

THE TEACHER'S PET: A TRANSFORMATIONAL STORY OF LEARNING HOW TO BELIEVE IN MY "SELF"

Abstract

This narrative shares a personal account of how the actions of one person can truly motivate, inspire, and challenge another person to transform. This reflective story outlines the actions of my transformational leader and also indicates how those behaviors align with a transformational leadership model published well after the interaction. I also challenge the reader to reach out to their transformational leader and reflect on their own personal development.

Keywords: Transformational leadership, mentors, leadership education, change

Introduction

A key goal of transformational leaders is to influence the follower to accomplish more than they ever thought they could as an individual (Northouse, 2021). As the name implies, transformational leaders help a follower "transform" to become a better self or a better person. Yet at times, some transformational leaders are just being themselves - a leader who seeks to positively impact a followers' beliefs, goals, principles, and ultimately their identity (Northouse, 2021).

As a low income, first-generation college student, finishing my dissertation in 2009 was a enormous feat. To my doctoral students today, I jokingly refer to it as a "book report." As I completed it, one of my peers asked, "who are you dedicating it to?" I reciprocated with the same question as that had never crossed my mind. They quickly responded, "my parents." While

this task could not have been possible without my two parents, I thought a little more about it, and I decided to dedicate that work to my 4th grade teacher, Mrs. Betty Winston. This paper outlines the reasons for my decision, my subsequent search to find her, and how her time then, still transforms me today. It is important to note that I wrote this piece first, and later through reflection, I was able to align Mrs. Winston's actions to a well-known transformational leadership model.

The 4-I's of Transformational Leadership

After several drafts, it became clear to me that, without her even knowing it, Mrs. Winston's actions in 1979 closely aligned with Bass (1985, 1990) and Bass & Avolio's model (1990, 1994), specifically the 4-I's of transformational leadership. In the story below,

please note the use of (parenthetical notations) as I connect her actions to the 4I's found in the Bass & Avolio model. It is uncanny how closely her actions resemble the 4-I's as outlined below. I guess it is true that effective leadership models are both descriptive and prescriptive.

Bass and Avolio's model (1994) defined key facets of a leadership continuum ranging from no leadership, or *laissez-faire*, to transactional leadership or *quid pro quo*, to transformational leadership which includes the 4-I's: Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration (Northouse, 2021). The part of the model that applies to Mrs. Winston is her innate use of the 4-I's. Idealized Influence can be best understood by observing leaders who do the right thing, expose followers to lofty goals while positively amending the follower's vision, all the while relying on charismatic interactions to propel the follower forward (Northouse, 2021). Inspirational Motivation is best characterized by a leader who can assist a follower in achieving more than what they can on their own (Northouse, 2021). Intellectual Stimulation from the leader affords the follower the ability to challenge their own beliefs to positively impact their values and principles (Northouse, 2021). Finally, Individual Consideration occurs when the leader meets the person where they are at. Leaders act as a coach, delegate to the follower, trust the follower, and challenge the follower to grow (Northouse, 2021). Now, let's look at how this story unfolded . . .

A Lifetime of Dedication

My parents were both very smart people, but they just did not get along well, and they divorced when I was 10. I am sure Mezirow (2000) would classify divorce as a disorienting dilemma that serves as a transformational learning event for those involved, to say the least. It was challenging for me to live in separate households, and I am sure I still have

trauma inside me today. But I learned to survive it. At the time, I bounced back and forth between their households which happened to be located 2,000 miles apart. Being asked to choose who to live with over and over again is not a good place for a 10 year-old, especially with both younger and older siblings now separated by thousands of miles. Instead, my brain power could have been spent figuring out who my favorite professional baseball team was, right?

My mother moved herself and her four children to Phoenix, Arizona from a small town, Pigeon, Michigan (population ~1,200). In 4th grade, I tagged along and left a rural Michigan, parochial classroom and all five of my classmates to attend a public school in Glendale, Arizona. This new school had more students in it than the entire population of my hometown! I vividly remember getting roughed up on the playground on one of my first days there. In 4th grade, this typically meant a lot of shoving and name calling. The motivation for the "fight" was my baseball cap, as the other guy did not like the team – the Pittsburgh Pirates. I guess he had enough time to think about his favorite team, sheesh! At that point in time, it would have been easy to crawl into a hole and disappear as the new kid, but an angel stood nearby, and she took me under her wing. Her guidance transformed me and helped me find my own worth and my own self.

That angel was my 4th grade teacher, Betty Winston. Remember how I attended a very small school with only five classmates, well, that truly helped me stand out academically in a large public school setting. Also, I was a natural extrovert, and I had a knack for being outspoken in class (a.k.a. trying to answer every question). I recall her sending me on errands during the school day, while quietly saying, "Eric, you know this material already, can you help me with a few errands?" My peers called me the "teacher's pet," but the title never bothered me - it was flattering to me as I enjoyed helping her. Even in these transactional acts, I was empowered simply because I knew she was thinking of me, and I felt special.

Due to my outgoing personality and my academic

classroom performance, Mrs. Winston was convinced that I was a “gifted” student (Inspirational Motivation). She would consistently send me to be tested for what was then called, the gifted program, as she felt I was so “far ahead of my peers.” But, I would never reach the mark – not once. I re-took those standardized tests over and over again – “Glove is to Hand as Shoe is to JELL-O?? - UGH?” I never met the threshold for the gifted program. While not earning a certain score over and over again might impact someone in a negative way, failing the gifted test multiple times was no big deal to me, because I knew I had someone in my corner who continued to cheer me on, helping me to reset my goals, and offer support (Individualized Consideration).

Mrs. Winston’s belief in me as a student did something rather remarkable – it made me believe in something I truly needed then – I started to believe in myself (Inspirational Motivation). Maybe she was right??!! I began to see that I had value to her, and apparently, I had potential too (Idealized Influence) as she continued to support me. She was the first and only name that came to mind when I dedicated my dissertation years back. Her belief in me then helped me to believe in myself, even still today as a leadership educator, partner, dad and youth sports coach. Looking back now, I see that my skill set was higher than my peers not because I was “gifted,” but due to the extra attention gained in my small, rural school. But she recognized that ability in me (Intellectual Stimulation) and continued to motivate me . . . as a 4th grader.

Where Is She Now?

After I made my mind up to dedicate the largest academic research project of my life to my 4th grade teacher, I felt at peace with the decision, because I knew how much she impacted my life. But, always a thinker, my thoughts shifted to “I wonder if she is still around?” Honestly, my mind’s eye told me that

she was VERY OLD in 1979. Nevertheless, I reached out to the current middle school principal and simply asked, “Does anyone remember Betty Winston?” Ironically, the principal was new to the school, but had attended a nearby college adjacent to where I now worked. I followed up with why I was looking for Mrs. Winston, and the new principal was “all-in” to help me find her. I still find the principal’s tenacity to be a major blessing.

A month went by, then six weeks, and then the principal’s email arrived that despite her best efforts to track down Mrs. Winston, no one knew her, no records of her, no forwarding address, nothing, and the search ended. Still, this changed nothing for me, I was still planning to dedicate my book to her. A few weeks later, the principal emailed again, stating that their school librarian had fallen ill, so they had to bring back a retired librarian who was employed when Mrs. Winston worked at the school. The substitute librarian knew Mrs. Winston and shared that she was retired and still living in Phoenix. They passed along my phone number, and one day at work, my phone rang, and it was Mrs. Winston! My transformational leader actually called me, in my office where I now serve as a leadership educator! The person who gave me this precious gift of personal belief and who challenged me to do more was actually on the other end of the call. We spoke for nearly an hour, and it was amazing, to say the least. I felt like I had come full circle in this developmental process. Her belief in me then propelled an average kid to someone who no one could stop. Or as Bass and Avolio’s (1990) model showcased, transformational leadership can create performance beyond expectations.

The Magic Continued...

In May of 2012, I attended a conference in Phoenix, and I was able to bring my family with me (partner and two children). I was able to arrange a visit with Mrs. Winston, and I hand delivered a copy of my

dissertation to her. We spent several hours together in her home and that reaffirmed her to me as an inspirational, hope-filling leader in my life. As you can imagine, that time together was very special, but in those moments something even more magical took place.

At the time, my children were six and eight years old – you can see where this is going, right? Her house was set up much like a school classroom. A wall of books here, activities there, small musical instruments there, file folders over there. At one point, she was sitting on the couch flanked by my children, and she was reading them a story. Here I was sitting in my teacher's home 33 years after 4th grade, and she was now teaching my children, whom she had just met an hour earlier. Flashing through my brain at that time: "How many kids did she save? How many students were transformed? How many paths did she amend or alter?" She told me once in 4th grade, "Eric, teachers only remember two kinds of students: the good ones and the bad ones. You're a good one." I guess the same can be said of teachers: she was an excellent one. That day, the kids left her house with books, a small musical instrument, and fond memories of Mrs. Winston. They still talk about her today as if she's family, "What are we getting Mrs. Winston for the holidays this year?"

Epilogue

As a leadership educator, I learned from Mrs. Winston then that all students have value, and all have a story to share. The lessons she taught me then, help me meet college students where they are at, see their value, teach with my heart, lead with my soul, and serve others. I also learned that transformational leadership is an ongoing, never ending, fluid process that we can choose to engage in with others. I was a face in the crowd in 4th grade, and she found me and chose to invest. I do my best to never let those small instances, where I find someone in a crowd, go to

waste. Why? Because she did it for me. Mrs. Winston will always be regarded as someone who transformed a then broken 10 year-old boy into someone who learned to believe in himself. Understanding "self" is a vital piece to most leadership models and leader actions (Buschlen & Dvorak, 2011). Would I be a leadership educator without Mrs. Winston – probably not.

As a current youth football coach, I see the value in these young, adolescent players who may come from dysfunctional families, have multiple caregivers, may lack structure, struggle in school, and often make bad choices. But at practice, I get them for two hours a day, and I seek out their strengths and shine a spotlight on those strengths to squeeze out their potential. The best leaders try to do just that – they create and share lessons that transcend the setting and see things in others that they do not see in themselves (Buschlen, Chang, & Kniess, 2018). Betty Winston did that for me in 1979, and as leadership educator and as a coach, I do that now.

I hope my story can help you think of your own transformational leader from the past or the present. This new section in the *Journal of Leadership Education* is known as "Origins," and it is designed for just that purpose. Maybe the time is right for you to reflect and also reach out to thank your transformational leader – the person who got you here today, when you thought that was impossible (a coach, teacher, mentor, peer, etc.). I am glad that I was able to share this story with you and yes, I cried happy tears while writing, revising, and editing it. This showcases the power imbedded in transformational leadership, reflective stories, and qualitative methods – a lesson that you can easily unfold while educating future leaders.

Classroom Activity

I have facilitated a classroom exercise for well

over a decade with undergraduate leadership students to accompany the process of teaching transformational leadership. To me, it was fairly easy to teach transactional leadership (sweep the floor, and you will get something in return). It was a tad more challenging to expose a young mind as to how transformational leaders challenge followers to become a better person. This activity outlines the power found in transformational acts. I suggest you try it as well with your leaders in training. I always supply a box of Kleenex to that class period knowing that it will get used.

Here is how the activity works. I start by asking students to author a brief letter they would send to their transformative leader – the person who motivated, inspired, and challenged them to become something more, something better. Then we move our chairs into a circle and share (voluntarily). If by chance a student chooses to pass on sharing their story . . . that is certainly ok and that needs to be stated. After others share their stories, a few will get emotional and more times than not, everyone ends up sharing as they understand the activity and see that it is ok to be exposed or vulnerable with their peers. Since transformational leadership tends to come later in a semester, most students feel at ease with their peers by then. Processing the activity requires your attention and empathy as some of these stories may elicit a sharp emotional response. I tend to have a clear motive in mind and that is, how can students better understand transformational leadership when compared to other leadership styles? If things tend to veer away from your goal, go back to the content and ask questions of students to connect a particular model from the text to the discussion. Most of the stories will be lighthearted and easy to follow. Still, as a facilitator, it is important for you to be well-versed in the content so you can always bring the conversation back to a factual point.

After we all share (yes, I tell them about Betty Winston too), I then suggest they mail the letter. If they send it, great! The circle is complete. If they do not send it, at least they invested time to reflect on how the other person impacted their life. Why is that important to

do? We never know when it might be our time to serve as someone else's transformational leader. It might be the next call or the next text. In fact, our students might be engaged in that process right now and not even know it. Our students may be serving as someone's Mrs. Winston right now and that is an important realization to make in the moment. As a facilitator I suggest pointing out a key distinction . . . your students are studying leadership now and after this activity are aware of the goals embedded in transformational leadership, while many of our leaders in the past had little or no formal leadership training (Buschlen & Dvorak, 2011).

So, who was that person who motivated, inspired, and challenged you to become something more, something better? It may only take a minute to reach out, but your outreach and appreciation will be well received. After all, their time investment then may have been the influence and change needed to transform you decades ago or maybe just last month. If so, I believe a small thank you is in order and maybe even an "Origins" article. And, be sure to buy some Kleenex – you will need it!

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