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IMAGINATION AND TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

For leaders to be transformational they must think imaginatively

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“[Human beings] think about the future in a way that no other animal can, does, or ever has...” (Gilbert, 2006, p.4). Imagining the future in complex and creative ways distinguishes humans from other animals. Beyond this, how *well* and how *much* individual human beings use their imagination can define their leadership potential. With global competition continuing to intensify, visionary companies are investing in leaders who can use their imagination to build a competitive edge.

Transformational leadership is a style of leadership that has proven to be effective across many contexts (Curtis, 2013). Although the aim of transformational leadership is to inspire followers to transcend their own self-interests for a higher collective vision (Bass, 1985), little is known about the connection between the ability to have such vision and leaders’ tendency to think imaginatively per se. Recently, a new measure of thinking styles was developed that assesses individual differences in preference for creative and imaginative thinking. This measure, the Rational-Experiential Multimodal Inventory (REIm: Norris & Epstein, 2011) has been developed in the wider context of Cognitive-Experiential Theory (Epstein, 2014), which attempts to capture individual differences in people’s thinking styles.

Cerni, Curtis and Colmar (2014) proposed the Cognitive-Experiential Leadership Model (CELM), which outlines the interrelationship between leaders’ thinking styles, as described by Cognitive-Experiential Theory, and their leadership styles. In this model it is proposed that two aspects of thinking styles are particularly strongly related to transformational leadership, namely, a preference for rational thinking and a preference for action-orientated problem-solving called behavioral coping. The proposed connections among transformational leadership, rational thinking, and behavioral coping are supported by the results of a number of empirical studies (e.g., Cerni, Curtis, & Colmar, 2008, 2010).

The CELM also proposes that a preference for imaginative thinking will be connected to transformational leadership because it should predict leaders' ability to imagine a new vision for their organization (Cerni et al., 2014). However, published research that preceded the development of the CELM did not measure leaders' preference for the imaginative thinking, because this research occurred before the development of the REIm. Nonetheless, in unpublished research, King (2012) reports a study of 77 school principals who completed the REIm, to assess preferences for rational and imaginative thinking, along with measures of behavioral coping and leadership styles. She found that these leaders' preference for imaginative thinking predicted additional variance in transformational leadership beyond that which was predicted by a preference for rational thinking and behavioral coping. This study provides new and interesting evidence that imaginative thinking is critically important to transformational leadership.

In addition to imaginative thinking helping transformational leaders create a vision for their organization, imaginative thinking may be critical to the further development of transformational leadership skills via coaching. Cerni (2015) has proposed a development framework for leaders that draws upon the connections between thinking styles and leadership styles outlined in the CELM. He suggests that coaching using guided reflection can help leaders to effectively tap into their creativity and innovative potential.

This guided reflection model of leadership coaching specifically aims to enhance imaginative capacity in leaders, but it implicitly requires leaders to possess some imagination to begin with (Cerni, 2015). Its goal of enhancing imaginative and creative capacity is enacted through supporting leaders to increase their awareness of how they think. Still, to be able to understand their own thinking systems leaders must

be able to visualize, or abstractly conceptualize, these systems. Moreover, in order to use their thinking more effectively, leaders must be able to imagine how it can be used differently from how it is being used now. Thus, some initial imagination is integral to the development of higher-level imaginative thinking.

In conclusion, to be a transformational leader, and to develop their transformational leadership capabilities, leaders must engage in imaginative thinking. Measuring individual differences in preference for imaginative thinking may be a useful addition to selection techniques for potential leaders. Furthermore, a way of enhancing imagination, according to the principles of Cognitive-Experiential Theory, is to allow the unconscious brain to process information and then use guided reflection to integrate this information into conscious rational thought (Cerni, 2015). Can you imagine an unimaginative person who is, nonetheless, able to become a transformational leader? No, neither can we.

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