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Malcolm X and Symbolic Convergence Theory

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Abstract

The focus of this paper will be the application of symbolic convergence theory to the leadership attributes of Malcolm X.

Symbolic Convergence Theory focuses on determining and identifying symbols in diverse communities and showing how the meanings for these symbols intersect to create shared results.

In the case of Malcolm X, several ideas which initially sounded radical and frightening to many white people became more solid and reasonable when presented by themes consonant with mainstream American Culture.

By focusing on specific examples used by Malcolm X to present his ideas to diverse cultures, I hope to emphasize the importance of symbols and the vital role they play in creating an understanding across diverse communities.

Table of Contents

- I. Abstract
- II. Introduction
- III. Overview of Symbolic Convergence Theory
- IV. History of Malcolm X
- V. Examples of Symbolic Convergence Theory used by Malcolm X
- VI. Limitations
- VII. Connections to Other Leadership Theories
 - a. Transformational Leadership
 - b. Servant-Leadership
- VIII. Summary and Conclusion
- IX. References

Introduction

Malcolm X (b. Malcolm Little) was born in Omaha, Nebraska on May 19, 1925. After a difficult childhood riddled with pimping and drugs, Malcolm was arrested and sentenced to 10 years in prison for burglary in 1946. It was in prison that Malcolm taught himself to read, developed an interest in debate and speech, and discovered the Nation of Islam. He joined the Muslims in 1952 and began speaking out against white domination of African-American culture and was seen by many as a black militant leader. By 1959 he was widely known and seen as a threat to the vast majority of Americans. Unique in his mission, he focused on achieving civil rights and change "by any means necessary." After leaving the Muslims in 1964, he formed the Organization of African American Unity (OAAU) in hopes of bridging the gap between blacks and progressive white groups.

Throughout his later life he was influential in speech and ideas and it was in those teachings that examples of symbolic convergence and fantasy themes arose.

Symbolic Convergence Theory is a general theory of communication that discusses the ideas of group consciousness, the dynamic of sharing group fantasies, and the role evolving culture plays in the interaction of symbols.

In this paper I will give a detailed description of symbolic convergence theory and related issues surrounding the theory including fantasy themes, the role of rhetoric, and the importance of dramatizing. Next, I will give a detailed history of the life of Malcolm X. I will then give specific examples of this theory presented in the actions and teachings

of Malcolm X. I will also state some limitations that this theory presents. Upon completion of discussion of Symbolic Convergence Theory, I will discuss two other leadership theories: Transformational Leadership and Servant-Leadership, which also seem to play a significant role in the leadership traits of Malcolm X. To conclude, I will summarize the major points and examples given in the paper.

Overview of Symbolic Convergence Theory

Symbolic Convergence Theory is a communications theory whose goal is to provide generalizations and explanations that show that the sharing of group fantasies create a common social reality. Symbolic Convergence Theory was developed by Earnest G. Bormann from the University of Minnesota. The theory focuses on two basic assumptions:

1. that communication creates reality between the words used and knowledge gained, and
2. the realization that individual's create meanings for symbols than can converge and lead to shared realities.

These two assumptions lead to the development of the basis for symbolic convergence theory. "Symbolic Convergence Theory provides tools to analyze and help sort out the typical complexities of subcultures and communities in conflict as well as the overall shared culture of the organization." (Bormann, 1983, p. 118)

Symbolic Convergence Theory focuses on four basic terms: fantasy theme, symbolic cue, fantasy type, and saga. The fantasy theme consists of the chaining of the

content of the dramatizing message by participants. A dramatized message is vital to the creation of a fantasy theme. Individual symbolic meaning may lead to a group fantasy which in turn can lead to group cohesiveness and commitment to an issue. The symbolic cue is a code word, phrase, slogan, or gesture that triggers previously shared fantasies and emotions. Similar to the idea of an inside joke. A statement or word which when spoken draws others to a notion or idea. The fantasy type is created when there is repetition of similar scenarios, which focus on a specific ideology, and in turn creates fantasy types. The combination of fantasy themes and types across large and often diverse communities creates the rhetorical vision. The sharing of fantasy themes also creates cohesiveness within the group. The saga is the repeated telling of the achievement in the life of a person, group, community, organization or nation. The saga can consist of shared fantasies, rhetorical visions, and narratives. And their content may or may not be reality based.

Symbolic convergence does not require tracking fantasy chains but does require the awareness of the importance of communication and concepts. Symbolic Convergence Theory provides tools to analyze and help sort out the typical complexities of subcultures within subcultures and communities in conflict as well as the overall shared culture of the organization. (Bormann, 1983, p. 118)

The main focus of symbolic convergence is the ability to locate sets of symbols in diverse communities. Bormann states three specific parts of symbolic convergence theory (Bormann, 1983, p. 101):

1. "The discovery and arrangement of communicative forms and practices into organized and structured patterns that demonstrate the evolution of shared consciousness."
2. "Description of the dynamic tendencies within communication systems that explain why group consciousness arise, continue, decline, and disappear and the effects such group consciousness have in terms of meanings, motives, and communication within the group (basic communication process is dynamic of people sharing group fantasies)"
3. "The factors that explain why people share the fantasies they do when they do. Including: common psychodynamics' and symbolic pre-dispositions that individuals bring to their communication episodes in addition to their current baggage of personal and shared group fantasies, the experiences they share as part of the group culture, and the rhetorical skill with which the speakers present the fantasies."

The process of symbolic convergence is "symbolic" because it deals with the human tendency to interpret signs and objects by giving them meaning (Bormann, 1983, p.102). Over time certain symbols have created meanings, which by sight only we are able to understand their purpose and meaning. These symbols exist and held meaning across cultures and communities.

"Convergence" refers to the way "two or more private symbolic worlds incline toward each other, come more closely together, or even overlap during certain processes of communication." (Bormann, 1983, p 102) The idea being

that two or more private symbolic worlds tend to overlap or combine to create a similar meaning.

When combining the meanings of symbolism and convergence one begins to understand how it creates a common consciousness and a basis for communications and the creating of community. It “explains how people come to share enough symbolic ground to take part in logical negotiation processes to achieve coorientation and also explains how individuals come to share a common sentiment or emotional involvement and commitment to symbols.” (Bormann, 1983, p. 102)

One example of this idea in action is the use of narrative in business meetings. Narratives allow the creation of good and bad characters and investment in the lead character. This can also help identify good and bad traits, actions, and beliefs. By involving others in a dramatic event and creating emotional bonding this often leads to a more comfortable, less self-conscious meeting. The narrative often leads the participants to become committed and involved in both the conversation and the meeting as well.

One thing to note in these concepts is the technical meaning of the term “fantasy.” The purpose of the use of fantasy is to create common experiences, which can then create group fantasies. Once one shares a group fantasy it creates symbolic convergence for a group of people, which often leads to the idea of inside joke syndrome. Bormann states an “inside joke is a communication incident in which a speaker alludes to a previously shared fantasy with a nonverbal signal or sign or verbal code word, slogan, label, name of hero or

villain, or story summary.” (Bormann, 1983, p. 109) The preservation of an inside joke can often create a mood, tone, and response like that which was received at the original sharing of the message. This recurring inside joke leads to the development of fantasy types.

“An understanding of the symbolic convergence theory and its application to a specific organization can explain the conflicts, lack of commitment, motivations, and the general quality of life within the culture.” (Bormann, 1983, p. 122) This theory provides an explanation of the communicative process and provides a level of understanding as to the purpose and reason things happen. By understanding this theory, one is able to assess the conflicts and motivations within the culture and is able to identify and anticipate future communicative events.

Malcolm X

Malcolm X was born on May 19, 1925, in Omaha, Nebraska as Malcolm Little. Malcolm's dad, J. Earl Little, was a baptist preacher and organizer for Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Malcolm's mom, M. Louise Norton, was a West Indian from Grenada, and also a Garvey supporter. Marcus Garvey fought for racial separation and more power for blacks. "He stressed becoming independent of the white man." (Haley, 1964, p. 5) He tried to organize black people to form black government.

The Little's had eight children. In 1928, the Little's moved to Lansing, Michigan. In 1929, Malcolm's house was fire-bombed. The whole family was in the house at the time of the bombing. Although the bombing was believed to have been racially motivated and perhaps even set by the Klu Klux Klan, Earl Little was arrested in suspicion of arson.

In 1931, Earl Little was murdered by racists. Malcolm was six years old. In January, 1939, Louise Little was declared insane and committed to an asylum. The kids were taken by the state and placed into foster homes. Malcolm was initially placed in a home in the neighborhood.

After a tough childhood filled with detention homes and reform school, Malcolm was entered in Mason Junior High School in seventh grade. It was a predominantly white school. It was here that he got his first paid job washing dishes at a local restaurant, played basketball, and began to excel in school. He

was also elected class president. In eighth grade, Malcolm was asked by his English teacher what he wanted to do for a career. Malcolm answered that he would like to be a lawyer. To which his English teacher responded, “Malcolm, one of life’s first needs is for us to be realistic. Don’t misunderstand me, now. We all her like you, you know that. But you’ve got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer – that’s no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you can be.” (Haley, 1964, p. 43) His English teacher then suggested he consider a career in carpentry. It seemed to be at this point that Malcolm realized the actual difference between white and black. Several of the other students, with much lower grades than Malcolm, were encouraged to do whatever they wished, while Malcolm was discouraged based only on his color. Malcolm said, “it was then that I began to change – inside.” (Haley, 1964, p. 44)

During the following summer, Malcolm visited his father’s grown daughter from his first marriage, Ella, in Boston. Here he encountered many proud black people. Black people who were active in church and who were a community, much unlike the white community in Lansing. He returned to school in the Fall. Now seeing all of the problems in the community he lived in, he began to rebel. He quit working at his studies, quit playing basketball, and became very anti-social. At the age of 15, Malcolm dropped out of school and returned to Boston.

After living in Boston for a few years, Malcolm moved to Harlem New York. In Harlem, Malcolm survived by gambling, bartending , and peddling drugs. In 1942, the Boston Draft Board contacted him. When he went down to

the Draft Board he was required to speak to a psychiatrist. Malcolm was not interested in being drafted and when he spoke to the psychiatrist he was quick to suggest that if he were enlisted he would try to unite the black soldiers to kill the whites. This ended his chances of draft.

By the middle 1940's, Malcolm began working as a hustler, a drug dealer, and even a pimp. In 1946, Malcolm was arrested and convicted of burglary and sentenced to eight to ten years in prison. He was sent to Charleston prison. One year later, after continued attempts by Ella, he was transferred to the experimental prison in Norfolk, Massachusetts. The prison was unique in that it believed in rehabilitation rather than just serving time. It was there that Malcolm met a prison inmate who introduced him to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam.

The Nation of Islam presented two different claims. One, it stated the definition of the white man as the devil and two, it offered affirmation of black history and culture. The Nation of Islam offered a religion based on black culture unlike Christianity which Malcolm X believed focused only on middle-class and white people. It was with this new ideology that Malcolm began to realize the importance of education.

He began learning by copying pages of the dictionary. Each day focusing on increasing his vocabulary and learning meanings to new words. Soon Malcolm began to study a wide variety of subjects including history, sociology, religion, and philosophy. He spent much time reading the history of slavery. He also began writing to Elijah Muhammad. Prison was also where Malcolm joined

the prison debate team. He was given the opportunity to compete against visiting students from Harvard and MIT. He was well prepared for debates and spent much time anticipating what his opponent would say and researching his responses. No matter what the subject of the debate was, Malcolm always found a way to tell history of the “monstrous crime” that the “collective white man” had committed against “the world’s collective non-white man.” (Haley, 1964, p. 53)

Malcolm was paroled in 1952. Upon release from prison, Malcolm joined the Nation of Islam. Upon joining, members replaced their surname with an “X.” The idea was to rid of the “evil white name” of their forefather’s slavemasters. Elijah sent Malcolm to the streets to speak to people; point out the injustices to blacks; and convince others to join the Muslim movement.

By the late 1950’s, Malcolm X was the Black Muslim’s best-known spokesperson. Elijah and Malcolm had a father-son relationship. Malcolm held what Elijah said as truth and respected his ideas and teachings totally. Black Nationalism thrived among poor blacks who had lost all hope in white society and its claims about freedom and justice for all. It gave an identity to many human beings in a white world that didn’t recognize black people as persons.

Malcolm’s early life made it impossible for him to accept nonviolence as a philosophy of human change. He grew up seeing domestic violence between his mother and father; viewed the violence of white hate groups; and saw the structural violence that led to hunger and the mental breakdown of his mother. Because Malcolm had early positive experiences with whites it served only to intensify his later negative feelings about them.

Malcolm was very successful recruiting members to the Black Muslims. The Nation of Islam membership grew from 400 members when Malcolm started to over 40,000 during his affiliation. This and other successes encouraged Elijah to name Malcolm minister of the most important temple on the East Coast.

For 12 years, from 1948-1964, Malcolm spoke on behalf of the Nation of Islam. Everything Malcolm spoke about was defined and approved by Elijah Muhammad. It was not until the early 1960's when Malcolm became more political and involved in the Civil Rights Movement. This led to increased tensions between Malcolm and Elijah.

1963 was a major turning point for Malcolm. In a "message to the Grass Roots" speech at a Northern Grass Roots Leadership Conference, Malcolm gave his most political talk yet, straying from the set talk approved by Elijah.

When John F. Kennedy was assassinated, Malcolm was quick to state that the assassination was an instance of the "chickens coming home to roost." (Cone, 1991, p. 184) His statement implying that America was a climate of hate brought about by enslavement and other issues. The assassination was an instance of the harvest coming up, a somewhat payback for the injustices ensued on others. The media saw Malcolm's statement as total disrespect of John F. Kennedy, giving no bearing to the points of Malcolm's statement regarding white oppression and God's justice. Elijah sentenced Malcolm to 90 days silence. Since Malcolm's life was based on debate and speech this was a very harsh penalty.

It was around this time that Malcolm learned of the immorality of Elijah. He was told that he has fathered four children with two mothers out of wedlock.

When he questioned Elijah about this, Elijah referred Malcolm to the bible, specifically to David and Noah, to try and justify his actions. Feeling ethically obligated to leave, Malcolm left the Nation of Islam in March, 1964. It was then that Malcolm realized some of the lies his total commitment had had him live.

Now Malcolm was a leader with no organization and very few public followers. Malcolm began to travel to Africa and the Middle East. It was in these travels that Malcolm found a new spirit of unity as he saw white and black people working alongside one another. It was then that he realized that not all white people were racist. Upon this realization Malcolm formed the Organization of African American Unity (OAAU). While the focus was black unity it now allowed the involvement of progressive white groups. However, Malcolm still followed the adage “whites can help us but they can’t join us.”

One of Malcolm’s goals was to remove the negative images of blackness as defined by whites. He encouraged black people to unite, to learn of their past, and to not fall into the trap of allowing whites to tell what blacks were capable of. He respected the intelligence of ordinary black people. He realized that his need to share information and speak out was urgent. He lived in constant danger and received daily threats on both his life and those of his family.

Malcolm X was assassinated, while beginning a speech on freedom and black unity, on February 21, 1965.

Examples of Symbolic Convergence Theory

There are several examples of Symbolic Convergence Theory present in the leadership of Malcolm X.

To begin, the “X” itself has much symbolism and meaning. In the past, the “X” was used to symbolize the ridding of the white name given to blacks by white slavemasters. It replaced the “African family name that he could never know.” (Haley, 1964, p. 53) Once replacing the name “Little” which had been given to him by the “white blue-eyed devil,” Malcolm went on to be known as Malcolm X

Today people everywhere can be seen with t-shirts and hats bearing the “X.” To some it symbolizes black unity and the fight for freedom, to others it holds different meanings. But to all it means Malcolm X. Whether one knows of his accomplishments and goals is not clear but when one sees the “X” one is aware of who it is representing.

Another example of symbolism was his nickname “Detroit Red.” His maternal grandmother was raped by a white man which caused Malcolm to have light skin and red hair. Malcolm used rape as a central theme in his early lectures because his color was a symbol of it.

Another statement frequently used by Malcolm X was “by any means necessary.” (Cone, 1991, p. 195) Malcolm spoke this phrase in most of his debates. The idea being that blacks must become united and overcome racial injustices “by any means necessary.” Where Martin Luther King, Jr. was also

striving for racial equality, it was Malcolm X who encouraged people to obtain their freedom at any cost. Malcolm was not afraid to raise the issue of violence as a possible means of success, where Martin Luther King, Jr. yearned for a peaceful compromise. “By any means necessary” became a slogan which blacks everywhere could relate. And while this invoked fear in many white people, the purpose was clear – success at whatever cost.

Malcolm used debate as a medium to reach the most possible people at any given time. He was always well-prepared and anxious to debate. Often, as his rhetorical skills became better known, many would try to avoid or decline debating with Malcolm because he was so adept at both asking the right questions and answering any question. Malcolm often saw debates with whites as the “oppressed vs. the oppressor.” (Cone, 1991, p. 102) He was always in control of the discussion. He would move the discussion in the direction of his own intellectual strengths and set the scenario so that he could state his goal at the time of his choosing. His repeated statements regarding slavery, black injustice, and achieving freedom “by any means necessary” led to an environment in which repeated fantasy themes and sagas were constant.

Religion also played a very significant role in Malcolm’s life and leadership. Viewing Christianity as a white, middle-class religion, Malcolm focused instead on the religion of Islam. It was not until his travel to Mecca that Malcolm realized the unity that could be shared by all races. It was also Malcolm’s commitment to religion which helped him eventually realize both the chances for unity and the immorality practiced by Elijah Muhammad.

Another example of symbolism portrayed by Malcolm X was his respect when addressing and speaking of Elijah Muhammad. In speeches and debates everywhere Malcolm would state “The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us that...” Malcolm had complete submission and absolute obedience to Elijah until the very end of this affiliation with the Nation of Islam. He placed his faith and commitment in the Nation of Islam and Elijah and abided by the requests and statements told to him.

Malcolm spoke the truth, often stating “the best thing to put the white man to fright is the truth.” (Cone, 1991, p. 95) Malcolm spoke the truth in simplicity, clarity, and with the passion of an angry biblical prophet. He spoke in a style to infuriate whites; to give whites a chance to feel that which blacks had felt for years. His ability to instill fear in whites seemed to ignite blacks everywhere. His push for blacks to become more educated, to know their roots and understand the injustices, seem to appeal to a wide variety of blacks. By focusing on the phrase “by any means necessary” he encouraged others to “refuse absolutely to let white exploiters shape the ethics of resistance of exploitation.” (Cone, 1991, p. 303) His respect and common roots to the poor and ordinary black people helped him unite the blacks to fight against injustice.

Symbolic Convergence Theory is evident in much of Malcolm X’s actions. His ability to create phrases and words which invoked deep held feelings and beliefs within masses of black people everywhere helped him unite poor blacks and rich blacks alike to strive toward freedom and fight for justice. From the start, with the symbolism of his name, to his strength in character and speech, to

his humility and self-criticism his leadership can be undenied. While being addressed as the “angriest Negro in America” (Cone, 1991, p.304) Malcolm was still able to respect other views and encourage their challenge and criticism.

Limitations of Symbolic Convergence Theory

Symbolic Convergence Theory creates a means of communication to discuss common experiences and outcomes. Symbols are easily identifiable and understandable. Individual’s meanings for symbols can converge to create a shared reality which can both be identified and viewed by others. Symbolic Convergence Theory does have limitations in that while it does seem to encompass many aspects of leadership it is not complete.

One limitation of the theory is that it “does not yield predictions and control.” (Bormann, 1983, p. 122). Although in describing the theory it is mentioned that the repeated use of fantasy themes and fantasy types does create predictable outcomes, the theory is unable to predict the level of these outcomes.

Another limitation of the theory is that it is said to be a general communications theory, however the studies have been confined to analyzing communication within the United States. One can not use the theory to explain communication in other countries because it has not been analyzed elsewhere. Malcolm X may not have had the same success with his rhetoric in a third world country as he did in the United States. The main focus of the theory is on dramatizing and creating fantasy. These themes are present in daily

communication in the United States however ^{they} may or may not be viewed in the same way elsewhere. (The idea of the creation of an inside-joke may not even be identifiable in a different country.)

out of context

The other major limitation of this theory, when applying it to Malcolm X, is that it does not encompass all of the leadership styles and traits. While, in my opinion, no theory can be complete, Symbolic Convergence Theory seems to cover the communication issues very well but seems to be less focused on the personal traits held by the leader themselves. Other theories, like transformational leadership theory and servant-leadership, seem to focus more on the leader and less on the ways the leader shares information.

Connections to other Leadership Theories

As described in the preceding pages, several aspects of Malcolm X's life fits the Symbolic Convergence Theory very well. However, other leadership theories also play a key role in analyzing Malcolm X and his leadership. Both transformational leadership and servant leadership play a vital role in the development of Malcolm X.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership theory was developed by James MacGregor Burns. Transformational leadership is leadership in which change is the key. In this theory both the leader and those being led are involved in a mutual relationship in which they are motivated to seek higher levels of achievement, ethical behavior, and morality. Transformational leadership involves three key components: morality, transcendence, and vision.

Morality means to put aside self-interest to pursue a larger goal. Transcendence is the utilization of empowerment, truth, and responsibility. Vision is the goal of the mutual relationship which will be achieved if all work together.

Malcolm X experienced three distinct transformations during his leadership. The first major change was when he joined the Nation of Islam. His total commitment to Elijah Muhammad illustrated his vision of recruiting others to join a mutual cause. Freedom for blacks was not going to be achieved without the effort of the masses.

Another transformation for Malcolm occurred 12 years later when he left the Nation of Islam. One of the main reasons Malcolm left was based on an issue on the morality of Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad. When he heard that Elijah had fathered four children with two different women out of wedlock, he began to view the ethical and moral conduct of Elijah as something of which he

did not want to be a part of. For the first time he was now independent and able to speak out on any issue. While the truth had always been the mainstay of his speech, he was now allowed to speak out on issues not endorsed by Elijah Muhammad.

Malcolm X experienced another change when he visited the holy lands of Mecca. It was here that he experienced a “spiritual rebirth.” (Cone, 1991, p. 197) He saw true brotherhood being practiced and everyone working toward a common good and common goal. All were participating in the same ritual in the spirit of unity. No longer would he view all whites as racist. This change was vital to his understanding and participation in the civil rights movement.

While his goal of uniting blacks to fight for freedom against injustice remained the same, his means of achieving this goal changed. By recognizing his shortcomings and acknowledging his mistakes he was able to make positive changes in both his own actions and beliefs and also those who followed him. The role of transformational leadership was vital in his evolving into the leader he became in the end.

Servant-Leadership

Servant-Leadership is a concept developed by Robert Greenleaf in the 1960's. The idea of servant-leadership is that great leaders first seek to serve others and then they are compelled to lead. There are ten main characteristics central to the development of servant-leadership: listening, empathy, healing,

awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, and commitment of the growth of others, and building community. (Spears, 1998, p. 6).

Malcolm X had several of these characteristics present in his leadership. Malcolm X had a great awareness, both general awareness and self-awareness. As stated by Greenleaf “awareness is not a giver of solace – it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and an awakener. Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed. They are not seekers after solace. They have their own inner serenity.” (Spears, 1998, p. 4). While Malcolm X did not appear to have his own inner serenity until late in his leadership he certainly had a great awareness of the situations around him, his ability to make changes, and the importance of sharing his knowledge with others.

Malcolm X was very persuasive. His use of rhetoric was vital in engaging others to action. His use of debate and speeches to voice his opinions to the largest audience possible was used to try and invoke community and shared awareness.

Malcolm X also had great foresight. In prison he spent years studying the history of slavery and other issues of great importance to him. This knowledge enabled him “to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future.” (Spears, 1998, p. 5). He was also very committed to the growth of people, especially in his case, black people. He encouraged blacks to become educated so that they could realize their past so that they could change the future. He could relate to the ordinary black

person because he had had the same roots. This commonality seemed to create a feeling of community and seemed to draw blacks from similar backgrounds to seek refuge and put focus on his teachings.

The idea of servant-leadership is to first look to serving others. From the beginning of his affiliation with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm was focused on serving Elijah Muhammad and the beliefs held by Black Muslims. He began by recruiting others to join them and ended up leading others in the ministry.

Greenleaf states that “true leadership emerges from those whose primary motivation is a deep desire to help others.” (Spears, 1998, p. 3). Malcolm X seems to exemplify this statement completely. His focus, from the onset, was to unite blacks to fight against white injustice. He began with that purpose and died striving to ensure that this same purpose would be reached.

Summary and Conclusion

Symbolic Convergence Theory is a general theory of communication that discusses the ideas of group consciousness, the dynamic of sharing group fantasies, and the role evolving culture plays in the interaction of symbols. It focuses on determining and identifying symbols in diverse communities and showing how the meanings for these symbols intersect to create shared results. It “explains how people come to share enough symbolic ground to take part in logical negotiation processes to achieve coorientation and also explains how

individuals come to share a common sentiment or emotional involvement and commitment to symbols.” (Bormann, 1983, p. 102). By understanding the ² and A
applying Symbolic Convergence Theory to a specific leader, in this case
Malcolm X, one is able to assess the conflicts and motivations within a culture
and is able to identify and anticipate future communicative events.

Four basic themes are the focus of Symbolic Convergence Theory.

Fantasy themes are the content of the dramatizing message which is connected by participants. Fantasy types are the repetition of particular scenarios that stress specific ideological emphasis. A symbolic cue is a word, phrase, slogan, or gesture that triggers previously shared fantasies and emotions. A saga is the repeated telling of the achievement in the life of a person, group, community, organization or nation. The sharing of fantasy themes creates cohesiveness within the group or community.

Several examples of these themes were evident in the leadership of Malcolm X. Symbolic cues like “X” and “by any means necessary” were used repeatedly to both symbolize specific meanings and to create fantasy themes and fantasy types which were repeated in debates and speeches throughout Malcolm X’s time with the Nation of Islam. The symbols held specific and shared meanings across diverse cultures and communities. By understanding their meaning and purpose, Malcolm X was able to use them to create a shared vision and create group consciousness.

While this theory does encompass many of the leadership traits presented by Malcolm X it is important to look at other theories, like transformational leadership theory and servant-leadership, to be able to be more complete.

Malcolm X was a great leader. He was a black militant who was feared by many people. His initial leadership was viewed as violent however in closer analysis it becomes evident that while he did not condone violence he saw it only as a necessary tool to succeed. The transformations in Malcolm's life from self-destruction in his adolescence to enlightenment in his conversion to Nation of Islam to redemption in his rise as a political activist are too telling to be ignored. These changes made him a more effective leader and a more aware one.

Malcolm X spoke the truth and pointed out injustices. He was able to self-criticize and showed great humility. He had a willingness to acknowledge his mistakes and limitations. He was able to grow and change as his situations and beliefs changed.

Malcolm X was also a servant-leader. His main goal was to unite blacks to fight injustice. He was a follower of the Nation of Islam for 12 years however, he was placed in a leadership position quite early in his affiliation. His beliefs in the need for change compelled him to lead which is the exact definition of servant-leadership.

Malcolm X had great courage and integrity. He was able to teach people how to organize themselves for the purpose of achieving their freedom. He possessed such leadership traits as "solidarity, willingness to serve, and willingness to suffer with the people, even to the point of death." (Cone, 1991, p.

299). He was a leader who was picked by the people because of his similarities and ability to speak the truth. To conclude, “real leaders are not self-appointed but are chosen by the people.” (Cone, 1991, p. 299). Malcolm X was definitely chosen by the people.

Applying Symbolic Convergence Theory is vital to recognizing the importance of rhetoric and symbolism presented by Malcolm X. As with all leadership theories it is important to realize that no one theory can be used alone.

Leadership is a complex concept which requires constant innovation and structure. By being able to recognize the different leadership theories practiced by certain leaders one can both better analyze the leaders actions and techniques and two, emulate those strengths and traits that create positive change and role models. Malcolm X was a leader who did not get enough credit for his achievements. His means were very different and somewhat threatening, but his goal was very focused and defined. One can learn a lot about leadership by studying Malcolm X, his rhetoric, and his use of symbolism.

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