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## The Writing Center, Transformed

Luke Niiler, The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL

*Niiler, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of English and Director of the University of Alabama Writing Center.*

### Abstract

Transformational leadership theory (TLT) includes the following three leadership qualities: vision, individualized support, and intellectual stimulation. These leadership qualities, in turn, create motivated, high-achieving followers. This essay traces these aspects of TLT in Writing Center practice, and suggests that these aspects of transformational leadership play a key role in the work of Writing Center administrators, consultants, and clients.

### Introduction

Writing Center administration requires not only management, or a primary focus on tasks; it requires leadership, “a focus on relationships with the people involved in [carrying out] those tasks” (Campbell 2006). Transformational leadership is well-suited to Writing Centers, as it involves change—changing people, in particular. It involves engaging, even “charismatic” leaders. And it can result, as Walumbwa and Hartell (2011) have shown, in those being led, or followers, “feeling more confident to perform beyond expectations” (p. 166). Dvir, Eden, Avolio and Shamir (2002) provide a working definition of the term: “The transformational leader [broadens] and [elevates] followers’ goals and [provides] them with confidence to perform beyond...expectations” (p. 735). Transformational leaders combine enthusiasm and energy to articulate and enact a specific vision, and work to reinforce it among his or her followers. Transformational leaders seek to help those they lead “identify with an organizational vision beyond their own self-interest” (Ruggieri and Abbate, 2013, p. 1172). As discussed below, such leaders remain highly visible and readily accessible to their followers by practicing “walk-around management” (Bass, 1985, p. 36). Transformational leadership, finally, emphasizes the relationship between leader and follower. This enhanced relationship has been shown to correlate positively with increased follower self-efficacy and performance, which is to say, followers working in transformational settings “feel more confident to perform above expectations” (Walumbwa and Hartell, 2011, p. 166). Because of strong leadership, these individuals believe in their ability to master circumstances and expectations, and, in turn, demonstrate considerable “mastery experiences,” or moments of achievement that serve to create an even greater sense of self-efficacy.

For the purposes of this paper, I will trace three attributes of TLT as demonstrated in the day-to-day work of the Writing Centers in general and the Writing Center I direct. Using Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, and Fetter’s 1990 criteria, I will discuss identifying and articulating a vision; providing individualized support; and providing intellectual stimulation. I wish to suggest that attention to these methods of leadership can help augment Writing Center practice.

### Vision

Podsakoff et al. define vision as “behavior on the part of the leader aimed at identifying new opportunities for his or her unit/division/company, and developing, articulating, and inspiring others with [this] vision of the future” (p. 112). Gluck (1981) notes that vision is “frequently the product of deep and disciplined analysis and creative thinking and only occasionally the result of a blinding insight” (p. 22). The exercise of vision can rely in part on “charisma,” a potent mix of personal attributes that followers can find

appealing. Charismatic leaders are “energetic, action-oriented, and positive” (Rolfe, 2011, p. 56). They “inspire and excite their employees with the idea that they may be able to accomplish great things with extra effort” (Bass, 1990, p. 21). Transformational leaders are committed to a vision, and they expect the same dedication from their followers.

Vision, in turn, is deeply woven into the fabric of Writing Center scholarship. Much of the field’s widely cited literature reads like a series of manifestoes. There is North (1984), sounding the call of “writers, not writing”; Bruffee (1984), positioning the discipline within the framework of social construction; Lunsford (1991), urging collaboration as praxis; Harris (1986), elucidating the value of “teaching one-to-one,” and so forth. These and other foundational works retain their substantial influence in our field, which is why the vision of the Writing Center I direct sounds like so many others: We “help [students] develop the writing skills necessary for academic success through free, friendly consultations” (The University of Alabama Writing Center, 2013).

The implementation of this kind of vision is far more complex than that simple sentence, and requires a holistic view. Indeed, Gluck notes that visionary leadership requires that we be “constantly aware of the need to question and reshape [our] vision, while maintaining those elements that are still relevant and [have] been instrumental in achieving that...success” (1981, p. 19). These transformational tools—questioning and reshaping—help me maintain a vision of Writing Center work in a university setting that, in many ways, poses significant challenges. The University of Alabama (UA) Writing Center is staffed primarily by generalists. I believe with Hubbach (1988) that active listening, insightful questioning, and a lack of familiarity with a given discipline enable these generalists to “help [clients] recognize what must be stated in the text” (p. 28). Yet some faculty members from fields outside the Humanities are skeptical of this arrangement. And perhaps they should be, as Kiedaish and Dinitz (1993) suggest. The authors document several instances of consultants failing to adequately or accurately counsel clients from outside their major fields of study. The same certainly holds true here, where consultants have been heard, on occasion, to ask Engineering clients to identify the thesis statements of their lab reports! If, therefore, I am serious about gaining the trust of more faculty, and if, more importantly, I am serious about realizing our vision of helping students achieve “academic success,” I need to “question and reshape” some Writing Center practices while holding fast to my core beliefs. I have therefore hired consultants from outside English to serve non-Humanities disciplines. I have augmented our training of generalists by creating a Writing Liaison program, which places select consultants in classes across the disciplines to serve as resource persons for those students. I routinely ask faculty and staff from outside the Humanities to share and unpack their disciplines’ writing conventions at our staff meetings. One-to-one consultations remain our primary focus, but I have learned to modify that vision to better suit our clientele. Finally, because I see the implementation of my vision as contingent upon our ability to excite and inspire, I place a premium on remaining positive, upbeat, and enthusiastic in all of my exchanges with clients, consultants, faculty, and administration.

### **Individualized Support**

Podsakoff et al. (1990) define “individualized support” as “behavior on the part of the leader that indicates that he/she respects followers and is concerned about their personal feelings and needs” (p. 112). For Bass (1985), this involves attention to “differences” among employees and willingness to mentor them (p. 21). The supportive transformational leader is empathetic, compassionate, and a good listener, behaviors that are routinely stressed in our training materials (Ryan and Zimmerelli, 2010; McAndrew and Reigstad, 2001; Gillespie and Lerner, 2000). Bass (1985) notes that regular communication between leaders and followers is vital to individualized support, especially through “walk-around management,” in which leaders circulate regularly throughout the organization to advise, consult, observe, and listen (p. 36). Campbell (2006), however, urges leaders to take into account the “ego needs” of those we lead (p. 33). Because ego needs are met when we know we are valued by others, Campbell suggests that leaders “go on record politely” when a message could have a negative impact on a follower’s ego. Suggested techniques are “questioning, minimizing, being deferential, apologizing, and being grateful” (p. 100). This method is appropriate when the needs of the organization, the member of the organization, and the leader’s relationship with that member are paramount, as is the case in a transformational setting.

At UA, graduate-level consultants (GTAs) are required to work in the Writing Center for a year prior to teaching. A small number of these GTAs may resist this requirement by showing up late for work or working listlessly, without passion or purpose. They may refuse to write required reports and reflections. In such cases, I will go on record politely with considerable attention to these GTAs' ego needs because I want to challenge them to improve and support them in their attempts to improve. I discuss these GTAs' coursework with them, as well as their career trajectories, the work of the Writing Center, and their feelings about that work. I want them to understand the value of the Writing Center experience, even though that value may not be immediately clear to them. I want them to become intrinsically motivated, to meaningfully and productively engage their clients. Kellaway et al. (2012) suggest that such demonstrations of a transformational leader's attention and care can augment follower trust—which, in turn, can build that follower's sense of well-being. Sometimes this extra attention works; sometimes it doesn't. Rolfe (2011) notes that in such circumstances, it is best to

forge ahead with the majority, collectively moving  
the vision forward. The naysayers can stagnate without input  
into their future, or they can join forces, making the group  
even more powerful as they move toward the vision (p. 55).

Leithwood (2010) suggests individualized support can also be developed through the delegation of authority, or sharing responsibility for some aspect of an organization's performance. This can lead to a greater collective sense of shared mission; and for Bass (1985), it can aid in the identification and development of future leaders (p. 35). I assign tasks such as promotions, social media, classroom visits, and the collecting of resource materials (such as reference texts) to GTAs who are particularly invested in their work. Research is also an option: I have initiated small research projects with staff members, who have had the opportunity to present their work at regional Writing Center conferences. Some of the consultants involved in these projects have become graduate administrators within the Writing Center.

### **Intellectual Stimulation**

Leithwood (2010) indicates that intellectual stimulation enables followers to "take risks," productively "re-formulate" their understanding of how their organization works, even "challenge the status quo" (p. 160). Bass (1985) notes that intellectual stimulation can entail risk-taking and innovation. These qualities clearly distinguish transformational leadership strategies from transactional methods. One site of intellectual stimulation in the UA Writing Center is scholarship: reading, discussing, and even writing about relevant texts that in some way address and unpack current staff practice. Consultants complete and are debriefed on the detailed client reports they write after each consultation; they are often assigned readings based on the specific problems and questions they report. Consultants, further, are required to submit monthly written reports in which they discuss issues like working with international students, working across disciplines, addressing the needs of students with disabilities. Finally, consultants are encouraged to use these documents to discuss moments for which they felt unprepared, due to a lack of training or a gap in Writing Center literature. I have found that some of the best scholarship comes from consultants' own reflective practice, which, in fact, is a key element in their training. Not only this, but reflective practice has transformational potential. "Transformational leadership can be learned," writes Bass (1985b), "and it can—and should—be the subject of management training and development" (p. 27).

Consultants, therefore, are transformed not only by their leaders, but also by their work. In a debriefing conducted at the end of her Writing Center assignment, Kirstin acknowledges the transformational value of her work, including a reference to a "mastery experience" which gave her greater confidence. She says, "At first I felt like I couldn't help people, but...when a client re-booked me, I did a victory dance!" Kirstin also learned something about the value of belief, a self-efficacy that transcends both Center and classroom. "Clients put their futures in my hands—they believed in me," she notes. "[Consultants] really can help them be better, and make a positive difference in their lives." She encourages future staff members, stating, "You can build relationships with your clients, because as they believe in you, you come to believe in yourself" (personal communication, April 28, 2012).

Grant (2012), further, has shown that followers actually perform better when they are in direct contact with the beneficiaries of their labor (in this instance, Writing Center clients). "Beneficiary contact," Grant

writes, “brings a [transformational leader’s] vision to life, enabling followers to perceive integrity in the vision and recognize the potential for their contributions to have a meaningful...impact” on those beneficiaries (2012, p. 461). Recalling an end-of-semester session with a regular client, Meghan notes a change in her client: “He can [now] detect patterns in his own writing!” (personal communication, December 5, 2012). Her tone is at once awestruck and energized. And at the end of the year, Meghan discovers a change in herself. She recalls that she has been “humbled in meeting and connecting with students in the Writing Center” (personal communication, May 3, 2013). This connectedness—between client and consultant, teacher and student, leader and follower—powerfully engenders the most powerful transformational act of all: our own clients’ learning. In an unsolicited e-mail, one client notes that he resisted visiting the Writing Center, and would not have come were it not for extra credit points. Once seated with Meghan, however, his mind quickly changed. “[She] was very welcoming, knowledgeable, and helpful,” he writes. “You could tell that she genuinely cared about what she was doing and really did want to help me make my paper the best it could be.” The result was self-efficacy: “I came out of the appointment with a vastly improved paper that I felt good about and was proud of” (emphasis mine; personal communication, April 15, 2013). The response of this satisfied client illustrates recent work by Bogler et al (2012), who have found positive correlations between a transformational teaching style and student satisfaction.

## Conclusion

I have suggested that the work of the Writing Center can be augmented by transformational leadership, with an emphasis on fulfilling both human and organizational potential. I have suggested that our field as a whole, and some of the work taking place at the Writing Center I direct, has transformational qualities. Indeed, Writing Centers are uniquely positioned as sites of vision, individualized support, and intellectual stimulation; these are intrinsic attributes of the work we do. I would add, too, that transformational leadership has a trickle-down effect: It helps change Writing Center consultants, to be sure, and it also helps Writing Center clients become the “writers” so much of our literature celebrates. If Writing Centers are sites in which transformative leadership plays out regularly, even organically, it should be possible for future researchers to further (and more formally) trace the effects of this leadership style on clients and consultants. Which TLT strategies benefit Writing Center clients the most? How can we teach TLT to Writing Center administrators? What are the implications of TLT for formative and summative assessment? I hope that this essay helps position us to further explore the implications of transformational leadership for our work.

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