

What's Your Motive [for leadership]?

By David Burkus



The business page of any newspaper has been dominated by corporate scandals for the past decade and, in the wake of this, experts from the world of leadership such as Warren Bennis and James O'Toole have been crying out for leaders to lead more authentically and transparently. One barrier to transparency can be found in the method leaders use to decide the appropriate leadership style. Leadership professor Bruce Winston believes that the motive of the leader determines the leadership style used. In addition, Winston proposes that followers infer the motives of leaders by observing leaders' behavior, and sometimes the behavior (or leadership style) observed does not match the motive. This discrepancy between the perceived motive and the actual motive can cause followers to believe their leaders are inauthentic. For example, leaders who utilize a charismatic leadership style, when their motives favor a transformational style, may be seen as merely trying to inflate their ego. Winston offers a method for avoiding this discrepancy by instructing leaders to examine which of four motives they possess (Me, We, Thee, or It) and selecting their leadership style accordingly. Winston describes a leadership style that best aligns with the motive of the leader: charismatic for "me" motives, transformational for "we" motives, servant for "thee" motives and transactional for "it" motives.

If your motive is Me, be a Charismatic leader

Often leaders focus on themselves or implementing their vision, what Winston calls a "me" motive. When this is the case, charismatic leadership is the appropriate leadership style. There are situations that call for a "me" motive and charismatic leadership. Michelle Bligh and Jeffrey Kohles, writing in *The Leadership Quarterly*, discuss that one of the reasons for Barack Obama's success in the 2008 election was that, in times of crisis, followers turn to charismatic leaders for a vision to get them out of

the crisis. In cases like these, leaders engage in persuasive rhetoric in order to get compliance with and effort behind the initiatives they're championing. Leadership experts Jacobson and House believe that followers exert effort toward the leader's vision when the vision appears in line with their own.

There are valid reasons, such as the one mentioned above, for a leader's motive to be "me" or "my vision," and these reasons call for charismatic leadership. Leadership author Jaepil Choi describes the three core components of a charismatic leadership style: envisioning, empathy and empowerment. Charismatic leaders generate excitement in their followers by creating a picture of the future that followers can identify with (envisioning). In addition, charismatic leaders create a feeling of oneness with followers by displaying that they understand what followers want (empathy). Lastly, charismatic leaders appeal to the need for power of followers by removing thoughts or obstacles that make followers feel powerless (empowerment) and increasing their self-efficacy through affiliation with the leader.

If your motive is We, be a Transformational leader

Some leaders dedicate themselves to an organization. This focus is what Winston calls the "we" motive and transformational leadership is the style of best fit. Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, provides an image of the transformational leader when describing his "Level 5 Leader" as someone who is paradoxically humble yet passionately devoted to the cause of the organization. According to Bernard Bass, an early pioneer of transformational leadership theory, transformational leaders sacrifice their own personal interests for the good of the organization, and expect followers to do the same.

As discussed above, sometimes the line between charismatic and transformational leader can appear blurry when observed by followers and cause them to believe the leader is merely looking out for themselves. As such it is important to utilize proper transformational leadership when the leader's motive is "we." Bass and Avolio developed the "Four I's" of transformational leadership as a guide for aspiring transformational leaders. They assert that transformational leaders demonstrate (a) inspirational motivation, (b) idealized influence, (c) individual consideration and (b) intellectual stimulation when interacting with followers.

If your motive is Thee, be a Servant leader

Leaders are sometimes known for their devotion to their people. These leaders believe that if they take care of their followers, their followers will take care of the success of the organization. The motive behind these leaders is what Winston refers to as "thee." When the motive is to provide for and

develop followers, the appropriate leadership style is servant leadership. According to Winston, servant leaders operate on the belief that as long as you select followers who are aligned with the organization's vision and values, then you can focus on providing followers with everything they need to achieve their goals. Chester Cadieux II, the founder of the QuikTrip, a chain of convenience stores, provides an example of servant leadership in action. He says, "The purpose of QuikTrip is to give our employees the opportunity to grow and succeed."

Although Robert Greenleaf initially coined the term servant leadership, Larry Spears, leadership expert and former head of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, distilled the writings of Greenleaf to identify ten core characteristics of servant leadership. These are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others and building community. Servant leaders demonstrate and apply these characteristics during interactions with their followers.

If your motive is It, be a Transactional leader

Although the literature is inundated with leadership models that stress the role of leaders in strategy and vision, sometimes leaders just need to get things done. The desire to accomplish a task because it needs to be done, without regard for the relationship between the leader and follower, is what Winston refers to as an "It" motive. When these motives arise, it is best to use a transactional style. According to Bernard Bass, transactional leaders trade rewards (or punishment) for performance from their followers. Winston uses the example of emptying the trash. It may be possible that the regular emptying of trashcans will add value to the organization or promote better morale among followers, but it is more likely that the leader's primary concern is just that the trashcan needs to be emptied.

Transactional leaders must understand that their attempts to trade rewards for performance work best when used in alignment with Expectancy Theory. Developed by Victor Vroom, Expectancy Theory predicts that followers will only exert effort when they believe that doing so will yield an increase in performance, better performance will lead to a reward and that the reward is desirable. Without these three elements, transactional leaders can expect to have their proposed transactions rejected.

Conclusion

As more voices begin to cry for transparency, it is important for leaders to consider what their motives are and align their leadership style accordingly. Failure to do so can risk followers developing the belief that the leader is not being authentic and eventually, followers will abandon the leader. When evaluating your motive as a leader, or aspiring leader, select a leadership style that matches your motive accordingly. If your motive is yourself or your vision ("me"), be a charismatic leader. If your

motive is your organization or its cause (“we”), be a transformational leader. If your motive is your followers (“thee”), be a servant leader. If your motive is the task at hand (“it”) be a transactional leader. Choose your leadership style appropriately so that you can be an authentic and effective leader.

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