

# Leadership in Academic Libraries: Exploratory Research on the Use of Transformational and Transactional Leadership Styles

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## Introduction

One of the most important parts of any organization is leadership. Leaders create a shared vision, inspire others, and provide a stable center during times of change. Leaders can also stymie growth, thwart change, and cause aggravation throughout the ranks. Academic libraries must not only survive but thrive in the ever-changing world of information and higher education where the traditional definition of academic libraries and librarianship is dying or already dead. Who a library has for its leader is critical to the library's success. Not only are dynamic leaders needed to navigate the library through change and uncertainty, but what is demanded of those leaders is changing rapidly. Who is best suited to lead the change in librarianship? Not just the change needed in each individual library, but the change needed across the profession.

This study is exploratory in nature looking for the best ways to bring about change in the profession. It is an attempt to draw more people into the conversation about leadership and change in the academic librarian profession. This study examines a small sample of academic librarians' perceptions of the use of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership by their director/dean/university librarian. More leadership theories and paradigms exist other than

transformational leadership, but research has shown transformational leadership is highly correlated with successful change. While transformational leadership can positively affect an organization in a wide variety of ways, this paper will focus on the transformational leaders' ability to facilitate change.

## Change

Change is difficult and complex, and most attempts at organizational change are unsuccessful.<sup>1</sup> Change threatens the perceived order of the world. Even those with messy desks and untidy offices want to work in an environment that is "orderly" and consistent as this routine provides a sense of safety and security.<sup>2</sup> If the future is perceived as "predictable," then it can be managed and controlled, and maybe more importantly, we know our place in that future. Change erases the predictability of organizational life and creates a future that is unknown, and just like a darkened hallway full of danger and peril, real or imagined, the unknown of change brings with it a sense of menace and fear.

All organizational change consists of several parts. The first is the "context" of the organization. This refers to the environment in which the organization exists and over which it has very little control. For institutions of higher education this can include leg-

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isolation, funding, and the changing wants, needs, and demands of students attending college. Context also refers to the environment within the organization. This largely means the skills, education, attitudes, and beliefs of those working in the organization.<sup>3</sup> An organization has more control over its internal environment than its external environment, but still not complete control. Change can be “fundamental” as a means of adjusting to changes in the external environment, or it can be incremental, a series of changes designed to meet an organizational vision.<sup>4</sup> Fundamental change for an academic library could mean drastically reducing the number of books purchased because of a cut in funding, while an incremental change would be weeding print books and purchasing mostly e-books in order to create learning and work spaces for students. The “process” of change is the actual steps and activity to bring about the preferred change.<sup>5</sup>

Resistance to change can take many forms from aggressive (outright hostility) to passive (not doing what needs to be done) to passive-aggressive (continually asking for more data; wondering if this change will be necessary three years from now).<sup>6</sup> No matter the type of resistance, the reasons are generally the same: organizational members feel they have no stake in the process; they wonder how they will fit in the new organization; they are afraid of the unknown change brings; or they have experienced too much change too fast. These reasons are often related to members’ worries over whether they will have the skills necessary to succeed post change, will have to take on more duties and responsibilities, or will even have a job after the change is finished.<sup>7</sup>

What is clear is “individual personalities” and attitudes of those within the organization greatly affect change and its chances of success.<sup>8</sup> Employees can feel two types of commitment to an organization. “Normative commitment” comes from the duty and “obligation” an employee feels toward the organization. “Affective commitment” comes from the emotional attachment an employee feels towards the organization, often due to alignment of personal and organizational goals and values. Affective commitment

has been shown to be more strongly associated with positive attitudes toward change.<sup>9</sup> When personal and organizational goals and values are aligned, the organizational member sees the need and benefit for change and realizes the change will be better for both the organization and its members.

Of course how well change is managed and implemented influences how well it is received, and ultimately its success. Many organizations have a top-down, directive approach to change. This is the least likely approach to be well-received. Management can invite participation in the change process in order to give voice to those within the organization. While this be better received, employees still need to understand why the change is taking place and to what ends. Change through a shared vision is the most successful way for change to be received. A good vision creates a path to betterment for the organization and has the support of those within the organization because the vision and change are clearly about them.<sup>10</sup>

The steps to successful change management listed above are common, and are what Schaffer and Thomson refer to as “activity-centered.” Activity-centered change is focused on the process of change: how change is introduced, managed, and communicated. The problem with focusing on activity is it is not linked to any results or goals, can be too big to comprehend, can be difficult to measure, often confuses activity for achievement, and with no data can be difficult to improve on the process and learn what works.<sup>11</sup> “Results-driven” change is different because it focuses on achievable, short-term goals (and the subsequent success of achievement brings encouragement for change), implementing change when needed, and measuring results. For results-driven change to work, the organization must have a “continuous learning process” that builds on each change “phase.”<sup>12</sup> Each department in the organization “sets and achieves ambitious short-term goals,” analyzes and re-designs their plans, and learns from the process while the organization makes what works part of its culture and continually recognizes opportunities to change and improve.<sup>13</sup>

## Transformational Leadership

Leadership is the link between “intention and outcome.”<sup>14</sup> A leader that “inspires,” “stimulates,” “focuses on followers’ needs,” connects “the goals and values” of the employee and organization, and models organizational values can more easily affect the attitudes of those in the organization and increase their commitment and performance.<sup>15</sup> This is what a transformational leader does, and why they are so effective at leading organizational change.

James MacGregor Burns first defined the terms transactional and transformational leadership.<sup>16</sup> Bruce Avolio and Bernard Bass expanded on his ideas to create the full range of leadership spectrum consisting of laissez-faire, transactional leadership, and transformational leadership. Laissez-faire is the complete absence of leadership. A laissez-faire leader ignores problems in the organization and neglects day-to-day duties.<sup>17</sup> Transactional leaders rely on a series of “exchanges” between leader and follower. A transactional leader sets organizational goals and standards for performance and behavior and rewards followers who routinely meet those goals and standards. Over time, by consistently keeping their word they develop the trust of those in the organization.<sup>18</sup> The transactional leader uses “contingent reward” to positively or negatively reinforce good or bad workplace behavior.<sup>19</sup> This requires the use of “management-by-exception” whereby the transactional leader monitors and corrects employee mistakes. Management-by-exception can be active (rigorous monitoring of employee behavior) or passive (only acting when a mistake is brought to his/her attention). While management-by-exception has its place, it is ineffective when used in excess and can increase stress for organizational members.<sup>20</sup>

While transactional leadership skills are needed by all leaders, transactional leadership by itself can only do so much. Transactional leaders can point an organization in the right direction, but transactional leaders will not get the same results or achievements a transformational leader will. Transactional leaders do not “inspire” or “challenge” the way transformational

leaders do. Transactional leaders do not develop leaders throughout the organization, and followers never reach their full potential. Organizations with transactional leaders are not innovative and shy away from risk.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, when it comes to change transactional leaders simply change one thing for another, whereas transformational leaders facilitate “radical change” in “structure.”<sup>22</sup> Most transactional leaders do not know how to be transformational leaders because the two simply have different “mindsets.”<sup>23</sup> Transactional leaders have greater “quantitative performance” while transformational leaders have greater “qualitative performance.”<sup>24</sup> In a steady environment transactional leaders work well, but when an organization faces turmoil the ways of a transactional leader can be “the kiss of death.”<sup>25</sup> In times of crisis and change an organization needs the skills of a transformational leader.

Transformational leaders are trusted “role models” who encourage instead of stifle challenge and develop leaders throughout the organization.<sup>26</sup> Transformational leaders put others first and are passionate about their work and possess an ever positive (though realistic) outlook. A transformational leader holds the notion that nothing in an organization is “too good, too fixed, too political, or too bureaucratic that it cannot be challenged, changed, retired, or abandoned.”<sup>27</sup> Transformational leaders use the “Four I’s”: idealized influence—modeling organizational values and building trust; inspirational motivation—sharing a vision of a better future; intellectual stimulation—encouraging new ways to solve problems and questioning cultural assumptions; individual consideration—helping followers reach their goals and potential and empower them to work autonomously.<sup>28</sup>

Transformational leaders think long-term and do not make short-sighted decisions. They gather input from others in the organization and look for solutions that create “revolutionary innovations.”<sup>29</sup> Transformational leaders are good in a crisis because they do not panic, and they inspire to action and instill confidence in organizational members.<sup>30</sup> Transformational leaders create an environment where followers focus on

“achievement, self-realization, and the greater good.”<sup>31</sup> They clearly “articulate a vision” and help align followers’ self-interest with the larger goals of the organization. Transformational leaders enhance all phases of organizational operation including “image, recruitment, diversity, teamwork, and innovation.”<sup>32</sup> Today’s leading organizations have a great number of transformational leaders, not just in formal leadership positions but throughout the organization.<sup>33</sup>

## Methodology and Results

The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) developed by Bruce Avolio and Bernard Bass examines the full range of leadership by measuring a leader’s use of laissez-faire, transactional, and transformational leadership styles. The components of idealized influence (with sub-components of idealized attributes and idealized behavior), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration form transformational leadership. Transactional leadership is measured with contingent reward and management-by-exception, active, and laissez-faire leadership is made up of management-by-exception, passive and laissez-faire traits. The MLQ also measures the leadership outcomes of extra effort, inspiring others to achieve more than they thought possible; effectiveness, both how effective the leader is and the effectiveness of the organization; and satisfaction in the leader and leadership styles.

The survey was distributed to several ALA listservs during two separate one month periods. A total of 465 academic librarians not currently in the role of library director/dean/university librarian) from four year institutions responded to the survey. The respondents rated their leaders as more transformational than transactional, but the means for both transformational (2.05) and transactional (1.65) leadership styles are not high (table 1). The 0 to 4 scale the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire uses makes a mean of 2.05 only so-so, while the mean for laissez-faire, a complete absence of leadership (1.52) is rather high. The means for individual components of the leadership are also low to middling (table 2) with the high-

est mean for a component is inspirational motivation (2.40). The means for leadership outcomes were also not impressive (table 3). The highest mean was for effectiveness (2.12), and both means for extra effort (1.77) and satisfaction (1.98) were below two.

**TABLE 1**  
Means of Laissez-faire, Transactional, and Transformational Leadership

Leadership Type	Mean (on a 0–4 scale)	N
Laissez-faire	1.52	463
Transactional	1.64	463
Transformational	2.05	465

**TABLE 2**  
Means of Individual Components of Leadership Styles

Leadership Component	Mean (on a 0–4 scale)	N
Idealized Attributes	2.13	464
Idealized Behavior	2.11	465
Inspirational Motivation	2.40	465
Intellectual Stimulation	1.78	462
Individualized Consideration	1.84	464
Contingent Reward	1.86	463
Management-by-Exception, Active	1.43	460
Management-by-Exception, Passive	1.64	462
Laissez-faire	1.40	461

**TABLE 3**  
Means of Leadership Outcomes

Leadership Outcome	Mean (on a 0–4 scale)	N
Extra Effort	1.77	458
Effectiveness	2.12	462
Satisfaction	1.98	460

## Transformational Leadership and Change

This study is very limited due to the number of respondents and the self-selection of participants. While the results are eye-opening, they cannot be projected to

all academic library leaders as a whole, and this paper does not try to do so. This study is an attempt to shine a light on leadership and change in the academic librarian profession, and the results should be cause for some reflection on leadership in academic libraries. The discussion will focus on the importance of transformational leadership to libraries, especially as it relates to change, and why the profession needs to focus on finding and developing qualified transformational leaders.

When asked to describe their external environments, most leaders use terms like “chaotic, uncertain, constantly changing, disruptive, and complex.”<sup>34</sup> This applies across all sectors of organizations including higher education and academic libraries. This has created a “new normal” for organizations where change is a constant. Under the “old normal” change had obvious starting and stopping points, was top down, and focused on gaining an edge in the marketplace.<sup>35</sup> Under the new normal organizations are constantly undergoing change of cultural assumptions and deep-seated ways of thinking and doing. This has created a need for learning organizations where employees are active and energetic.<sup>36</sup>

Changes in information access, creation, and dissemination and changes in how students and faculty use the library and what services they want from the library are drastically changing the nature of academic libraries and the profession. If students can connect to the library’s databases and e-book collections from their dorms, then what are they doing in the physical library? While many libraries indicate more students than ever are using the library (increased student enrollment), libraries need to understand why students are using the library in order to meet their needs. The library “as a place” is still very much alive, but for different reasons than it was just a generation ago. Academic libraries must demonstrate their worth which is now increasingly shown through impact on teaching and learning and student retention. This requires a shift in how we see the library, what we think librarians should be doing, and how we measure and explain what we do. The ACRL Top Trends in Academic

Libraries reflects these changes to higher education and the profession. They include changes in the use of the library’s physical space, services offered students and faculty, and access to and delivery of information. The academic library’s mission and purpose is also in flux. Libraries now must contribute to student success and be at the forefront of open access and digitization.<sup>37</sup> The 2013 ACRL Environmental Scan found great changes in what academic librarians are expected to know and do, how academic libraries are used, and what academic libraries should be to students and faculty. These changes are driven by technology, new developments in higher education, and shifting student demographics.<sup>38</sup> All of these changes require re-envisioning the academic library, inspiring librarians and staff, and aligning goals, mission, and purpose.

Transformational leaders are ideally suited to facilitate long-lasting, substantive change in organizations. Their habits of setting high standards and ambitious goals, sharing a vision, and modeling the way all help to lead change in an organization.<sup>39</sup> Transformational leaders make use of idealized behavior to gain trust of those in the organization. Trust is a key factor in affecting employees’ attitudes toward change.<sup>40</sup> A transformational leader’s emphasis on follower development means those in the organization have skills and confidence to succeed the new environment, limiting one of the fears of change, and the use of intellectual stimulation challenges employees to find innovative solutions to problems and the most significant ways the organization can change allowing everyone in the organization to have a voice in the process. Intellectual stimulation also creates a learning organization and fosters an environment primed for the constant change of the “new normal.”<sup>41</sup> Through the personal relationships they create, transformational leaders reduce stress in an organization, especially helpful during times of change.<sup>42</sup> All of this requires a leader to make use of idealized attributes, idealized behavior (the two together create idealized influence), inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation, but all of these components’ means in the study are low to middling. The highest component inspirational

motivation (2.40) and the lowest in intellectual stimulation (1.78). In fact, intellectual stimulation is the lowest of the transformational components. The components of idealized attributes and idealized behavior are slightly more than two.

Research has shown individual consideration by transformational leaders helps followers to understand the need for change, improve affective commitment (which positively affects attitudes toward change), and increase the attraction for change amongst followers. Idealized influence was shown to reduce pessimism towards change, and inspirational motivation was shown to reduce “cognitive forms of resistance to change.” Overall, transformational leadership was found to both reduce resistance to change and increase the acceptance of change in organizations.<sup>43</sup> Creating a shared vision is particularly helpful as followers try to navigate their way through the stress and fear of change. The shared belief in a better future helped them to both understand why change was necessary and accept the change.<sup>44</sup> In this study the mean for the component of individualized consideration (1.84) is the second lowest of all transformational components. Individualized consideration may be the biggest help in influencing the attitudes about change of those in the organization. This low of mean would indicate the leaders in this study are very lacking in this component. Research has shown “Emergent” change, a more bottom-up approach to change, is also aided by transformational leadership. Emergent change requires the transformational skills of “lower level” leaders who were in-turn mentored and developed by more senior level leaders.<sup>45</sup> For new leaders to emerge requires extra effort, the ability to achieve more than one thought possible, needs to be present in the organizational members. The mean for extra effort (1.77) is low, indicating very little extra effort exists in these librarians, which is year another hindrance to change.

As librarians move to the “new normal” transformational leaders are more important than ever. Transformational leaders do all the things leaders need to do to successfully facilitate change. They place an emphasis on learning, results, and personal develop-

ment, making followers better suited to adapt to and embrace change. Transformational leaders instill confidence in their followers allowing them to achieve more than they thought they could and become leaders themselves. They create a nimble organization with easily adaptable members who are ready and able to lead change themselves. What is to be done? Evidence suggests leaders can learn to be transformational. One way a leader can become transformational is through the mentoring by an experienced transformational leader.<sup>46</sup> Transformational leadership can also be learned through leadership classes and continuing education. The “Four I’s” of transformational leadership can be developed by learning “critical evaluation and problem detection, envisioning, communication skill for conveying a mission, impression management, and how and when to empower followers.”<sup>47</sup> Leaders with high emotional intelligence are more likely to be transformational and can more easily learn the “Four I’s.”<sup>48</sup> More research and analysis needs to be done on transformational leadership in academic libraries, especially as it relates to transformational followers, but academic libraries and the profession of academic librarianship need to critically assess its leadership look to develop transformational leaders to being about needed change within the organization.

## Conclusion

This exploratory study examined the perceptions of a small sample of academic librarians on the use of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership by their library leadership. The results show a middling to low use of transformational leadership. This is troubling due to the fact that transformational leadership has been shown to be highly correlated with successful change in organizations. Brought about by technology and student demographics, the rapid changes in higher education strike at the core of academic librarianship. Strong leaders are needed throughout the profession to navigate change and strengthen the profession of librarianship. Whether the profession thrives or perishes may depend on its ability to find and develop transformational leaders.

## Notes

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