Applying Transformational Leadership in Aggie Habitat for Humanity

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Introduction

One of the most notable TED Talks videos about leadership is of Simon Sinek describing his idea of the “Golden Circle”. The Golden Circle is a marketing idea based on the phrase, “People don’t buy what you do, they buy why you do it” (Sinek, 2009). This concept can be applied beyond the field of marketing since its roots are in basic human psychology. People can be influenced into a desired action, but to varying degrees depending on what is providing their motivation. One theory of leadership, known as Transformational Leadership, corresponds to the Golden Circle by agreeing that people follow leaders who influence them.

Background on Transformational Leadership

Transformational Leadership (TL) is a leadership theory in which a leader causes change, or a transformation, in individuals or a group (Langston.edu, 2010; Stevens, 2013). Leaders using this approach have the ability to motivate others, “to want to change, to improve, and to be led” (Hall, 2002). Transformational leaders are effective by transforming the motivations of people to turn them from bystanders to dedicated followers. Bernie Bass set the foundations of TL in his book *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations (LPBE)*, published in 1985. This book initiated a cascade of research into an entire field of leadership theories, which Bass continued to investigate (Yammarino, 1993). *LPBE* laid the groundwork for nearly 40 subsequent scholarly works written in the decade following Bass’s publication. These studies generally contend that “individuals who exhibited transformational leadership were more effective leaders with better work outcomes” (Hall, 2002).

Four factors have been designated to TL, namely, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration (Langston.edu, 2010; Hall, 2002). Idealized influence is the leader serving as a good role model, inspirational motivation is
the leader motivating the group to commit to the shared vision, *intellectual stimulation* is the leader encouraging creativity by challenging the status quo, and *individual consideration* is the leader acting as a coach to the group’s individuals (Hall, 2002). However, some researchers argue transformational leaders should use different behaviors in different situations in order to best motivate individual followers as well as the collective group simultaneously. Hence, Wang and Howell break down these four factors into further categories, but still overlapping with the originals. Dimensions of TL that empower individual followers are the leader’s behavior to *communicate high expectations*, *develop the followers*, *intellectually stimulate*, and *provide personal recognition*. Dimensions of TL that empower the group as a whole are the leader’s actions to *emphasize group identity*, *communicate a group vision*, and focus on *team-building* (Wang, 2010).

The application of TL theory can take many forms; the overall process does not have detailed steps, so leaders can approach it in a variety of ways. The above factors and dimensions can be utilized in any combination and to different extents. The theory is broad, and it ultimately depends on whether the leader is able to motivate change in other people, enhancing the group’s performance at least in some way (Hall, 2002).

**Background on Membership Project**

Aggie Habitat for Humanity is the campus chapter of the larger Habitat for Humanity International (HFHI). This student organization was founded at Texas A&M around the year 1992, and since then, it has established a good reputation among students and the cities of Bryan and College Station. One of the group’s best years on record was the 2012-2013 school year. That year’s officers were well organized and gave the group a professional face, there were approximately 200 active members, a key annual fundraiser was the most successful it had ever
been, and the organization surpassed its goal of sponsoring one Habitat house each year by actually funding two houses that year.

However, the following 2013-2014 year brought numerous challenges that significantly harmed the organization. The membership count was obliterated at the very first informational meeting due to a conflict with room reservations, causing the most important and professional meeting of the year to be held outside with frazzled officers shouting their haphazard speeches to a judgmental audience. Additionally, within the first month of the year, 4 of the 14 officers dropped out of Aggie Habitat, and it was a struggle to quickly replace them. The group tried to recover, but the officers were relatively new and lacked central leadership. The President was focused on applying to medical school in the fall semester and had “senioritus” in the spring, and the organization fell into a downward spiral as a result. Unfortunately, it was unable to raise the funds to sponsor even one house that year. By the year’s final meeting, less than 20 general members were in attendance. Those few were begged to become the succeeding officers, even though all but two had only become members that semester and had little knowledge of the organization as a whole. All of the 2013-2014 officers were leaving the group, except one, and the faculty advisor was stepping down as well. Therefore, with an army of brand-new officers and scars from a difficult year, the lone returning officer – the club’s new President – assumed responsibility for restoring Aggie Habitat.

The specific leadership project discussed in this paper was to increase Aggie Habitat’s membership and to improve its member retention. Inspired by Sinek’s Golden Circle, the President took a TL approach in her position. Throughout the past year, she attempted to inspire potential members and the organization’s other officers, reaching them on a personal level in
order to accomplish Aggie Habitat’s goals. This paper describes how the President applied aspects of TL to the Aggie Habitat membership project.

Methods

Building a Leadership Foundation with the Officers

The project was initially to increase the group’s general membership out of fear that Aggie Habitat may be fully extinguished if not enough people stayed involved. Yet, upon seeing the starting condition of the club’s mostly new leadership, it was deemed more important to strengthen the 2014-2015 officer group before focusing on the general membership.

The first step was to build a foundation of teamwork among the new officers. Before the fall semester, the President organized an Officer Retreat so the new kids could officially meet one another and overcome inevitable social awkwardness. As seen in many other group projects during school, there is usually some discomfort in a new group environment, but it is preferable to address it as soon as possible. Attendees discussed the details of the upcoming year, learned names and faces, met the club’s new faculty advisor, and bonded by learning and playing a new game together. The Retreat served as a planning session as well as an informal social gathering. A key way to unite the group was to explain Aggie Habitat’s troubled circumstances, so as to provide a common goal or vision, as mentioned in TL theory (Stevens, 2013). By treating the diminished membership base as a need for damage control, the officers were ready to approach the problem with a sense of urgency and importance.

In addition to the Retreat, the President scheduled a “Habitour” at the Bryan/College Station Habitat Affiliate so to introduce the office with which the campus chapter works so closely. Officers were able to meet the Affiliate staff while being driven around Bryan to see the Affiliate’s office, ReStore, warehouse, its largest finished home subdivision, and Aggie Habitat’s
most recently sponsored house. The purpose of a Habitour was to make sure the officers would all be starting with the same knowledge of the Affiliate. They had a chance to see all of the work done by Aggie Habitat’s parent office, and they could overcome potential future hesitation when needing to communicate with the Affiliate via email or phone, having already met the staff.

The root intent of this project was to ensure Aggie Habitat could exist into the future, which entails strengthening its leadership by developing the officers as leaders themselves. At the start of this school year, the President was the only person with detailed knowledge of each officer position’s duties, and most of her role required delegating. Nearly all of September involved her answering narrow questions or giving detailed instructions to fellow officers regarding an array of important tasks. While she had the experience to know many specifics of all the positions, there was an underlying goal to develop the fellow officers into independent leaders. A responsible President using a TL style should ensure continuity of the organization after he or she leaves the group. Aggie Habitat will benefit the most in the long term if the entire leadership base is strong. All of the officers need to know their roles, communicate well, and rely on each other, which happens through experience. Therefore, it was important to practice effective delegation techniques. Steven Covey emphasizes the downsides of gofer delegation and the upsides of stewardship delegation in his book The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. Gofer delegation is so named because it often comes from a manager who is focused on methods and often over-supervises subordinates’ tasks, as if saying, “Go for this, go for that…” which does not leverage the manager’s time nor does it teach the subordinate how to achieve. Stewardship delegation is much more beneficial; it “gives people a choice of method and makes them responsible for the results. It takes more time in the beginning, but it’s time well invested” (Covey, 1989). The effective approach requires patience and lenient control of tasks, but it
empowers subordinates and utilizes their creativity. In the long-run, it does not matter whether an assignment is carried out with any one exact method; what matters is the job being accomplished and team members learning how be effective in their positions for the future.

**Increasing General Membership**

The previous year served as a wise example of the many points that can go wrong with attracting new members. Therefore, a plan was devised to reach new students without succumbing to observed pitfalls. The President prioritized reserving meeting rooms on-campus for the entire fall semester as soon as reservations were available, during the preceding April and June. Unlike the prior year, the meetings were to no longer be held in a cramped, out-dated academic building at the late hour of 8:30pm. Now the meetings were scheduled earlier in the evenings in the clean, modern, centrally located Memorial Student Center (MSC). The officers then advertised the organization’s important informational meeting at the university’s MSC Open House, where hundreds of students flock every semester in order to discover A&M clubs and activities they can join.

The MSC Open House lets the student body know Aggie Habitat exists, but the first meeting of the fall semester, the informational meeting, is the event that encourages new members to join. The President is expected to be the primary speaker for informational introductions as she is likely the most experienced member, which was especially true this year. In the past, the main speech has mostly summarized Aggie Habitat’s annual activities and stated the basic regulations of the group. However, a new approach had potential to better impact the audience, so the President decided to overhaul the informational presentation. The Golden Circle preaches, “People don’t buy what you do, they buy why you do it” (Sinek, 2009), and the basis of TL is to motivate followers to desire a shared goal and empower them to take ownership
of the process (Stevens, 2013). TL was already applied to the officers at the Retreat, and this was extrapolated to the potential members by providing them a shared purpose as well.

The updated speech was constructed to inform the audience why Aggie Habitat is an organization. The President gave a heartfelt presentation to convey there is a massive problem of substandard housing in the world, that HFHI’s efforts noticeably and effectively alleviate the problem, and how Aggie Habitat helps to improve peoples’ lives. The presentation cited statistics, displayed pictures of poverty housing, and was rehearsed numerous times in order to convey confidence at the informational. The goal was to convince everyone at the meeting – prospective members to officers – that Habitat for Humanity is a worthy cause and the campus chapter is a fantastic way to help the community. Transformational leaders motivate people to change, and this informational speech was a key factor to instill passion in Aggie Habitat’s new and returning members.

**Member Retention**

Attracting new members continues throughout the year via word of mouth and positive press, but member retention is still a struggle. Aggie Habitat uses the phrase, “You get out of it what you put into it,” and so students are not required to attend events. By the end of each semester, attendance is sparse, so the officers have tried to keep members engaged at each general meeting through various activities. The first meeting of each semester was an informational, which provide necessary details of the organization. The second meeting had guest speakers of a homeowner and representatives from the Affiliate to share their perspectives on Habitat outside of A&M. The officers organized profit-shares at a favorite restaurant occurring after several of the spring general meetings, encouraging socializing in a less formal setting combined with a fundraiser. A classic meeting activity done numerous times was called
Construction Challenge. Here, members are divided into small teams and compete against each other to build a given object with limited resources, such as the tallest tower using only ten dry spaghetti noodles and tape. We also experimented with holiday festivities, including a pumpkin scavenger hunt in the MSC for Halloween, a pumpkin pie eating contest for Thanksgiving, and writing Christmas cards to Habitat homeowners. Beyond meetings, Aggie Habitat traditionally hosts broomball socials at the local ice-skating rink at the beginning of each semester. Members can bring their friends or roommates out to the rink for a memorable hour of falling and laughing, which may aid in word-of-mouth advertising. During the spring, the organization also experimented by registering for two intramural sports teams. Hopefully, these activities and striving to socialize with the members will foster continuing interest in the organization.

RESULTS

Building a Leadership Foundation with the Officers

The TL methods intended to bolster Aggie Habitat’s 2014-2015 officer group have already shown results; some were immediate and others have been continual during the year.

The Retreat was successful since it established the desired foundation for which the leadership team could build on throughout the year. This purpose correlates with the three group-focused TL traits named in Wang and Howell’s study. *Emphasizing group identity* is “highlighting shared characteristics among group members and stressing followers’ membership in the group,” which fits under Bass’ *idealized influence* (Wang, 2010). Despite times when every person at the Retreat probably felt uncomfortable and out of place, the shared discomfort was a source of bonding and built appreciation for the group. *Communicating a group vision* involves articulating a vision of the group for the future, which fits Bass’ *inspirational motivation* (Wang, 2010). By discussing Aggie Habitat’s annual events, goals, and need for
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restoring general membership, the new officers were able to orient their intentions to what would make the group successful in the upcoming year. *Team-building* involves making sure the group can cooperate and function together so as to achieve its goals, and the Retreat was the first step taken toward building an Aggie Habitat officer team instead of a collection of individuals (Wang, 2010). Based on the positive impacts of the Retreat, the President later led the group members in sharing their individual personality assessments at the start of the spring semester, with the intent of members gaining more appreciation for the different working styles that exist within the officer group.

The Habitour was also successful and it was a clear help to the TL approach. TL leaders provide a shared vision and help subordinates feel an ownership in their work (Stevens, 2013). A couple of officers truly engaged in the Affiliate’s purpose during the Habitour, and all of them took interest absorbing the sights and asking lots of questions to the staff. The tour exhibited areas of the city A&M students may never have a reason to see during their college careers, especially the lower-income neighborhoods where HFHI’s work gravitates. The attendees instantly felt more connected to the Affiliate and learned much more about the details of its efforts than even the President could have told them. Seeing examples of the Affiliate’s work beyond Aggie Habitat’s involvement stressed that the student organization is only a part of a greater cause. The club works to sponsor one Habitat house each year, but the local Affiliate builds more than fifteen houses annually, and as of June 2013, HFHI has “built, rehabilitated or repaired more than 750,000 homes,” across the globe since it was founded in 1976 (*Habitat for Humanity International*). The Habitour served as an eye-opener for the officers; it was their responsibility to run this organization so that it can contribute to the overall Habitat purpose. Feedback from the event was so positive that officers who had not been able to participate voiced
feeling left out. Hence, a second tour was scheduled for later in the fall semester to give everyone a chance. The faculty advisor even attended this second tour, which was fantastic since he was also new to the organization this year. Compared to former faculty advisors, his desire to embrace the club has provided appreciated encouragement. Hopefully, Habitours will become a required event for officers at the beginning of each year. Notably, there appeared to be little hesitation from the officers whenever they needed to communicate with Affiliate staff. While it was anticipated tasks would not be done out of officers’ apprehensions, the early on face-to-face meetings with the staff may have prevented any such damaging fears.

Based on the daunting circumstances afflicting Aggie Habitat at the end of last year, the President was reasonably anxious about having to shoulder much of the organization’s activities with only limited support from the inexperienced officers. Yet, after witnessing the remarkable energy and enthusiasm after the Retreat and Habitours, she felt reassured the group was capable. The President then adapted her TL focus to ensure each officer would be a quality leader on his own in the following years.

Wang and Howell identify four individual-focused TL traits, which are behaviors meant to empower individual followers to develop their full potentials, enhance their abilities and skills, and improve their self-efficacy and self-esteem (Wang, 2010). *Communicating high expectations* involves demonstrating “the leader’s expectations for excellence, quality, and high performance by followers” (Wang, 2010). While this has not been performed on an individual scale so far, officer executive meetings have frequently included reflecting on organization activities and noting related strengths and weaknesses. Performance reviews of each officer will likely occur at the end of this school year, but those effects cannot be seen yet. *Follower development* is “behavior that enhances followers’ skills and abilities,” fitting Bass’
individualized consideration characteristic of paying attention to each individual’s need for achievement (Wang, 2010). Transformational leaders are known to serve as coaches to subordinates, helping them grow by offering constructive feedback and teaching through delegating responsibility for their own assignments. Similarly, intellectual stimulation encourages followers to be creative critical thinkers. These two dimensions have been accomplished during the year via effective delegation and by allowing each officer leniency in performing his tasks, rather than forcing him to prescribe to old methods. The last of these four dimensions is personal recognition, which is acknowledging followers for their good work, and stems from Bass’ contingent reward component (Wang, 2010). Acknowledgements can range from “impersonal economic exchanges” to “emotional exchanges,” as both forms of recognition can transform the individual’s psychology (Wang, 2010). The President consciously stowed to give positive reinforcement to the officers throughout the year in hopes of keeping the group motivated. Some lethargy was observed over the winter break between semesters, but this is an understandable rest period for college students. Perhaps the continual recognition helped rekindled commitment in the spring semester.

**Continued Transformational Leadership Development**

There are no exact methods required to apply TL, as it can incorporate all or some of the four components, each to varying degrees (Hall, 2002). Becoming a transformational leader is an adoptive and continuing process, witnessed throughout this past year. The President was aware at the outset that the other officers may have perceived her as dictatorial, since she had years of experience beyond them. The officers may also have seen methods of TL as manipulative, depending on how recognition and motivations were presented. Dennis Tourish highlights some potential detriments of TL in his book, *The Dark Side of Transformational*
Leadership: A Critical Perspective. Transformational leaders can be erroneously given unbounded power if they are thought to have inherently good intentions, and TL ideas are paralleled those in corrupt corporations and cults (de Villiers, 2014). Tourish warns that “one of the most malignant and commonplace symptoms of leadership’s dark side is the way in which dissent from powerful leaders is constrained and often eliminated”, and so, “Inevitable debates and disagreements on strategy are best brought into the open, where they can be engaged by leaders, rather than repressed, denied or ignored” (as cited in de Villiers, 2014). The Aggie Habitat officers have generally circumvented such pitfalls during the year, as the President has deliberately spurred the group to openly discuss topics and has encouraged seeing multiple viewpoints on decisions. This approach has helped make decisions as a team, and has notably gotten individual team members to speak their minds during meetings; a couple of officers who had looked shy at the beginning of the year are now confident in sharing opinions with the group, even if in opposition to the President or to the majority.

TL is not always considered risky or malicious since its benefits are so widely lauded. Multiple studies have found TL behaviors in leaders have positive effects on follower well-being and performance (Mason, 2014), which may explain overlooking the downsides. Some researchers suggest leaders or managers should go through training programs specific to TL, and those managers who already have psychological traits compatible with TL – such as self-efficacy, perspective taking, and positive affect – may be more apt at applying TL (Mason, 2014). In theory, transformational leaders should have strong belief in their abilities to act as a good leader, high self-efficacy, in order to rally an organization around a shared vision and to be confident in challenging traditional methods (Mason, 2014). John Sosik says in his book, Leading with Character: Stories of Valor and Virtue and the Principles They Teach, that
perspective taking helps leaders articulate visions that appeal to followers, stimulate intellectual engagement in followers, and be aware of followers possibly each having different viewpoints (as cited in Mason, 2014). High positive affect in leaders is seen as a driver for behavior change, so a leader with a better mood will be more able to utilize TL concepts, such as building strong relationships with team members (Mason, 2014).

These three psychological attribute theories showed merit during this leadership project, personally for the President and for the Aggie Habitat officers. The group was willing to assume more challenging projects and apply more effort to their roles later in the year, once they gained confidence in their capabilities to manage Aggie Habitat. The President worked to consider the perspectives of her fellow officers, especially when dissenting opinions arose. She regularly sought feedback on her ideas and management skills from individual officers, feedback on the club’s activities from its members, and input on Aggie Habitat’s progress from the Affiliate. This practice illustrated a 360-degree feedback approach, which correlates to perspective taking since it can “raise awareness of how your leadership behavior is perceived and which aspects of your leadership style need modifying,” and lets the leader “determine whether new concepts and behaviors are achieving the desired outcomes” and make ongoing self-corrections (Mason, 2014). The officers also appeared to work and communicate better as a group as they got to know each other and become friends, which improved the atmosphere at meetings. The President’s application of TL theory transformed the officer group, who proceeded to impact the general members via its own use of TL.

**Increasing General Membership**

Some of the actions described above were meant to impact Aggie Habitat in the long term, but they have already shown certain effects, including an increase in membership. The
MSC Open House spread awareness of Aggie Habitat’s presence on campus. The officers promoted the club well and even added the idea to advertise free popsicles at the informational, which certainly garnered attention. However, the primary cause of membership growth was the speech at the informational meeting.

TL depends on the leader being a visionary for the group. The leader should adopt a vision, recruit followers to adopt it as well, and provide direction to accomplish the group’s purpose (Stevens, 2013). According to Sinek’s Golden Circle, the most inspiring and effective leaders are those who first appeal to peoples’ instincts to decipher rationales and then follow up with plan specifics (Sinek, 2009). This concept agrees with TL, and so it was utilized in the informational speech. The presentation was intended to educate the audience on the proliferation of global poverty housing and the impact substandard housing has on a person’s entire quality of life. The societal issue served as the “why” core of the circle, as in, why care about poverty housing. The next layer of the circle is “how”, which was portrayed as how HFHI works to alleviate the problem with its mission to provide everyone with a decent, safe, and affordable place to live. The outermost layer of the circle is the “what”, which was stating what Aggie Habitat and its members do to help the Habitat cause. In this order, the audience was presented with a motivational case to join Aggie Habitat. This introductory speech appealed to the audience’s desire to serve the community while instilling an overall passion for Habitat.

The President’s presentation at the fall informational meeting appeared to have the requisite effect of attracting new members. At the end of the preceding school year, the number of engaged members was barely high enough to fill the necessary officer positions – less than 40 students. However, by the end of this year’s fall semester, the organization had about 100 paid members. A second informational meeting occurred at the start of the spring semester, and a
version of the original speech was performed here as well. As a result, the organization gained more members, and the total membership count in April 2015 was approximately 175 students.

**Member Retention**

As member retention must be evaluated over time, the engagement efforts’ effectiveness cannot be accurately determined yet. As of April 2015, the total number of paid members for the year is drastically higher than the number of members who attend general meetings. The more recent meetings have had between 20 and 40 students in attendance, with approximately 10 to 15 students who attend the majority of the organization’s events. The activities done at the meetings appear to have socially connected these die-hard students with each other and with the officers. They feel engaged at events and are likely to continue interacting with their Aggie Habitat network. However, since the current number of meeting attendees is significantly below that of paid members, the organization is still struggling with retaining members’ physical presences, if not their interest.

Member interest in student organizations is difficult to measure overall because so many factors influence participants. Regardless of interest levels, students may not be able to attend club meetings if they have scheduling conflicts with other organization meetings, group projects, or exams, which have required attendance policies. College students may also understandably prioritize studying, socializing, and relaxation above extracurricular involvement. Another aspect is the size of the Texas A&M campus; the campus is very large and the majority of students live off-campus, perhaps miles away from the meeting and event locations, so it could be tedious for a student to coordinate transportation. These are only a few factors that could have hindered member retention, but they are systemic and not a direct result of Aggie Habitat.
A more definitive measure of improved member retention will be to see how many members will return in future semesters, and if they recruit friends to join as well. Another good evaluation will be to see which students will pursue an officer position for the 2015-2016 year. If the current officers and current members wish to serve as officers next year rather than leave the organization, they likely felt engaged enough with the organization to remain involved, and in a committed capacity.

CONCLUSION

The specific leadership project described in this paper was to increase Aggie Habitat’s membership and to improve its member retention. The President applied TL through various methods throughout the year on both a large scale and small scale. She strived to inspire the mass group of potential general members by preaching Habitat’s noble purpose. Her two informational presentations were the key rallying points that drastically renewed the organization’s membership count. Membership retention may not have been a clear success, but this factor is difficult to measure and may be best evaluated in future semesters. The President also used TL to overcome the challenge of running the large organization with mostly new officers. Following a TL approach, she first assessed the new group’s starting conditions then shaped the officers into a well-functioning team. She utilized methods of leading by example, managing with discussion instead of authoritarian dictation, connecting with officers on a personal level, and focusing on effective delegation.

The precise impact of this TL approach could be further evaluated if the preceding President – preferably working with the same officer group and some overlap of general members – were to embody a very different leadership style, then this year’s results could be compared to next year’s. Therefore, while TL has been effective in achieving Aggie Habitat’s
goals already, future investigation could reveal more about responses to leadership styles. No matter which theory is chosen, as long as Aggie Habitat harnesses strong central leadership, it will continue serving society for years to come.

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