

# The Leadership Teachers Want from Principals: Transformational

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study, which was part of a larger study, was to examine teacher perceptions of transformational leadership qualities among principals. From a randomly generated sample of 135 public schools in the province of Alberta, Canada, 77 schools agreed to participate in a study on leadership attributes of principals. Ten randomly selected teachers from each participating school were asked to complete the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Bass & Avolio, 1995, 1997, 2000a) for their respective principals. The MLQ was a quantitative instrument in which teachers rated principals. Based on teacher responses, principals were stratified into categories according to whether they possessed high or low levels of transformational leadership qualities. Using the MLQ to rank principals allowed for clear selection criteria to group them. Once the principals were stratified, 10 teachers were then selected for in-depth interviews. Five of the teachers worked with principals who were characterized as highly transformational

and five worked with principals characterized as low in transformational leadership attributes. One teacher from the low group subsequently withdrew from the study. The purpose of this study was to determine which characteristics and behaviours teachers viewed as most desirable in principals. The interpretation of the data indicated teachers strongly preferred behaviours that aligned with the aspects of transformational leadership.

## **Précis**

Les données partagées dans cet article font partie d'une étude préliminaire. Une analyse plus approfondie et plus fiable des données sera effectuée plus tard. Soixante dix-sept écoles parmi un échantillon généré de manière aléatoire de cent trente-cinq écoles publiques de la province de l'Alberta, au Canada, ont accepté de participer à une étude sur les qualités de leadership des directeurs d'école. Dix professeurs choisis au hasard dans chaque école participante ont été invités à remplir le Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Bass et Avolio, 1995, 1997, 2000) à l'égard de leurs directeurs respectifs. Selon les résultats du MLQ, les directeurs d'école ont été divisés en catégories représentant des niveaux élevés ou faibles de qualités de leadership transformationnel. Dix enseignants ont ensuite été sélectionnés pour participer à des entrevues en profondeur. Pour une des composantes qualitatives, des enseignants de dix écoles ont été choisis en vue d'entrevues en profondeur. Cinq de ces enseignants avaient travaillé avec des directeurs qui ont été qualifiés d'extrêmement transformationnels, et cinq avaient travaillé avec des directeurs qui ont été caractérisés comme ayant de faibles attributs de leadership transformationnel (l'un d'eux a plus tard mis fin à sa participation à l'étude). L'interprétation des données a permis d'affirmer que les enseignants préféraient nettement les comportements de directeur qui reflétaient certains aspects du leadership transformationnel.

## Introduction

Principal leadership is paramount in developing effective schools and enhancing student achievement (Blase & Kirby, 1992; Edmonds, 1979; Hallinger & Heck, 1996, 1998; Heck & Hallinger, 1999; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000a; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). The current emphasis on school change and efforts to create successful educational leaders demands that professionals master a deeper understanding of how to work within a school milieu (Whitaker, 2003), because doing so is considered critical to the quality of teachers' work and student learning. Available literature vacillates over how to approach the study of principal leadership. Some researchers have used quantitative designs (Hallinger & Heck, 1996, 1998), others have provided data from meta-studies (Deal & Peterson, 1990), and still others have approached the issue by attempting to secure first-hand reports using empirical measures (Blase & Blase, 2000; Blase & Kirby, 1992; Hauserman, 2005; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990, 1999, 2000a).

Quantitative designs that assess school principal leadership provide one avenue to understand the influence of principals' actions on teachers' attitudes. Qualitative analysis affords the opportunity for a researcher to dig beneath surface responses and better understand the qualities and behaviours of principals who are appreciated, sought, or disliked by teachers. Often, mixed-method designs can provide triangulated data that lead to greater understanding (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003).

In this study, the quantitative component consisted of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) ratings of principals. The MLQ is an instrument that measures transactional, laissez-faire, and transformational leadership factors. For the purposes of this study, the ratings were used to stratify the principals into categories based on their perceived transformational leadership qualities. This process allowed for clear selection criteria to rank principals for the qualitative interviews.

Bass and Avolio (2000a) hold the view that transactional and transformational leadership are not dichotomous—rather, the relationship between the two leadership styles is one of augmentation. Thus, many of the managerial characteristics of transactional leadership must be present before transformational attributes can emerge. Bass (1985) presents four transformational variables that are measured by the MLQ: idealized influence, individualized concern, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation. These variables lend themselves to studying school settings in conjunction with teacher reports of transformational leadership qualities.

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## Literature Review

### Transformational Leadership Theory

Burns (1978) described transformational leadership as an effort to satisfy followers' needs and to move followers to a higher level of work performance and organizational involvement by displaying respect and encouraging participation. He said the apparent differences between transformational and transactional leadership arose because the former "recognizes and exploits an existing need or demand of a potential follower . . . looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower" (p. 4). Transactional leadership reportedly appealed to an individual's self-interest and was mainly an exchange process. Such leadership had limited potential for success, whereas transformational leadership was deemed to predict favourable long-term performance (Geyer & Steyer, 1998; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

Long-term performance reveals the visionary aspect of transformational leadership (Bennis & Nannus, 1985). In schools, this was evidenced by leaders acting as change agents in facilitating organizational learning (Tichy & Devenna, 1990), a pivotal role for principals. Building on the work of Burns (1978), Bass (1985) posited that leadership was composed of three domains: transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire. He initiated a study of transformational leadership with an open-ended questionnaire (Bass & Avolio, 1993) that led to the development of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire. That instrument was validated across a variety of sectors, including industry (Hater & Bass, 1988) and the military (Yammarino & Bass, 1990), and resulted in the Full Range Leadership (FRL) model and training program (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1998). Subsequently, the MLQ was checked for validity and reliability in other research (Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1995, 2000a). In 2001, Pittenger reviewed the MLQ in *The Fourteenth Mental Measurements Yearbook* and concluded that available research for the MLQ "does provide evidence that the instrument consistently measures constructs in keeping with Bass' theory" (p. 2).

The MLQ has been used in business (Bass, 1998; Hater & Bass, 1988; Waldman, Bass, & Einstein, 1987), schools (Bass, 1998; Fisher, 2003; Hauserman, 2005; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2004; McIntyre, 2003; Nader, 1997; Philbin,

1997; Small, 2003), and the armed forces (Yammarino & Bass, 1990; Bass, 1998; Bass & Avolio, 2000b). Additionally, it has been continuously studied to ensure validity and reliability (Antonkis, Avolio, & Sivasubramaniam, 2003; Avolio et al., 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1990, 1993, 1995, 2000a). Application of the transformational leadership concepts to education occurred with the realization of how important leadership styles, particularly transformational leadership behaviours, were to the academic success of students and the cohesiveness of a school faculty (Duke & Leithwood, 1994; Fisher, 2003; Geijsel, Slegers, Leithwood, & Jantzi, 2003; Leithwood, 1994; McIntyre, 2003; Small, 2003).

Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1999) claimed that a transformational leadership model comported well with education. Bass (1998) had explained that position by saying that every leader displayed each leadership style to some degree: “the person with an optimal profile infrequently displays laissez-faire (LF) leadership . . . [but] displays successively higher frequencies of the transactional qualities . . . and the transformational components most frequently” (p. 8). The most effective leaders augmented transactional leadership with transformational leadership “in generating the higher levels of extra effort, commitment, performance, and satisfaction of those led . . . This has been true almost regardless of the level of leadership position, the type of organization, and the culture in which both are embedded” (Avolio, 1999, p. 40). Such leadership increased the levels of trust, satisfaction, and commitment (Koh, 1990), resulting in significant and positive changes in schools (Silins, 1994).

Bass (1985) believed transactional and transformational leadership qualities were not dichotomous but that elements of both styles were present in effective leaders, surfacing to greater or lesser degrees according to prevailing circumstances. A transactional leader was one who operated within a defined system and followed its rules. Control was maintained through processes. Transformational leaders sought new ways of doing things and were less likely to support the status quo. They attempted to create and shape an environment and encouraged followers to be a part of the process. In later research, Bass (1998) claimed that transactional leadership skills were foundational to the development of transformational leadership skills.

Following a sequential mixed-method design, Kirby, King, and Paradise (1992) used the MLQ 5F-Revised (Bass, 1988) when studying school principal transformational leadership. In the first stage, data was gathered from 103 practising professional educators enrolled in graduate education courses. Effective principal leadership was associated

with the MLQ categories of idealized influence and intellectual stimulation. A second study, with 58 different professional educators also taking graduate courses, asked for descriptions of an extraordinary educational leader with whom each participant had worked. The researchers concluded that followers appreciated leaders who engaged in “transformational behaviors associated with individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and the transactional behavior of contingent reward” (p. 309).

Philbin (1997) studied transformational leadership and student performance in Indiana high schools, grades 9–12, stratified for students’ economic status and cognitive abilities as measured against the state test mean. The twin foci of that investigation were to learn whether there was a relationship between principals’ transformational behaviours and enhanced student learning as determined by the state’s annual achievement test, and whether teachers reported (i) willingness to extend themselves at work, (ii) increased levels of job satisfaction, and (iii) perceived self-effectiveness with instructional practices. Lead teachers voluntarily provided the information using the Bass and Avolio MLQ 5X form. The analyses indicated that principals in all of the high schools studied evidenced transformational leadership behaviours. In addition, teacher perceptions of highly transformational principals resulted in teachers being happier with the school leadership and more willing to put greater effort into their jobs; they also believed that the leadership for their respective schools was more effective than other schools. Kurland, Peretz, and Hertz-Lazarowitz (2010) explored the influence of leadership on vision in schools as learning organizations. High-functioning schools were found to have transformational principals who shaped the school vision and learning processes within the organization, thus creating a positive learning culture. Those findings reinforced Skalbeck’s (1991) earlier conclusions that a principal’s vision and the establishment of a collegial culture fostered teacher empowerment. Shifting the emphasis from a supervisor being the sole decision maker to greater teacher involvement fostered reflection and positive change among teachers. They experienced a sense of empowerment as professional educators when they viewed themselves as knowledgeable and capable of focusing on student learning needs (Grimmett, Rostad, & Ford, 1992).

Smith and Bell (2011) concluded that head teachers in England used both transactional and transformational leadership, but it was the transformational leadership that brought about the greatest school improvements. “Transformational leadership is a powerful stimulant to improvement. *Vision building, developing consensus about group*

*goals, providing intellectual stimulation and individual support, culture building and contingent reward* were the leadership dimensions that most accounted for this stimulation” (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 37; emphasis in original).

## **The Role of a Principal**

The single most important factor in school effectiveness is the principal (Edmonds, 1979; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Hoy & Smith, 2007). That person provides instructional leadership (Austin, 1978; Hallinger & Heck, 1996, 1998) and is pivotal to creating organizational conditions under which teachers work best (Blase & Kirby, 1992; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990, 2000a, 2000b; Rosenholtz, Bassler, & Hoover-Demsey, 1986). According to Hoy and Smith (2007), transformational leadership by a principal increased teacher efficacy. Purkey and Smith (1983) concluded that many variables were important, but the real change occurred at the school level under the guidance of principal leadership. Superintendents and school districts provided policy guidance, but principal leadership at the school level affected performance (Murphy & Hallinger, 1986, 1988).

A variety of responsibilities and activities are associated with the role of principal. Principals must stimulate, nurture, and support teachers (Hipp & Bredeson, 1995), be good role models, encourage cooperation, work collaboratively (Bosster, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982; Greenfield, 1982), emphasize facilitation, and support empowerment (Lambert et al., 1995; Short & Greer, 1997). Recently, there has been a greater emphasis on shared decision making and professional learning communities (Dufour, 1998; Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). The organizational structure has shifted to a more open and democratic model. Understanding the role of collaboration is essential for implementing change, and transformational principals are best equipped to address these issues (Marks & Nance, 2007).

Hallinger and Heck (1998) discovered that principal leadership was tied to student academic achievement; principals had an indirect effect on school effectiveness and student performance. More recently, Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) concluded that many aspects of transformational leadership positively correlated with improved student achievement. Leithwood et al. (2004) concluded: “Leadership was second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school . . . Leadership effects are usually largest where and when they are needed

most” (p. 3). These ideas resonate with the transformational approach to leadership advocated by Bass (1997).

Eval and Roth (2011), in a study of the relationship between transformational leadership and motivation, concluded leadership style is a significant factor in the motivation of teachers.

Teachers reported that principals who had the greatest influence were open, participatory, and effective (Blase & Blase, 1999a, 1999b, 2000; Blase & Kirby, 1992; Hoy & Smith, 2007). Better student learning and more committed teachers were associated with school principals demonstrating transformational leadership. If such observations are supportable, it will be important for the upcoming generation of school administrators, especially school principals, to fully understand transformational leadership. This study was conceived to test claims that principal leadership style is of paramount importance to educational processes. The study involved obtaining survey information related to school principals and their leadership styles as reported by voluntary teacher participants. Quantitative analysis of teacher responses guided the subsequent interviews with selected teachers.

## **Methodology**

The MLQ was used with a random sample of teachers from 135 public schools in the province of Alberta, Canada, to identify the transformational leadership qualities of principals. The sample of schools was randomly selected from a list provided by the Alberta government department responsible for K–12 education. Principals were contacted by phone and asked for approval to contact teaching staff for voluntary participation in the study. Secretaries at cooperating schools randomly distributed the MLQ survey to 10 teachers, who then rated the leadership of their respective principals on a five-point Likert scale: zero represented “not at all” whereas four represented “frequently, if not often.” Usable MLQ data was received from 77 schools. The sample used for securing participants to be interviewed later was selected from schools at which five or more teachers had responded. There were 58 such schools.

The MLQ was a quantitative instrument whereby teachers rated principals. Based on teacher responses, principals were stratified into categories as having high or low levels of transformational leadership qualities. Using the MLQ to rank principals allowed



for clear selection criteria to group the principals. Once the principals were stratified, 10 teachers were then selected for in-depth interviews. Five of the teachers worked with principals who were characterized as highly transformational and five with principals characterized as low in transformational leadership attributes. One teacher from the low group subsequently withdrew from the study. The purpose of this study was to determine which principal characteristics and behaviours teachers viewed as most desirable, by contrasting principals with high and low levels of transformational qualities.

Data from teacher rankings of principals on the MLQ were arranged into four quartiles of transformational leadership. Schools with principals in the upper and lower quartiles were selected for subsequent teacher interviews as they were the most widely dispersed. A random number generator was used to select potential interviewees from each school. Initially, there were five interviewees in each group; however, as mentioned above, one of the teachers from the low group elected to withdraw from the study. The remaining nine participants were full-time teachers who worked at schools varying in size from 250 to 900 students. The interviewees were representative of a number of school grade levels and school sizes (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Grade Configurations and School Populations of Interviewees

Quartile	Grade Configuration	School Population
Lowest	1–6	500–600
Lowest	1–6	400–500
Lowest	7–12	400–500
Lowest	1–12	400–500
Highest	1–6	300–400
Highest	6–8	400–500
Highest	9–12	300–400
Highest	10–12	800–900
Highest	1–12	250–300

The interview questions focused on the four dimensions of transformational leadership: idealized influence, individualized concern, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation. The purpose of the interviews was to delineate the transformational qualities teachers valued. The interviews were used to highlight the key question, “What

were the behaviours of highly transformational principals that were indicative of showing support for teachers?" The process to determine this was done through descriptions of what qualities were present or absent from principals' actions, as reported by teachers.

All interviews were (i) conducted by telephone, (ii) focused on the four components of transformational leadership, (iii) recorded with permission, and (iv) transcribed into Microsoft Word within two working days. The MAXQDA program was used to sort and categorize the data for between- and cross-case analysis using a variation of the qualitative tradition of constant comparison.

Two randomly selected five-minute sections from each recording were used to verify intra-reliability. There was 100% reliability with each transcript. A verbatim transcript was then mailed to each participant, with a self-addressed envelope, soliciting confirmation of the data's accuracy. The interviewees were asked to return the documents with any necessary corrections or clarifications. There were no changes.

## Results

Teachers with highly transformational principals gave much more vivid and detailed descriptions and provided many examples for each of the four transformational leadership variables. It appeared they could not report enough positives about their principals. Teachers with low transformational principals had the greatest difficulty responding with examples or comments for the category of intellectual stimulation.

### **Idealized Influence**

Principals in the low category treated teachers as professionals and provided some support when requested. There was little focus on leadership development, and staff were excluded from participation.

Highly transformational principals helped to develop the leadership capacity of all staff members, and teachers were given opportunities to share their leadership skills. These principals worked collaboratively with staff to increase the level of personal and school support and to create a consistent vision. When policy or process questions arose, they sought to involve the persons affected and oftentimes engaged in personal research

and reflection on important issues. Professional growth for personnel was deemed a priority, and the principals themselves modeled such activities.

### **Individualized Consideration**

Principals in the low category worked cooperatively with staff and were believed to be caring and supportive of individual teachers in areas such as professional development. At times, these principals sought all teachers' input on decision making, but staff consultation was limited. This behaviour created difficulties, as some staff members were viewed as having undue influence with respect to school issues.

Principals rated as exhibiting high levels of transformational leadership assisted teachers with problems and encouraged reflection. Collaboration was the norm and deemed important. Problems and issues were discussed in an open manner without fear of retaliation, and persons directly impacted by decisions were involved in the decision-making process. Importantly, these principals were viewed as colleagues rather than bosses. They dealt with matters in an ethical manner and inspired a high level of trust in co-workers.

### **Inspirational Motivation**

The low transformational principals were cited as demonstrating inspirational motivation by showing support for new ideas and curriculum implementation. There was limited accountability for staff members, and principals were hesitant to change.

Principals in the high category emphasized teamwork and collegiality. Controversial issues were dealt with in an open atmosphere. Highly transformational principals were an inspiration to teachers. Such principals reportedly served as good role models and focused on doing "the right things for the right reasons."

### **Intellectual Stimulation**

For principals in the low category, there were some general comments about vision and support, but respondents could cite few specific examples. Problem solving was not a priority and was often neglected.

Principals from the highest quartile were characterized as able to push forward and think outside the box. They asked invitational questions as they encouraged reflection. They were seen as visionary. Problem solving was a collaborative process. Teachers enjoyed working with these highly transformation principals.

### **Summary of Interviews**

Principals rated low on transformational criteria were described succinctly. Their apparent influence on teachers and schools was marginal, and they preferred limiting the development of leadership capacity to the administrative team. They seldom sought input, and some colleagues had greater influence over their decisions. There was support for professional development, but principals did not model professional growth. They exhibited less receptivity to change or new ideas. They appeared not to monitor teacher activities and had a lax attitude toward intellectual stimulation. Interestingly, they discussed and shared visioning but showed no apparent initiative to engage in reflective practice or problem solving.

Highly transformational principals were viewed as effective disciplinarians who focused on making students responsible. They acted as role models and emphasized collaboration. Distributed leadership qualities were present, as they encouraged leadership in staff. They were open to innovative ideas and supported projects by providing resources. Highly transformational principals were respectful and considerate of staff. These principals consulted those affected by decisions or issues. Highly transformational principals were trusted and viewed as professionals.

### **Discussion**

This study addressed the call by Antonkis et al. (2003) for research in the field of leadership across a variety of contexts and with different methodologies. The results were interpreted qualitatively and supported the importance of the transformational leadership components of idealized influence, individual consideration, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1998; Bass & Avolio, 1993). How teachers characterized principals in the highly transformational group can be summarized as follows:

- *Idealized influence* behaviours highlighted included maintaining and creating visibility, developing rapport, holding students and teachers accountable, having high expectations, having a best-practices emphasis, leading by example, mentoring, showing consistent fairness, making ethical decisions, and building leadership capacity.
- *Individual consideration* behaviours included collaborating on decisions, listening and caring, consulting involved parties, being consistent, and making decisions that were best for children.
- *Inspirational motivation* behaviours were demonstrated by showing encouragement and support, promoting teamwork, celebrating successes, and using humour effectively.
- *Intellectual stimulation* was illustrated by asking questions and challenging the status quo, explaining decisions, using current research, trusting staff to take risks, focusing on a collaborative vision, being a proactive problem solver, and providing creative solutions.

Teachers who worked with highly transformational principals were effusive in their comments and praised the positive organizational culture at their school. In contrast, teachers who worked with principals evidencing low levels of transformational qualities were frustrated with the behaviours of their respective principals and the attendant negative implications for the school's culture.

## Recommendations for Additional Studies

This qualitative research revealed specific behaviours teachers wanted from principals. It would be useful to consider interviewing a systematically stratified sample of different K–12 teachers from the same pool. The research could also be extended by using similar procedures with purposefully selected samples of teachers in other geographic locations.

Another suggestion for follow-up qualitative research would centre upon currently serving school principals. Securing an understanding of how they believe they act as leaders would be informative if these results were juxtaposed with feedback from teachers in their respective schools. The focus would need to be proactive in the sense of seeking to enhance communications that lead to better schools for children.

The issue of school leadership might be approached by critically reviewing leadership programs. The information from this study suggests that course content and related experiences of participants should include discussions about transformational leadership and how it impacts teachers.

## **Limitations**

The findings of this study relate to interviews completed with nine teachers from the province of Alberta, Canada. Guiding the interviews was the MLQ data, which provided for stratification of principals based on their transformational qualities as perceived by teachers. Although caution should be exercised in generalizing these findings to other areas and situations, the conclusions are consistent with earlier research regarding the desirability of highly transformational principals in public school environments.

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