# Charismatic versus Transformational Leadership Theories Comparison

## Introduction

Leadership is considered to be among the most important aspects of society today; from large corporations, governments, religious organizations, and families, leaders play a crucial role in shaping the destiny of the society that we live in. There are various leadership theories that have been advanced in the field of leadership. This essay focuses on charismatic and transformational leadership theories. Charismatic leadership theory was first postulated by Max Weber in 1947, who advanced the three forms of authority (charismatic, legal, and traditional). A charismatic leader can be defined as an individual who exudes superhuman or exceptional leadership qualities (Judge, Woolf, Hurst, & Livingston, 2006). A transformational leader is a leader who exudes courage, humility, willingness to collaborate, self-awareness, articulation of the interdependent nature of society and authenticity. In conclusion, it was noted that the vision of charismatic leaders seldom outlast the lifetimes of the leader. Many times their visions perish with them. Nonetheless, the vision of transformational leaders remains sustainable even after their demise.

## Comparison between Charismatic and Transformational Leadership Theories

Considering that charisma is sometimes exuded by both charismatic and transformational leaders, an empirical and theoretical overlay between charismatic and transformational leadership theories (Borgas, 2014) exists. On one side of the divide, there are charismatic leaders with ethical behavior and non-ulterior motives; such leaders may be regarded as transformational leaders with charisma. A fitting description of this overlap is Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. Leaders such as Martin Luther King were able to appeal to the beliefs and value system of their followers and they modeled the vision into their followers through the employment of charismatic means (Borgas, 2014) that did not evoke the perception of a one man’s show.

Another similarity between transformational and charismatic leaders is the fact that both categories of leaders are tasked with realizing the vision regardless of whether the vision is for personal self-aggrandizement or for a worthy cause, that impacts the ordinary masses. In essence, the leaders are the face of the movement.

There is still a debate on the similarities between charismatic and transformational leaders. According to Robert House - pioneer of charismatic leadership researcher, the two leadership theories are identical in many aspects and the differences are not pronounced (Judge et al., 2006). House views charisma as part of transformational leadership in which a transformational leader possesses broader abilities.

## Contrast between Charismatic and Transformational Leadership

## Transformational and charismatic leadership theories differ in diverse ways. In charismatic leadership theory, leaders who fall in this category are characterized as visionary risk-takers who are willing to go to any length in order to accomplish their vision. Charismatic leaders are also considerate of their followers' needs. Research studies on approaches to leadership have also established that followers of charismatic leaders are often dissatisfied and demotivated in comparison to followers of transformational leaders. In addition, it has been observed that some charismatic leaders are not able to separate their personal interests from those of the institutions that they serve. Charisma motivates leaders to pursue their goals by unconventional means, which in turn motivates their followers to put in an extra effort and improve their productivity. Charismatic leaders act in unconventional ways to achieve the vision and recognize opportunities that other ordinary people ignore. The ability to inspire their followers contributes to the cult-like following of charismatic leaders.

A transformational leader identifies potential motives among his or her subjects and strives to stimulate their capacity for higher needs (Northouse, 2015). This results in the followers being fully engaged in the pursuit of the collective vision. The outcome of transformational leadership is dependent on the leader-follower relationship, mutual stimulation, and the promotion of followers into leaders while leaders become change agents in the society (Miller, 2015).

While the charismatic leader leads the show and he or she is expected to achieve some things among these accomplishments is to impress his or her vision on his or her followers, secure their commitment and support in the process of attaining the vision. On the other hand, a transformational leader is willing to accommodate opinions and suggestions from his or her followers in order to create an all-inclusive vision and an environment of equal participation (Miller, 2015) which results in mutual stimulation.

In transformational leadership, the follower and the leader also play a significant role in the attainment of the vision while the charismatic leader is the sole architect of the vision. The striking differences are in the way that transformational and charismatic leaders articulate their vision portray their self-schemas. The open leadership policy, which is the hallmark of transformational leadership, is largely a product of the leader’s self-schema. Transformational leaders are opposed to self-aggrandizement because self-aggrandizement stifles the free and open exchange of opinions and in turn mutual stimulation of the followers. Integrative leadership often yields integrative power which does not incite fear of the leader among the followers because open leadership evokes emotions of love, togetherness, and collaboration. On the contrary, a charismatic leader evokes fear among his followers in the event that they do not actualize his vision.

In addition, a transformational leader acts as a change agent; and is not defined by his or her charisma, and does not desire to be accorded extraordinary respect or supernatural status (Miller, 2015). A notable transformational leader includes Mahatma Gandhi who exuded exemplary transformational leadership that was integrative of his follower's opinions. The leadership style of Mahatma Gandhi does not fit into the charismatic realm because; the revolution that he inspired against the British colonial rule was not a one man's show neither was it for personal self-aggrandizement. Nelson Mandela’s struggle against apartheid in South Africa also featured transformational and charismatic qualities. The struggle was not for self-elevation but for the transformation of the lives of ordinary South Africans. The ability to subscribe to either, transformational or charismatic leadership style is largely influenced by the leader’s persona (Miller, 2015).

On the contrary, a charismatic leader buys in followers into the vision that has been already established by him or her. The dynamics of the vision are leader focused and he or she has to stimulate the followers. Followers of transformational leaders are self-stimulated because the followers are united by a common objective of articulating a self-imposed vision (Miller, 2015).

Transformational leaders are capable of adopting charismatic leadership styles in their leadership if need be. However, a majority of leaders who exude charisma are deficient of other essential characteristics that constitute transformational leadership (Borgas, 2014) such as moral ethics, individual consideration, and intellectual stimulation. Leadership studies have established a close correlation between charismatic leadership style and unethical leadership in the business and political arena (Borgas, 2014). In some instances, charismatic leaders are narcissistic and exhibit chauvinism such as Adolf Hitler whose vision was to exterminate the Jews. Majorities of transformational leaders hold high moral and ethical standards in their dealings, and this makes it easy for them to influence their followers.

## Leaders who have Manifested Transformational Leadership

Around the globe, there are innumerable leaders who have exhibited transformational leadership; some under obscurity while other under the limelight. In this case, only John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King will be considered because they represent the epitome of transformational leadership with regards to civil rights, technological revolution, and peaceful conflict resolution.

Martin Luther King was an African American who led the civil rights movement in the US and also doubled up as a co-pastor of the Baptist Church in Atlanta (Nobel Media AB, 2017a). His speech titled "I have a Dream" inspired the civil rights movement in the US. Martin Luther King was born into an African-American family in 1929 and he graduated with a bachelors and doctorate degree from Morehouse College and Boston University, respectively. Martin Luther King inspired African Americans to mount a nonviolent demonstration that was characterized by bus boycott. The boycott led to the abolishment of the segregation among whites and blacks traveling on buses (Nobel Media AB, 2017a). His efforts paid off when segregation was abolished and African Americans were given the right to vote. Prior to his assassination, he was named by Time Magazine as Man of the Year and in 1964 he received the Nobel Peace Prize (Nobel Media AB, 2017a).

John F. Kennedy was an American president who inspired space exploration in the 1960s through his vision of landing Americans on the moon. John F. Kennedy was born in 1917 to a family of Irish descendant, graduated from Harvard University in 1940, and won the presidential elections in 1961 (White House, 2017). His visionary plan culminated in the successful landing of American astronauts on the moon. His actions were necessitated by the need to catch up with the Soviet Union in the space exploration program.

The background and achievements of Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy prove that transformational leadership is the hinge on which our world hangs on. The two leaders exuded confidence, charisma, and popularity in their quest to transform the society and they were able to articulate their vision on their followers. Their achievements and visions are still evident today in a more racially tolerant, equal American society, and in the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) successful space programs that transcended the vision of landing American astronauts on the moon.

## Leaders who have Manifested Charismatic Leadership

Mao Tse-tung was among the most notable charismatic leaders of the 20th century. Mao was born to a peasant family in 1893 and he proceeded to become the founding father of modern China, Chairman of the Communist party of China and great revolutionary leader who strived to advance the communist cause (Butterfield, 1976). In 1893, China was engulfed in a civil war; widespread poverty was the norm, and foreign powers were encroaching on its territories. Mao strived to improve the lives of the Chinese and with time, he developed a strategy that involved appealing to the peasants’ discontentment and sense of nationalism and transformed ordinary citizens into millions of soldiers who fought and won the Cultural Revolution and established the People’s Republic of China in 1949 (Butterfield, 1976). Despite the challenges emanating from the long march and the “Great Leap Forward”, Mao managed to keep his band of guerilla fighters motivated for at least 20 years during the struggle (Butterfield, 1976).

At the time of his demise, China had risen from poverty and civil strife to become a peaceful and industrialized country with nuclear capabilities and a resurgent economy. However, Mao’s charismatic leadership was to some extent devoid of ethics and was intolerant to any form of opposition. A case in point is the bloody execution of dissidents in the 1950s by his government (Butterfield, 1976). Over one hundred thousand dissidents were killed. Furthermore, the “Great Leap Forward” was executed with little input from his loyal followers and this contributed to its disastrous outcome and the death of 40 million Chinese due to hunger (Biography.com Editors, 2016).

Nelson Mandela was an icon in the apartheid struggle in South Africa and a Pan-African leader. Nelson Mandela was born in 1918 and studied law at the University of Witwatersrand. In 1944 he became a member of the African National Congress (ANC) which fought the apartheid policies of the white-dominated ruling party (Nobel Media AB, 2017b). Nelson Mandela was instrumental in the formation of a military unit in the African National Congress. ANC’s military unit (Umkhonto we Sizwe) was accused of violent tactics and murders of South Africans who did not subscribe to its anti-apartheid struggle or who seemed sympathetic to the white rule. Nevertheless, according to Nelson Mandela, the military wing violent struggle was a necessary response to the government’s use of force on peaceful protests and the killing of innocent civilians.

Nelson Mandela was against any form of domination by both blacks and whites in South Africa. His aspiration was to have a free, harmonious democratic society. In 1964, Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment but he was later released from prison in 1990. During his imprisonment, a band of loyal followers advanced his anti-apartheid struggle for 27 years and his stature in the apartheid struggle became more prominent. He went on to become South Africa’s first black president and in 1993, he received the Nobel Peace Prize (Nobel Media AB, 2017b). Nelson Mandela’s vision was not fully actualized because South Africans remain racially intolerant to this day and the country has increasingly become xenophobic.

The account of Nelson Mandela and Mao Tse-tung life illustrate the exceptional abilities and unconventional power that charismatic leaders command. However, their leadership approach and the strategy that they employed to attain their vision was at times devoid of ethics and morals.

Around the globe, the impact that charismatic leaders leave on the society is either extremely negative or largely positive depending on their self-schemas. Leaders such as Adolf Hitler, and Alexander the Great exuded charisma but left a trail of destruction and death because of pursuing their vision through selfish means. In an organizational context, the attainments of charismatic leaders are often devoid of substance. Furthermore, the achievements of a charismatic leader remain as long as the leader is present to articulate the vision into his followers. An example is the collapse of the great ancient Greek empire after the death of Alexander the Great (Mark, 2013).

The unsustainability of charismatic leader’s visions is attributed to the fact that the vision of charismatic leaders is sometimes not equally cherished by the followers and the leader remains as they key motivating factor in the process of attaining the vision.

## Conclusion

In light of the discussion in the preceding paragraphs, it can be established that there are striking differences between charismatic and transformational leadership styles. Charismatic leaders are largely devoid of moral ethics, which is the mainstay of transformational leadership. Nonetheless, there are charismatic leaders with solid morals and working ethics, which qualifies them to be considered as transformational leaders as well. Considering that charismatic leadership, rides on clear vision and purpose as an energizer for the followers, and strives to inculcate the beliefs and values of the leader into the followers, it is not strange to observe unfortunate outcomes from such leaders. It has been observed that the vision of charismatic leaders seldom outlast the lifetimes of the leader while the vision of transformational leaders remains sustainable even after their demise. This was attributed to mutual stimulation and integrative leadership on the part of the transformational leader and the self-aggrandizement of charismatic leaders.

However, a lingering question remains; whether charismatic leaders enjoy peculiarities that are exclusive to them but are absent in transformational leaders. This is in light of the fact that charisma is exuded by both transformational and charismatic leaders.

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