

What can We Learn from Women Transformational Leaders?

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Abstract: How can women leaders transform the workplace of today? Although women in leadership positions have steadily increased, there are not enough female leaders in business as women remains a much smaller subset than male leaders (Mason, 2015). This article depicts lessons that can be extracted from the lives of successful female business leaders—Katharine Graham, Mary Barra, and Sheryl Sandberg. These leaders exhibited and role modeled transformation leadership in their lives.

Keywords: Transformational leadership, Women, Katharine Graham, Mary Barra, and Sheryl Sandberg

1. INTRODUCTION

How can women leaders transform the workplace of today? The workplace is filled with famous male transformation leaders such as Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, and Steve Jobs (Moran, 2020). While there is much to be learned from the lessons of these great male business leaders; however, when it comes to developing female leaders in the field of business, it seems logical to find lessons from the lives of successful female, business leaders today. Women comprised nearly 40% of all managers in the workforce (BLS Reports, 2019). Although women in leadership positions have steadily increased, there are not enough female leaders in business as women remains a much smaller subset than male leaders (Mason, 2015).

Katharine Graham, Mary Barra, and Sheryl Sandberg are transformational leaders selected to extract lessons from in this article. These leaders exemplified transformational leadership throughout their lives and have influenced people around the world. Organizational leaders can learn from these great leaders. This author connected leadership lessons obtained from these three prominent leaders with the current transformational leadership theory.

The purpose of this article is to accomplish the following: 1) briefly define and review transformational leadership, 2) describe the lives of Katharine Graham, Mary Barra, and Sheryl Sandberg, and 3) provide practical application of transformational leadership in the workplace.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND

Transformational leadership (TFL) is one of the most effective contemporary leadership styles today (Kasimoğlu & Ammari, 2020). Burns (1978) and Bass (1985) developed transformational leadership theory which Burns defined as “process in which leaders and followers are coordinated toward more elevated amounts of ethical quality and inspiration. Unlike traditional leadership theories, which principally concentrate on coherent procedures” (Gyanchandani, 2017, p. 31). There are four dimensions of TFL (“The role”, 2019):

- (a) Idealized influence: Leader acts as charismatic and positive role model to followers
- (b) Inspirational motivation: Leaders inspire and motivate followers through clear vision
- (c) Intellectual stimulation: Leaders challenge followers to achieve highest performance
- (d) Individualized consideration: Leaders give personal attention to followers’ needs/concerns

Research has consistently affirmed the effectiveness of TFL to organizational success. Jaithen Abdullah et al. (2019) examined empirically the effect of TFL on followers’ inventiveness and

organizational innovation. The authors surveyed 503 individuals using a random sampling technique. The results showed that TFL has a significant positive relationship with both followers' creativity and organizational innovation. Moreover, Yucel (2021) analyzed the impact of TFL on employees' turnover intentions and its mediating role to their individual performance. Turkish healthcare professionals participated in this research study. The results revealed that transformational leaders who encourage employee performance decreases employee turnover intentions.

Transformational leadership is also linked to increased creativity, innovation and team performance. Khalili (2016) investigated the association between TFL and employees' creativity and innovation. The author collected data from various industries in Iran. The findings revealed positive and significant relationships between TFL and employees' creativity and innovation. Thus, Khalili recommended TFL training in the selection of leaders with this leadership style with the aim of fostering and enhancing employees' creativity and innovation. Similarly, Gyanchandani (2017) analyzed transformational leadership style as an important predictor of team performance in the information technology (IT) industry. The author collected data from 262 employees working in IT sector. The results revealed that transformational leaders make employees work in a more creative way which makes the work environment more creative which encourages work involvement and team performance.

3. LEADER'S BACKGROUND

Three servant leaders are discussed in this section— Katharine Graham, Mary Barra, and Sheryl Sandberg.

3.1. Katharine Graham

Katharine Graham was born in 1917 in New York City and grew up in a wealthy household where the family purchased the Washington Post newspaper. Graham completed her undergraduate degree at the University of Chicago, and she later moved to San Francisco and worked as a reporter. She married a Supreme Court clerk, Phil Graham who became Washington Post's publisher. Graham took over the helm of Washington Post when her husband died. She guided the Washington Post newspaper to national prominence throughout the Pentagon Papers and Watergate scandal. She was the first female Fortune 500 CEO. Graham died in 2001 (Biography, 2019).

As a leader, Katharine Graham has a humble yet firm leadership style. Thrust into the leadership role after the death of her husband, she was firm and dedicated during two of the greatest moments in American journalism—1971 Pentagon Papers and 1972 Watergate story. Graham inspires others through her calm yet firm strength while maintaining compassion and understanding (Tylor, 2012). During Graham's tenure, Washington Post has grown in revenues from \$84 billion in 1963 to \$1.4 billion in 1993 while stock rose 30 times in value. Graham was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her memoir in 1998 (Biography, 2019).

3.2. Mary Barra

Mary Barra was born in 1961 in Michigan to parents of Finnish descent and her father working as a die maker. Barra completed her bachelor's degree at Kettering University and MBA at Stanford University. In 1985, Barra married her husband, Anthony Barra. Barra became General Motors (GM) CEO in 2014, becoming the first woman in history to head of the "Big Three" American automakers. She took over the company during the "Switchgate" scandal—a decadelong cover-up involving faulty vehicle ignition switches in several car models. Several magazines cited Barra on their influential listings such as "100 Most Influential People" and "Word's 100 Most Powerful Women", and "50 Most Powerful Women in Business" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019).

As a leader, Mary Barra exhibits an inclusive leadership style. With over 33 years of managerial experience at GM, Barra became the first female CEO of a major automaker in 2014. Barra is known for her collaborative approach conducting town hall meetings to seek input on projects. Moreover, she seeks tension in a constructive way while making the final decision at the end. Barra received praises for her listening skills and approachability, and thus creating an inclusive environment where workers can voice their opinions. Safety, innovation and technology have been the cornerstone of Barra's vision for GM. Consequently, GM ranked #1 on the 2018 Global Report on General Equality (IndustryWeek, 2014).

3.3. Sheryl Sandberg

Sheryl Sandberg was born in 1969 in Washington D.C. but her family moved to Florida when she was 2-years old. Sandberg completed her undergraduate degree and MBA at Harvard University graduating with honors/distinctions. She worked in the U.S. Department of Treasury during the Clinton administration and worked for Google for seven years. Sandberg is currently Facebook's chief operating officer where she became the first female member of the company's board of directors. She was married to Dave Goldberg, a Yahoo! Executive and have two children together. Sandberg received various accolades such as Time's list of "100 Most influential People in the World" and Forbes list of "Most Powerful Women" (Biography, 2019).

As a leader, Sheryl Sandberg is an engaged and inquisitive leader. Sandberg is known for asking smart questions and encouraging debates among employees. Asking what employees think is vital to getting honest feedback and information. At Facebook, Sandberg visited people's desks, introduced herself, asked questions, and listened to employees. Sandberg believes in team effort/spirit propelling her to write a book entitled "Lean In" which launched Lean In movement. Experts contend Sandberg is responsible for Facebook's stunning success in handling logistics such as human resources and advertising. Facebook has over 1 billion users becoming one of the most top regarded companies in the world (Doyle, 2017).

4. ANALYSIS OF LEADER BEHAVIOR

Montgomery (2018) noted seven traits of TFL—curiosity, communicative, visionary, team-first attitude, simplicity, charismatic, and tolerance for risk. Indeed, transformational leaders causes change in individuals and organizations. All three leaders--Katharine Graham, Mary Barra, and Sheryl Sandberg--exhibited transformational skills at the highest level despite their unique background and life experiences. All three women share the following commonalities:

- High professionalism/competence
- Collaborative approach
- Team-spirited/results-oriented

Katharine Graham, Mary Barra, and Sheryl Sandberg are great examples of transformational leadership. First, all three leaders attended and listened to their followers' needs (individualized consideration). For example, Barra received high praises for her listening skills and approachability. Second, the abovementioned leaders challenged assumptions, took risks, and solicited followers' ideas (intellectual stimulation). For instance, Sandberg visited followers' desks and asked questions to garner feedback and continuous improvement. Third, all three leaders motivated/encourage team members to exceed expectations (inspirational motivation). For example, Barra motivated her employees through her collaborative style emphasizing safety, innovation, and technology as the cornerstone of her organization. Finally, the aforementioned leaders exhibited moral and ethical behavior within their organization, and thus, earning the trust and respect of followers (idealized influence). For instance, Graham demonstrated high ethical marks through her humble, firm, and compassionate style through scandals—1971 Pentagon Papers and 1972 Watergate story—and assuming also leadership after the death of her husband.

5. PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Transformational leadership has become one of the most popular leadership theories due to its relational and inspirational style which encourages, inspires, and motivates employees to innovate and create change within their organization (Khalili, 2016). To be an effective leader, one must adapt to the environment and continuously motivate and inspire others to perform their best. Literature commonly describes transformational leaders as charismatic, enthusiastic, optimistic, passionate, collaborative, visionary, and change agents in their workplace (Hein, 2013).

DiFranza (2019) provided three tips to apply leadership in the workplace:

1. Work on yourself as a leader – Focus on developing empathy, charisma, and inspiration in your leadership arsenal.

2. Create the proper culture in your workplace – Establish a culture that support collaboration, innovation, and communication on daily basis.
3. Practice identifying and facilitating core values – Define and clarify the organization’s values and make changes accordingly.

6. CONCLUSION

Effective leadership is all about influencing others to action. Transformational leadership involves idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. This article defined transformational leadership, examined the lives of Katharine Graham, Mary Barra, and Sheryl Sandberg, and provided practical application of transformational leadership in the workplace.

AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Baldonado, is a faculty member at Columbia Southern University and a military veteran. His areas of expertise include human resources, work motivation and diversity, business administration, and management. Dr. Baldonado has over 20 years of human resources, military, and teaching experience and has published in his field.

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