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## Transformational Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: *Shakespeare on Leadership*

By Julia Poulos



**“Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon ‘em”**

(Twelfth Night)

This is the moment. This is the time. Our nation witnessed a transfer of power. Now more than ever, government, business and individuals need transformational leadership. “The ground has shifted beneath us” as President Obama said on January 20, 2009.

On the world stage, with the backdrop of this time in the USA, I ask you to listen to the wisdom of Shakespeare and his lessons on transformational leadership. My purpose is to define the practices of transformational leadership, briefly share some of Shakespeare’s lessons on Leadership, and offer some applications for leadership development in organizations.

This is our business as organizational consultants. Our responsibility is the development of professional leaders. The so-called business gurus, and the Wall Street giants have fallen as fast and as hard as King Richard II and III, Macbeth, and all of Shakespeare’s flawed and tragic monarchs. In fact it reminds me of words from **Shakespeare’s Henry VI:**

*“Was it you that would be king? Was’t you who reveled in our Parliament,*

*And made a preachment of your high descent?*

*Where are your mess of sons to back you now?*

*The wanton Edward and the lusty George?*

*And where’s that crookback prodigy,*

*Dickie, your boy who with his grumbling voice*

*Was wont to cheer his dad in mutinies”*

Yes, those who coveted, claimed, and then corrupted the halls of power, where are they now? Amazing isn't it? This is Queen Margaret in “Henry VI” written in 1592. Oddly though, even some of the same names are still haunting us! What is the alternative to that vaulting ambition on which Shakespeare has written so much? In my observation, I draw parallels to the reckless and destructive ambition of leaders in today's public and private sector.

What is transformational leadership and why do we need it now? Well, it seems obvious, as Shakespeare said “there is no virtue like necessity” (Richard II, Act I, Scene iii). For me the key to transformational leadership is the belief that the leader's and follower's interests are “fused”. And hey, we better all be pulling in the same direction now!

To put Shakespeare into a modern context I turn to Kouzes and Posner, and creators of “The Leadership Challenge”, who have defined five practices of exemplary leadership from their intensive research projects. These practices they believe are the leadership competencies that are essential to getting extraordinary things done in extraordinary times. I believe they provide the best description of Transformational Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A Shakespearean quote follows each of the five practices.

**1) Model the Way** – Leaders establish principles concerning the way people should be treated and the way goals should be pursued. They create opportunities for victory.

The Merchant of Venice, Act IV, Scene i

*“The quality of mercy is not strained, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blest; it blesseth him that gives and him that takes.”*

**(Mercy is a measure of leadership.)**

**2) Inspire a Shared Vision** – Leaders passionately believe that they can make a difference. They breathe life into their visions and see exciting possibilities for the future.

Henry V, Act IV, Scene iii

*“We few, we happy few, we band of brothers...”*

*And gentlemen in England now abed*

*Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,*

*And hold their manhood's cheap whiles any speaks*

*That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day."*

**3) Challenge the Process** – Leaders search for opportunities to change the status quo. They develop innovative ways to improve the organization.

Hamlet, Act II, Scene ii

*"Nothing is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."*

**4) Enable Others to Act** – Leaders foster collaboration and build spirited teams. They strengthen others, making each person powerful.

*"Let each man do his best."* (Henry IV, I, Act V, Scene ii)

*"Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice."* (Hamlet, Act I, Scene iii)

**5) Encourage the Heart** – Accomplishing extraordinary things in organizations is hard won, keeping hope and determination alive, so leaders celebrate accomplishments. People feel like heroes.

Henry V, Act 3 Scene i

*"Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;*

*Or close the wall up with our English dead.*

*In peace there's nothing so becomes a man*

*As modest stillness and humility;*

*But when the blast of war blows in our ears,*

*Then imitate the action of the tiger. . .*

(Henry V takes charge and rallies the troops in the face of tremendous odds)

Leadership favorably impacts constituent (employee) attitudes. When the people leading engage in the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership, their employees (constituents) report significantly high levels of important employee attitudes. This is the consistent conclusion of a recent analysis involving over 66,000 survey responses completed over the past two years.

According to the research of Kouzes and Posner, the more frequently respondents reported their leaders, across a variety of organizations, fields, and functions: Modeling the Way, Inspiring a Shared Vision, Challenging the Process, enabling Others to Act, and Encouraging the Heart, the more these same constituents reported experiencing:

- 1) Pride in their workplaces,**
- 2) Strong motivation (willingness to work hard and long hours),**
- 3) Team spirit,**
- 4) Being productive,**
- 5) Trusting management,**
- 6) Clarity about their responsibilities.**

In a survey involving 94 companies, Richard Rois (2006) asked executives to rate their company's senior leadership on The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership by completing the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI). Then he analyzed the company's long-term performance (over a 10-year period; 1996-2005) using net income and stock price growth. The relationship between transformational leadership practices (combining all 5 leadership practices into a single measure) and company financial performance was dramatic.

Companies with a strong and consistent application of these five leadership practices had net income growth of 841 percent versus – 40 percent for companies with a low incident of leadership practices. Similarly, stock price growth was 204 percent for strong leadership practices companies compared with only 76 percent for companies with a weak implementation of leadership practices.

The evidence is strong, clear and consistent: The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership make a significant difference in both favorable employee sentiments and positive company financial performance. Hundreds of other empirical studies, across a wide variety of industries and settings, support these conclusions.

Let us return to Shakespeare and President Obama and draw together these voices that are offering similar standards for transformational leadership.

On Tuesday, January 20, 2009 President Obama declared that what will lead us as a country out of our present trauma, is the commitment to a positive future.

*“Those values upon which our success depends- these things are old these things are true.”*

Shakespeare agrees that goodness should be our cause:

Henry V, Act V, Scene ii

*“ . . . a black beard will turn white, a curled pate will grow bald, a fair face will wither, a full eye will wax hollow. But a good heart...is the sun and moon. . . for it shines bright and never changes, but keeps its course truly.”*

### Let's use Shakespeare in the Real World: Leadership Development Options

#### **1) Study Shakespeare, formally or informally.**

Many management gurus have offered analysis and strategies to our 21<sup>st</sup> century leaders. The genius of Shakespeare is that he never offers advice or prescriptions. He “holds a mirror up to nature” and invites the audience to decide if there is a model or lesson for them, individually, or for their society.

Shakespeare has much to say to all leaders and a careful study of his work and what it says about leadership is a creative and powerful strategy. Columbia University offers a seminar, “In search of the Perfect Prince”, taught by Tina Packer, (founder of Shakespeare and Co., in Lenox, MA) that offers an exploration into Shakespeare’s insights into leadership. Tina Packer in her book, “Power Plays”, says that leaders need three ingredients; energy, mental focus and physical stamina. “Infecting the troops with your energy, listening hard, speaking with conviction, being emotionally available, empathic without sentiment and able to keep going for long periods of time, sorting, distilling, disseminating-if you can do these things you will be a great leader.”

#### **2) Self- Assessment and Feedback Essential: Using Real-World Application Projects**

As organizational consultants we know what leadership requires; self-assessment, feedback from others, and skill-mastery in targeted competencies. Based on my 25 years of experience in leadership development programs, I believe the key element in the success of these programs is the requirement that managers observe and reflect on their own behavior. The Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) of Kouzes and Posner give leaders the ability to assess their own behavior and this instrument also provides the opportunity for leaders to get feedback from others who are evaluating their strength in the five exemplary leadership competencies.

In my work with the State of New Jersey’s “Certified Public Management Program”, we require participants to complete several “practicums”, which are oral and written reports of how they applied specific leadership behavior to their real-world leadership responsibilities. In addition, the program requires two projects in which they apply transformational leadership practices to their work environments to meet a specific, measureable objective for: personal development, work process

improvement, or team development. I believe that these projects have been the true “learning experiences”. This process challenges them to: 1) choose a target goal for leadership development 2) assess their current competency level in that target area 3) apply transformational leadership behaviors 4) measure if they have met the specific goal 5) evaluate what worked and what didn't.

### 3) On-going Executive Coaching and Mentoring Programs

Even in this relentless “organization-world”, the practices of mentoring, job enrichment and job rotation should not be abandoned. Organizations must demand action plans which include: mentoring, work reports, and real-work projects, so managers are challenged to make a commitment to their own leadership development.

Executive coaching and performance consulting demonstrate value for today's leaders. Yes, executive coaching has had a run of good press and a run of bad. But there are excellent programs out there. The point is that the work must be ongoing. How important is it to hold leaders accountable for, not only legal and moral, but ethical behavior?

Hamlet, Act I, Scene iii

*“This above all: To thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.*

**(Live your highest values. Always.)**

And in reality, on 1/20/09, President Obama mirrored Shakespeare's vision. Listen carefully to the illusions: “band of patriots”...let it be said ...that when we were tested..future generations.” Many parallels can be drawn to Shakespeare, particularly referencing the famous speech in Henry V, Act IV, Scene iii. And by the way, Henry V is considered the greatest leader in the Bard's work.

Inaugural Speech President Barack Obama:

*“So let us mark this day with remembrance of who we are and how far we have traveled. In the year of America's birth, in the coldest of months, a small band of patriots ----America in the face of our common dangers, in this winter of our hardship....With hope and virtue, let us brave once more the icy currents and endure what storms may come. Let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested, we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter and with eyes fixed on the horizon and God's grace upon us we carried forth that great fight of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations”.*

That, my friends, is the vision of a transformational leader.

We are all leaders in some place in our lives and life demands transformation from all of us.

*“All the World’s a Stage and all the men and women merely players, they have their exits and their entrances and one man in his time plays many parts”.* (“As You Like It”, Act II, scene vii)

***About the author:***

**Julia Poulos is president of “All the World’s a Stage”, a business dedicated to helping corporations and individuals master savvy presentations in the age of show business; Julia Poulos has developed “Ten Talking Points for Women Professionals” that can help you make presentations powerful. You can learn more about Julia and her organization at [www.savvypresentations.com](http://www.savvypresentations.com).**

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