 5 leadership, principled-centered leadership, servant leadership, and covenantal leadership. Transformational leadership motivates followers to increase their level of performance and has, at its foundation, four pillars. The first is idealized influence. The second is inspirational motivation. The third is intellectual stimulation. The fourth is individualized consideration. This fourth pillar defines the leader's role as that of a coach or advisor attempting to help followers develop to their full potential in a supportive climate.

Charismatic leadership is predicated on the followers having a strong personal bond with the leader as well as viewing the leader as one who advocates a moral purpose. Level 5 leadership reflects the leader's personal humility and tendency toward being understated. Level 5 leaders and transformative leaders are reported to share a commitment to results, employee recognition, cooperation, and partnership. Principled-centered leaders are obligated to embrace ethical standards that require them to focus on universal principles and values that combine the attainment of a more productive and moral society with one's desire to become a better person. Servant leadership is incorporated into transformative leadership with the demonstration of an authentic concern for others that inspires them. Lastly, covenantal leadership advocates that "it is only through increased understanding that people can benefit themselves, society and the organizations" (Caldwell et al, 2012). In support of this, covenantal leaders also create a learning culture in which information is shared and individuals are provided with the opportunity to improve (Caldwell et al, 2012).

Transformative leaders are also described as creative, charismatic, self-creative (someone who commits to making a difference) (Montuori & Fahim, 2010). The transformative leader is credited with the ability to rethink "the who, what, where, when and how of leadership" in complex environments (Montuori & Fahim, 2010, p. 2). They require people to reconsider their assumptions and to develop new solutions (Caldwell et al, 2012). Transformative leadership requires the reframing of one's view as well as the creation and integration of "organizational systems that add value, enhance lives, benefit society, and honor duties owed to stakeholders by optimizing long term wealth" (Caldwell et al, 2012, p. 177).

Three Examples of Transformative African American Women Leaders

Historic reflection provides numerous examples of African American women, from multiple disciplines, who have embodied transformative leadership. The following three women, Sojourner Truth, Harriett Tubman, and Mary McLeod Bethune are all examples of transformative leaders. Because of their inclination toward advocacy, their work provides particularly strong examples of the third tenet (deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge frameworks), the fifth tenet (bringing about deep and equitable change), and the seventh tenet (demonstrating moral courage and activism).

Sojourner Truth

Sojourner Truth was born into slavery in 1797 as Isabella Baumfree in Ulster County, New York. Throughout her life, she was an advocate for social justice and inclusion. Among her many activities, and perhaps one of the most pivotal, occurred in 1844 when she joined the Northampton Association of Education and Industry, an organization founded by

abolitionists who supported an agenda that included the reform of women's rights. It was there that she met other abolitionists such as Frederick Douglas and William Lloyd Garrison (The Biography Channel, 2013).

Her commitment to the inclusion of African American women in the suffrage movement is well documented. "Typical of the Sojourner Truth's proficiency as a speaker is a talk she gave at a July fourth gathering in 1850 in which she played on White women's maternal sentiments to remind them of their common humanity with Black women." Sojourner Truth, in effect, challenged the agenda of those committed to women's rights to include African American women and is credited with influencing the platform of the National Women's Convention in 1850 to adopt a resolution that stated that "among women, those in bondage were 'the most grossly wronged of all'" (Kelly, 2010, p. 262). In 1851, she delivered a speech to the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in which she rhetorically asked those in attendance to consider her question: "Ain't I a woman" (The Biography Channel, 2013). This rhetorical question is a clear indication of the third tenant of the transformative leadership model – deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge frames.

Sojourner Truth's life of advocacy provides numerous examples of transformative leadership and advocacy that continued until her death in 1883. Truth is remembered as one of the foremost leaders of the abolition movement and an early advocate of women's rights. Although she was known as an abolitionist, the reform causes she sponsored were broad and varied, including "prison reform, property rights and universal suffrage" (The Biography Channel, 2013).

Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman was born circa 1820 and lived until 1913 (Crewe, 2005, p.6). Her work as an abolitionist is well documented with her role as the "conductor" of the Underground Railroad in the 1850s. She is credited with at least nineteen return trips to the South to lead other Blacks to freedom (History.com). She is credited with rescuing more than three hundred people, including her parents and other members of her own family (Crewe, 2005, p.6).

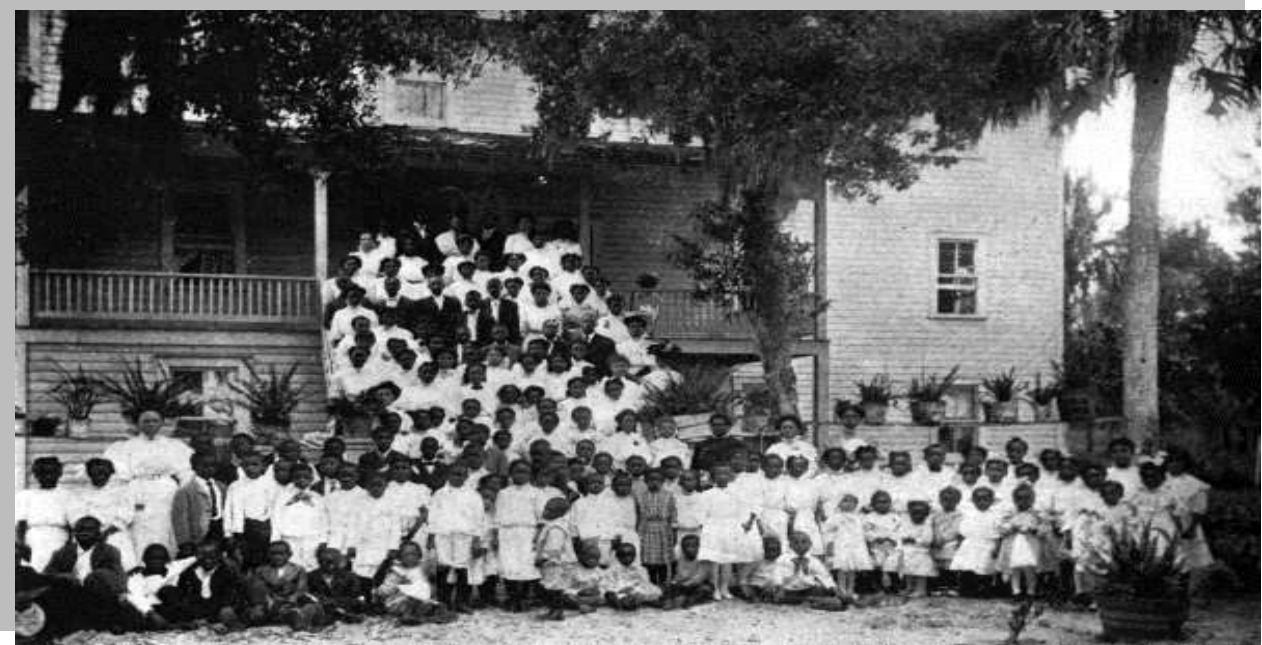
Another area in which Harriet Tubman illustrated great courage and dedication was demonstrated in her work – providing housing and supportive services to others. She had many accomplishments in this area and in some instances, models she developed became the basis for programs developed in the nineteenth century. She recognized the importance of providing supportive services (such as housing and care) for individuals, while concomitantly encouraging independence through self-sufficiency activities. These activities amounted to what would be referred to today as "micro-enterprises activities" (Crewe, 2005). For example, she funded the construction of a wash-house and taught freed women how to do laundry while providing them with assistance in growing food. This made it possible for these women not to have to rely on government assistance to support themselves (Crewe, 2005).

Harriet Tubman's philosophy of "bringing someone to freedom is not enough, you sometimes have to take care of, empower and teach to take care of themselves as well" (Crewe, 2005, p.6). This ideology demonstrates her commitment to advocacy for those who

were underserved and provides clear support for her work as a transformative leader. Additionally, her work shows her commitment to stimulating deep and equitable change – another tenet of transformative leadership.

Mary McLeod Bethune

Mary McLeod Bethune, the child of former slaves, was born in 1875. She is credited with many accomplishments that promoted social justice including the establishment of the Day-



tona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro Girls in Daytona, Florida which would later merge with the Cookman Institute for Men becoming Bethune Cookman College (The Biography Channel, 2013). She ascended to the national platform of leadership through her service as the president of the National Association of Colored Women of the Florida Chapter. This was followed by a number of invitations and appointments by U.S. presidents. . Specifically, President Coolidge requested her participation in a conference on child welfare. President Hoover invited her to serve on the Commission on Home Building and Home Ownership and appointed her to a child health committee. President Roosevelt appointed her as special advisor on minority affairs, leading to her tenure as the Director of Negro Affairs of the National Youth Administrators. President Truman appointed her to serve on a committee devoted to national defense. In 1935, she founded the National Council of Negro Women. The purpose of this organization was “to represent numerous groups working on critical issues for African American women” (The Biography Channel, 2013).

In her advocacy role, Bethune navigated the boundaries of race and gender by using direct but carefully chosen words to exemplify traditional values of God and country. She spoke of family mostly in the broad sense of race and humanity....She occupied a perch of moral authority and from this position, attempted to revise existing scripts that read Blacks as morally and intellectually inferior and confined them to a narrow range of their human potential (McCluskey, p. 237).

Conclusion

African American women have a rich history of occupying roles as transformative leaders. The tenets of this leadership style have been embraced and effectively leveraged to further social justice in numerous instances. While history has documented the work of notable African American women such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Mary McLeod Bethune, their contributions as leaders, particularly in the context of transformative leadership, has not been fully described. This model of leadership seems particularly appropriate given its focus on ethics, values, empowerment, and the long-term interest of society as a whole.

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About the Author

Dr. Yvette Lynne Bonaparte is a collaborative and metric-driven scholar and practitioner in the areas of marketing and leadership. She has a twenty-year track record of success in

private industry and has held leadership positions in the areas of brand/product management, global marketing, customer insights, and program management with some of the world's best known corporations. She has also consulted with leading organizations within higher education and the health care industry in the areas of strategic marketing, and diversity and inclusion.

During her corporate marketing career, Dr. Bonaparte and her teams successfully launched and managed products and programs targeting various audiences. She led and participated in corporate initiatives in the areas of diversity and inclusion as well as management effectiveness. These efforts resulted in companies understanding and leveraging their diverse employee populations and customer bases to realize increased revenues, productivity, and engagement.

Dr. Bonaparte's academic accomplishments include degrees from the following universities: Brandeis University (B.A. in economics), Duke University – The Fuqua School of Business (MBA in marketing), and North Carolina A&T State University (Ph.D. in leadership studies). Currently, Dr. Bonaparte is an Assistant Professor of Marketing in the School of Business at North Carolina Central University in Durham, North Carolina.

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