

The Theory and Practice of Leadership: An Experiential and Reflexive Perspective in the Context of Professional Development

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Introduction

This chapter focuses on the theory and practice of leadership. Leadership is not merely about what is prescribed in the literature, but also in practice. There are various theories of leadership. I seek to test the theories of leadership with what I have personally experienced in the organisations that I have worked for. To achieve this, the chapter reflects on my interactions with senior colleagues in leadership roles. The leadership and styles theories are used as the framework for the discussion and arguments being made in this chapter. The intention is not to provide a detailed discussion of each of these leadership theories, but to understand the evolution of theoretical debates and research on leadership.

It is not the intention of this chapter to provide a comprehensive review of various theoretical debates on the types of leadership. What I intend to do is to reflect on two types of leadership theories and its application in an organisational context. These are transformational and transactional leadership theories. Ultimately, the key questions that this chapter wants to respond to are the following: Do transformational and transactional leadership styles work independently of or complement each other? Which of these leadership styles is most influential in producing the most impactful results on people and organisational performance?

I am familiar with these types of leadership from a work experience point of view, having been supervised, mentored, coached, supported, empowered, and challenged by different leaders during my working life. I respond to the three questions posed in the introductory section of this chapter through three case studies of real-life personal and organisational experiences to illustrate the impact that transformational leadership has had on my professional development and organisations I worked for. The case studies include the experiences of the transformational leadership style of Prof Dee at the University of the

Witwatersrand, followed by Jimmy, the shift-boss in a gold mining workplace whose transformational leadership style generated positive team performance outcomes, and the significance of transformational leadership in the Minerals Council's CEO-led initiative aimed at improving occupational health and safety in the mining industry.

Leadership and Styles Theories

The review of extant literature reveals multiple theories, definitions, classifications, and explanations of leadership. There are numerous organisational and social research studies on leadership styles and behaviours. Khan, Nawaz, and Khan identify seven leadership and styles theories. These theories of leadership and styles are the "Great Man" Theory, trait theory, process leadership theory, style and behavioural theory, transactional leadership theory, transformational leadership theory, and *laissez-faire* leadership theory.

The "Great Man" Theory

The origins of this theory can be traced to Thomas Carlyle in 1847, who claimed that leaders were born rather than made. This theory was referred to as the "Great Man" Theory on the notion that only men who displayed heroic traits became great leaders. The views of this theory were subsequently followed by notions of a great leader who dictatorially led an organisation with brilliance and farsightedness to the detriment of organisational democracy. The "Great Man" Theory proved flawed in the later years as in the case of disgraced leaders such as Hitler and Napoleon. The theory lost credibility as it was heavily challenged and criticised. This gave rise to the theory that focused on certain traits of leadership to address the shortcomings of the "Great Man" Theory.¹

Trait Theory

The trait theory debunked the notion that leaders were born rather than made. It maintained the premise that there were certain traits or attributes that differentiated leaders from non-leaders. The proponents of this theory argued that intellectual, physical, and personality traits distinguished who were leaders and who were followers.² This theory was, however, not devoid of limitations. One of the criticisms levelled against this theory was that it failed to pinpoint traits that were common among effective leaders. One research study conducted in the 1940s among military leaders and non-military leaders discovered that certain traits of leadership developed over a particular period of time.³ The

trait theory was also criticised for not specifying whether leadership traits were genetic and acquired over time.

Contingency Theory

This theory is based on the premise that no leadership style is fit for all situations. The contingency theory puts emphasis on the situation and context in which leadership is applied. It argues that the effectiveness of leadership depends on a number of factors such as the quality and situation of the followers. There is no single or universal way to lead. There are internal and external organisational situations that require the leader to adapt for effective leadership. It is argued that it is not only the leader that changes organisational dynamics, but employees also change within the organisation. This theory posits that the leadership style that proves effective in a certain environment may not be effective in a different organisational setting of employees. The situational theorists asserted that although contingency theorists largely focused on the leader in a leader-subordinate relationship, the maturity level of subordinates played an important role in determining the quality of the relationship.⁴ Situational theories later became useful in understanding work group norms and team performance dynamics in organisations.⁵

Style and Behaviour Theory

This theory recognises certain leadership skills that enable effective leadership. There is no one-size-fits-all. Every individual has a peculiar style of leadership that works for them. In the same vein as the contingency (situational) theory, this theory argues that there is no leadership that can be effective in all situations. Yukl identifies three leadership styles that have different impacts and outcomes on employees. These are the democratic, autocratic, and *laissez-faire* leaders. Leaders could fit in any of these categories, while employees would react differently depending on the type of leadership style. Yukl discovered that democratic leaders tended to involve subordinates' views before making decisions. This style of leading people consequently elicited positive employee performance outcomes characterised by heightened levels of job satisfaction, creativity, motivation, enthusiasm, and energy, regardless of the presence and absence of the leader. On the contrary, autocratic leaders were found to be obsessed with output targets and took decisions without involving subordinates, whereas *laissez-faire* leaders were found to be suitable in leading a group of highly skilled and motivated employees with an excellence track record of performance, allowed subordinates to take decisions, and provided no-real leadership.⁶

Process Leadership Theory

This theory gained popularity in the 1990s and focuses on the following types of leadership: Servant leadership, learning organisations, principal-centred leadership, and charismatic leadership. The focus of servant leadership is on serving the welfare of the followers. Servant leaders need to be servants themselves in championing a course of action that improves the wellbeing of their followers. Servant leadership is concerned with what people (the followers) are lacking, and how their “have-nots” and anxieties could be addressed. Servant leadership leaders in learning organisations, on the other hand, rally people behind the vision, which is considered to be greater than everybody in the organisation. They are the stewards of the vision of the organisation.⁷

Transactional Theory

The late 1970s and early 1980s signalled a shift in what leadership constituted. This period saw the views on the making of leadership focusing on the exchanges between followers and leaders. The literature refers to this as leader-member exchange, that largely focuses on the quality of the relationship between leaders and subordinates.⁸ Transactional leadership is described as one that is based on certain types of concessions between leaders and followers to achieve a certain organisational goal.⁹ It is the type of leadership that is centred on contingent reward to reinforce active and positive exchange between leaders and followers. This implies that leaders reward followers for a job well down in achieving the agreed upon targets and objectives. In return, followers exchange their behaviours through increased performances.¹⁰ This affords the leader an opportunity to focus on fixing errors and avoiding delaying in decision making. This is known as management-by-exceptions which can either be active or passive transactions, based on the timing of the leaders’ involvement in the affairs of the followers. For instance, the active form of management-by-exception occurs when the leaders timeously and proactively intervene in the monitoring of the performance of followers.¹¹ Some studies have found deficiencies with transactional leadership, the quality of the leaders’ actions, and relationships with the followers.¹²

Transformational Theory

This theory distinguishes itself from the rest of the old and contemporary theories of leadership. At the centre of transformational theory is “the involvement of the followers in the processes or activities related to personal factor towards the organisation and a course that will yield certain superior social dividend”.¹³

It is argued that transformational leaders raise the motivation and morality of both the followers and the leader. Its premise is that transformational leaders' interactions with followers are based on common values, beliefs, and goals. This in turn influences the performance and the achievements of the goal. In transformational leadership, the leaders and followers relegate their self-interests for the benefit of the group.¹⁴ Transformational leaders create a vision and secure the commitment of followers to realise the vision.¹⁵

Transactional Leadership Style

In line with the transactional theory discussed above, the transactional leadership style concentrates on contractual agreements as the main motivating instrument for the desired behaviour between leaders and followers. This style of leadership makes use of an extrinsic reward system to entice the followers' motivation in the achievement of work group and organisational goals. As noted above, another feature of this leadership style is management-by-exception which can be passive or active. When the style is active, the transactional leader leads in such a way that the followers are trusted that they will execute the task fully to the expected work standards. Conversely, when the transactional leadership style is passive, the leader does not intervene in the followers' performance until something wrong happens.¹⁶ This transactional style of leadership has been criticised for retarding creativity and stifling employee job satisfaction. In the transactional type of relationship, the leader and followers focus only on what has been agreed upon and defined by rules. The leader and followers follow the script to precision. They would not go an extra mile regardless of the performance bottlenecks that are encountered, if such challenges were not defined in the contract. Transactional leadership style is best suited in "environments, especially technological intensive, with high degrees of precision, technical expertise and time constraints. Transformational leadership, on the other hand, is best applied in human-intensive environments where the focus is on influencing followers through motivation and respecting their emotions on the basis of common goals, beliefs, and values".¹⁷

Transformational Leadership Style

The transformational leadership style is associated with positive outcomes at individual, work group, and organisational levels. It is argued that leaders with a transformational style achieve more superior outcomes than autocratic leaders. It is argued that transformational leaders take their relationship with followers seriously to fulfil "their needs for empowerment, achievement, enhanced

self-efficacy and personal growth”.¹⁸ Transformational leaders have the ability to rally followers behind the achievement of organisational goals instead of personal interests. There are four attributes that characterise leaders with a transformational style: Idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised considerations. Through idealised influence, transformational leaders show great concern for the resolution of the needs of followers and embrace shared risk-taking.¹⁹ In this case, transformational leaders are able to manage and resolve conflicts in a manner that does not derail the achievement of the common goal. The idealised influence attribute creates vision and purpose that gives followers a sense of direction through regular communication and leading by examples in the achievement of the mission and goals of the company.²⁰ Khan *et al.* point out that an idealised influence entails “role-modelling, articulation and value creation, providing sense of purpose, meaning, self-esteem, self-determination, emotional control and confidence in followers.”

The inspirational motivation attribute focuses on the consciousness of the followers, aligning them with the goals, vision, and mission of the company. The focus is on ensuring the sustainability of the organisation rather than the personality of the leader. The job of the leader is to ensure that the followers become the best that they could be to the greatness of the organisation and its members.²¹

Transformational leaders that possess the intellectual stimulation attribute, stimulate followers to be creative and resilient when faced with challenges. Khan *et al.* state that this attribute entails mentoring, coaching, and morale building strengths. Transformational leaders with this approach involve themselves in the work to intellectually stimulate their workers. Khan *et al.* summarises the key ingredients of intellectual stimulation to include “rationality, creativity, consensus-decision making, coaching, supporting, challenging and involvement.”

The individualised consideration attribute places emphasis on the contribution of individuals to the attainment of organisational goals, vision, and mission. Through this approach, leaders recognise the needs of workers and development areas in which they need to empower the uniqueness of individuals.²² In a nutshell, the key elements of the individualised consideration are “reassurance, caring for and coaching of individuals and open consultation”.²³

Transformational and Transactional Leadership in Practice

The preceding section provided a discussion on the theories of leadership and styles. The litmus test for any type of leadership is the style in which it is applied and the impact that it has on people and organisations.

The case of Prof Dee – Personal Encounters of and Reflections on Transformational and Transaction Leadership

In this section, I relate transformational and transactional leadership styles to my own experiences of leadership in the context of the workplace. Since I started my professional career, I have interacted with leaders who largely displayed transformational rather than transactional qualities of leadership. As in the case of Jimmy, the mining production supervisor, referred to in the preceding section, these leaders exhibit a human-centred approach to leading others in the organisation. My first formal employment was at a university where I was appointed as a research officer working on mining related research projects. My immediate manager was previously the supervisor for my post-graduate studies.

Prof Dee not only took interest in the job that had to be done but cared so much that he created a working environment that brought the best out in me. He cared so much to know about my personal goals and what field of research I was pursuing as a young aspiring researcher. This mattered a great deal to him. It is this type of leadership that deepened my research interests in the mining workplace related research studies. Under his supervision, coaching, support, and mentoring, I passed my Master's degree with distinction. Under his supervision, I later published my first academic article in the peer reviewed *Journal of Workplace Learning*. The title of the journal article is *Self-directed work teams in a post-apartheid gold mine: Perspectives from the rock-face.* Upon publication, this article was voted by the editors of the journal as the most outstanding paper among papers published in the 2003 volume of the journal. I was thrilled to receive the Emerald Literati Award for Excellence at the Lord's cricket ground in England.

The impact of Prof Dee's leadership was transformational and impactful on my personal and professional development. He did not only see in me a student that would just assist him in churning academic papers that would solely boost his academic profile in the world of academia. He saw in me an aspiring young researcher that had a potential to make an immense contribution to the production of knowledge on workplace change processes in a post-apartheid mining industry. It was therefore not surprising when I secured a

Commonwealth scholarship to pursue my doctoral studies at the University of Oxford in England.

Prof Dee was a leader that displayed qualities of idealised influence, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation noted by Khan *et al.* Prof Dee inspired each student as a role model that stimulated others intellectually, to achieve academic excellence against the odds. He cared much about not only supervising students to pass their research degrees, but also to make a difference when they join the world of work for their organisations and the country. This, however, does not mean that the transactional part of leadership was not important in my working relationship with him. It was still important that I achieved the targets associated with working at a university setting, where “publish or perish” is a make or break if one is to be taken seriously in the academic ranks.

I published my first academic article that exceeded our expectations by winning the Emerald Literati Award of Excellence in London. This proved not to be the last award of this sort. While at Oxford, one article that I wrote from my ethnographic doctoral research in a South African gold mine won the inaugural Ngo Future of Work prize. The title of this article is *Getting on and getting by underground: Gold miners’ informal working practice of making a plan (Planisa)*. I later published this article in the *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* in 2013.²⁴ Guess what? This article was voted the most outstanding article by the editors of the 2013 volume of this journal. I was presented with the Literati Award of Excellence for the second time for two different journal articles published from my Master’s and Doctoral studies. This is one of the examples that shows the massive impact that transformational leaders can have on people and organisations. In the case of Prof Dee, his transformational leadership mostly contributed to the remarkable results of building the next generation of researchers and scholars, particularly from the previously disadvantaged communities. In 2018, after numerous hours spent in my study room, balancing writing and the demands of full-time employment in a non-academic setting, I successfully turned my Doctoral thesis into a book published by Emerald Publishing in England. The title of the book is *Production, safety and teamwork in a deep-level mining workplace: Perspectives from the rock-face*.²⁵ These remarkable scholarly achievements did not only benefit the university at which Prof Dee and I were employed. It also benefited the productivity of the country insofar as knowledge production, research, and development are concerned. I argue that in practice, leadership is much more impactful in delivering the desired results

if it is human-centred and transformational, rather than when it is preceded by a transactional type of leadership.

The case of Jimmy, the Frontline Supervisor in the Mine

During my Doctoral research process in a deep-level mining workplace, there were two frontline supervisors that I interacted with, which adopted two different leadership styles in how they supervised the day-to-day running of the production process at the rock-face down the mine. These two frontline supervisors or shift-bosses as they are called in South African mines, Jimmy and Lee, oversaw the extraction of the gold-bearing ore in similar working conditions with similar profiles of the mining teams. However, they achieved different team performance results at the end of the month. This boiled down to the different styles in which these two front-line supervisors led the different members of their mining teams.

Jimmy enjoyed a great deal of success with his charges in the achievement of team performance goals. His mining teams outperformed many work teams in the mine in terms of production and safety performance results. When I spoke to his frontline mining team members, they attributed their success to the leadership style of their supervisor. Jimmy's transformational leadership style enabled him to develop a reciprocal working relationship with his crews, based on the values of respect, trust, and teamwork. The members of Jimmy's mining team spoke highly of him, as somebody who cared for them more as human beings than putting production targets first. Jimmy's human-centred leadership style was based on the spirit of *ubuntu* (humanness).

The concept of *ubuntu* means that a person is a person because of other people. In isiZulu or isiXhosa, *umuntu ungumuntu ngabantu* refers to personhood, human dignity, and interconnectedness.²⁶ It is therefore not surprising that many leaders refer to people as their greatest asset of their organisations. Great leaders of all walks of life do not take people for granted as they know that they are what they are because of people. They are not shy to base their success on the relationship that they built with people to achieve impactful results. This is what Jimmy demonstrated in his mining workplace.

Down the mine, Jimmy's frontline mining teams were super teams in the mine as they always went an extra mile in achieving the organisational and team performance goals. They always performed beyond expectations as they surpassed monthly production calls and achieved a superior safety performance. I observed that unlike other frontline teams, Jimmy's teams enjoyed team

cohesion, respect, and trust among each other. They covered each other very well in their day-to-day execution of production tasks, even if one members of the team was absent due to an emergency at home. Jimmy's frontline mining teams always enjoyed safe production bonuses, unlike other teams in the mine, as they worked as a cohesive unit under a transformational leader.

Conversely, the performance and working relationships of Lee's frontline mining teams were plagued by a lack of teamwork and conflict between members due to the instability of the team. Lee's frontline teams were not as cohesive as Jimmy's teams. I observed that there was a lot of grumbling and dissatisfaction with management and supervision within Lee's teams. There was no reciprocal type of relationship between the leadership style of Lee and his crews. The working relations were largely transaction, focusing more on attaining production targets through authoritarian supervisory styles. This leadership style did not bring the best out in Lee's frontline teams. Jimmy's transformational leadership style paid dividends for him and his teams, whereas Lee's transactional leadership style was not as outstanding as the team and organisational performance results in Jimmy's case.

Focusing on people alone is not good enough in leadership. A great leader is one that also focuses on results. There needs to be a balance. Jimmy, the frontline supervisor, seemed to have kept this balance very well compared to Lee. Jimmy was able to reconcile the demands of balancing people management, cost management, and production management in a manner that paid dividends for himself as a leader, his charges, and the company. Lee struggled to do so. It can therefore be argued that the tale of Jimmy and Lee highlights what separates leaders from managers. Jimmy displayed to a large extent the qualities of being a leader, whereas Lee demonstrated the qualities of being a manager. What is so unique about great leaders? What is so unique about them is that they take people along with them in what they seek to achieve – their vision.

The case of Mining CEO-led Strategy on Occupational Health and Safety

In this section, I reflect on another practical experience of transformational leadership in the mining industry. In 2019, following a spike in the number of occupational fatalities in 2017 and 2018, the Minerals Council member-CEOs reflected deeply on this disturbing safety performance trend in the South African mining sector. They reckoned at the time that occupational health and safety performance reflected the quality of their leadership. For this reason,

they agreed that they needed an introspection of their leadership and its impact on occupational health and safety. The workshop was held on 25 January 2019.

It was at this workshop that I witnessed the significance of transformational leadership among the industry's CEOs. The CEOs agreed that they needed to be visible to and engaging with frontline mine employees if they were to improve occupational health and safety performances in their mining operations. The CEOs' heartfelt deliberations indicated that their leadership styles and behaviour needed not only to be transactional but also transformational if they were to ensure healthier, safer, and more sustainable mining industry. The CEOs agreed that their leadership needed to be transformative and heartfelt from the top to the frontline employees at the rock-face.

The Minerals Council's CEOs' heartfelt conversations were not just a "talk shop," but culminated into a transformative strategy that was called the *Khumbul'ekhaya* CEO-led health and safety strategy. *Khumbul'ekhaya* is a Nguni word for "remember home." *Khumbul'ekhaya* served as a rallying cry for the achievement of transformational health and safety leadership from the CEO to the worker at the rock-face. The *Khumbul'ekhaya* strategy highlighted the importance of connecting the workplace safety to homes and communities of mine employees.

The CEO-led *Khumbul'ekhaya* strategy marked a significant step change and paradigm shift in the achievement of the zero harm goal in the mining industry. The CEOs affirmed that health and safety outcomes were influenced by a set of multiple factors. This affirmation advocated for a multi-pronged and holistic strategy to deal with the various social and technical system factors contributing to the occurrence of fatal accidents in the mining industry. The CEOs admitted that what gave them sleepless nights in creating value for shareholders was no longer tons of ore, but also health and safety, environmental, social, and governance issues. Health and safety are part and parcel of gaining a social licence to operate, as well as an acceptance by the mining communities. Transactional leadership styles are no longer adequate for the sustainable development of the mining industry if it is not complemented by transformational leadership based on shared value principles. In practice, transformational leadership embodies caring, inclusiveness, empowerment, and prosperity for all stakeholders associated with the mining company.

The launch of the *Khumbul'ekhaya* strategy in October 2019 was accompanied by the commencement of *Khumbul'ekhaya* health and safety days. This is a health and safety campaign that forms part of the Minerals Council's

annual National Day of Safety and Health in Mining. I coordinated the launch of the CEO-led *Khumbul'ekhaya* and hosting of *Khumbul'ekhaya* health and safety days in a manner that demonstrated transformational leadership for tripartite leaders from organised business, government, and organised labour. These leaders put aside their differences, as what mattered most with the *Khumbul'ekhaya* initiative was saving lives more than merely extracting minerals.

During the hosting of the *Khumbul'ekhaya* health and safety days, transformational leadership from the CEOs and their executive teams came to the fore. Transactional leadership took a backseat, as production was halted in order to meaningfully engage with mine employees on health and safety in mines and beyond the mine gates. Various CEOs engaged in meaningful transformative conversations with groups of employees on the importance of safe production. In 2019, while recognising that one fatality is one too many and much still needed to be done to realise the industry's goal of zero harm, the industry recorded 51 fatalities, the lowest number of fatalities ever recorded in the history of the mining industry. It has been shown that mining operations that are led by leaders who embrace visible-felt transformational leadership styles tend to be safer, more productive, and more profitable. When compared to the 1993 figure of 615 fatalities, the industry reduced the number of fatalities by 92%. This is a significant reduction that can be attributed to a plethora of industrial initiatives, including the transformation of the culture of health and safety in the mining industry.

In line with the leadership literature, leaders who put transformational leadership principles at the centre of their leadership are more likely to engineer a sustainable safety culture than leaders who solely rely on the transactional leadership style, aimed at achieving production and financial targets, regardless of the state of mind and hearts of employees. Leadership commitment is one of the critical factors that determines the success of any safety culture transformation programme. Transformational leadership remains a crucial leadership attribute for the achievement of a safer and healthier mining industry. The Minerals Council's CEOs' Heartfelt Conversations and *Khumbul'ekhaya* strategy are just the beginning of the journey for transformational health and safety leadership. All workplace leaders, from the top to the bottom of the organisational hierarchy, need to blend transactional leadership with transformational leadership. This is especially important in a transforming mining industry with a changing workforce profile of women and millennials.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined and discussed the theory and practice of leadership. The various leadership and style theories were reviewed to understand the evolution of leadership over the years. The theories of leadership served as a framework for the discussion and arguments made in this chapter. To understand leadership in practice, the chapter focused on transformational and transactional leadership to highlight the application of these styles of leadership in practice. I reflected my own personal and work experiences to ascertain which of these leadership styles generated superior outcomes on my professional development and on the organisations where I worked. The reflection highlighted that transformational leaders are much more capable to create long-lasting working relationships that lead to sustainable and impactful organisational outcomes.

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Endnotes

- 1 Khan *et al.* 2016; McGregor 2003.
- 2 Burns & West 2003.
- 3 Khan *et al.* 2016.
- 4 Bass & Avolio 1997.
- 5 Khan *et al.* 2016.
- 6 Khan *et al.* 2016.
- 7 Khan *et al.* 2016.
- 8 Brunetto, Farr-Wharton, & Shacklock 2010; Gerstner & Day 1997; Yukl 2001.
- 9 House & Shamir 1993.
- 10 Khan *et al.* 2016.
- 11 Bass & Avolio 1997.
- 12 Khan *et al.* 2016.
- 13 Khan *et al.* 2016:3.
- 14 House & Aditya 1997.
- 15 Burns & West 2003.
- 16 Bass & Avolio 1994; Khan *et al.* 2016.
- 17 Khan *et al.* 2016:5.
- 18 Khan *et al.* 2016:5.
- 19 Jung 2001.

20 House & Shamir 1993.

21 Bass & Avolio 1994; House & Shamir 1993; Khan *et al.* 2016.

22 Khan *et al.* 2016.

23 Khan *et al.* 2016:6.

24 Phakathi 2013.

25 Phakathi 2018.

26 cf. Mangaliso 2001.



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