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# Abraham as a Transformational Leader

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## Dedication

This paper is dedicated to the memory of the first author's father, Abraham Shlomo (Alexander) Friedman, who lived his life by the principles of his namesake.

Abraham as a Transformational Leader

## Abstract

The World Wide Web and the rise of the global economy are rapidly changing the way business is conducted. Organizations that hope to prosper need special leaders, leaders that are more than just accomplished administrators and managers. They need leaders that have some charisma and possess the ability to inspire followers to subordinate their own interests for the good of the entire company. What organizations need, if they desire to change rapidly, are transformational leaders. One of the greatest transformational leaders of all time was, arguably, the Biblical Abraham, progenitor of three major religions. This paper demonstrates that the traits Abraham possessed, traits useful to individuals desiring to become transformational leaders, were: a vision, some charisma, confidence, courage, humility, a strong sense of justice, a willingness to be different, concern for others, and a willingness to make great sacrifices for his vision.

**Abraham as a Transformational Leader**

The Internet age is still in its infancy and more and more radical changes are coming. It is quite evident that the World Wide Web and the rise of the global economy will change the way business is conducted and will affect many firms. Changing a company is not easy. People often become complacent and resistant to change. Managers often face the challenge of transforming companies that fear change. Organizations that hope to prosper need special leaders, leaders that are more than just accomplished administrators and managers. They need leaders that have some charisma and possess the ability to inspire followers to subordinate their own interests for the good of the entire company. What organizations need, if they desire to change rapidly, are transformational leaders.

Black and Porter (2000, p. 432) define transformational leadership as: "leadership that motivates followers to ignore self-interests and work for the larger good of the organization to achieve significant accomplishments; emphasis is on articulating a vision that will convince subordinates to make major changes." These leaders have a profound effect on their followers' beliefs regarding what the organization should become and also on their subordinates' values. They also provide their followers with guidance so that they are able to achieve their goals. Some examples of individuals who are considered transformational leaders include Bill Gates of Microsoft, Steve Jobs of Apple, Michael Dell of Dell Computer Corporation, Jeff Bezos of Amazon.com, Lou Gerstner of IBM, and Jack Welch of GE.

Understanding the qualities that make one a transformational leader can be very helpful to managers and leaders concerned with improving their effectiveness. It is also true that people who have the potential to become transformational leaders can easily lose this opportunity by making serious mistakes. Indeed, President Clinton may be an example of an individual who botched the opportunity to become a highly successful transformational leader, because of several mistakes.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Theory about transformational leadership is rooted in Weber's (1952; 1978) theory about charisma, and his application of the theory to several historical examples, most importantly his interpretation of the respective roles of the ancient Jewish prophets and priests (Bryman, 1992; Zeitlin, 1984).

The recent theoretical interest in transformational leadership and charisma in formal organizations intensified with Burns's (1978, p. 425) distinction between transactional and transforming leadership. Transactional leadership is characterized by an exchange that aids individual interests. The emphasis is on motivating followers by exchanging rewards and benefits for motivation and productivity. In contrast, transforming leadership shapes, alters and elevates the followers' motives and values. It unites diverse members in pursuit of higher goals, the realization of which is tested by the achievement of significant change that represents the pooled interests of leaders and followers. Another difference between the two is that transactional leadership involves motivating subordinates to make small changes whereas transformational leadership motivates followers to make large changes. There is a significant amount of evidence that transformational leadership is more effective than transactional leadership in achieving higher productivity, higher job satisfaction, and lower employee turnover rates (Robbins and Coulter 1999, p. 534).

Bass (1985; 1990) and Bass and Avolio (1994) develop the concept of transformational leadership to include charisma, inspiration, individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation. Sashkin (1988) emphasizes the importance of vision in transformational leadership. Trice and Beyer (1991) argue that charisma is characteristic of founders of organizations whereas transformational leaders are organizational members who wish to change existing organizations.

The bottom line is that transformational leaders are individuals capable of motivating and inspiring followers by appealing to higher goals and the common good rather than individual needs and self-interest (e.g., financial gain).

### **Transformational Leadership: Lessons from the Bible**

Clemens and Mayer (1999) found valuable lessons for individuals interested in deriving leadership lessons from Western literature. We believe that the Bible is another source to tap in order to learn about effective leadership. Some of history's earliest leaders are found in the Bible. The Bible is replete with stories of leaders, some successful and some unsuccessful. Some of the Biblical leaders were charismatic and others were quite uninspiring. Across the ages, many people -- both believers and nonbelievers -- have turned to the Bible for their role models, examples, and metaphors. Weber himself discussed the Biblical examples of prophets in his seminal works. This paper will examine the characteristics of a

Biblical individual who was arguably the most successful transformational leader in history, Abraham.

The story of the Hebrews starts with Abraham, a simple clan chief who believed in a single God. Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees and became "the father of a multitude of nations" (Genesis 17:5). Abraham sowed the seeds that helped destroy paganism, planted the roots for the three major monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), and permanently changed the world with the ideas of monotheism, justice, and compassion. At least one-half of today's world has been influenced by Abraham's vision. It is not surprising that Pope John Paul II has expressed strong interest in visiting Ur (in Iraq), the birthplace of Abraham. What characteristics did Abraham possess that made him so capable as a leader? We will see that Abraham possessed the traits inherent in transformational leaders.

### **Abraham had a vision**

Abraham's vision was to found a new nation – the Promised Land, one where his descendants would live as a unified people believing in monotheism, concern for the helpless, and justice for all. Even though Jacob, Abraham's grandson, settled in Egypt, he wanted to be buried in the cave of Machpelah, the burial place of Abraham and Isaac. Jacob made Joseph swear that he would be buried in the Holy Land and was indeed buried there by Joseph and his brothers. He passed his love of the Holy Land on to all his children and we note that even Joseph made his brothers swear that they would bring his bones back to the Promised Land. In Joseph's words (Genesis 50:24-25): "I will die but God will surely remember you and bring you up out of this land unto the land which He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob ... God will surely remember you, and you shall carry up my bones from here." This vision, passed on from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob and to Jacob's children, sustained the Israelites through a bitter servitude lasting many decades.

Abraham was a monotheist in a pagan society and spread the name of God wherever he traveled (Genesis 12:8; Genesis 13:4; Genesis 13:18). Abraham planted a grove in Beer Sheba "and there he proclaimed the name of God, Lord of the Universe" (Genesis 21:33). It seems that the purpose of this grove was to provide hospitality for travelers and to spread monotheism through the pagan ancient world. In fact, the Midrash and Talmud (Midrash Genesis Rabbah 54:5; Ethics of the Fathers of Rabbi Nathan 7; Bava Metzia 86b) state that Abraham and Sarah

used to invite wayfarers into their home and provide for them. After eating, they were encouraged to say grace to God. This approach enabled Abraham to spread monotheism and the values of hospitality and concern for others throughout the ancient world.

It is not surprising that he was known in the ancient world as a "prince of God" (Genesis 23:6). Abraham not only had a vision but was also able to communicate this vision to descendants living hundreds of generations later. Approximately two thousand years after his death, the Talmud states (Ethics of the Fathers 5:19): "Whoever possesses the following three traits is of the disciples of our forefather Abraham ... a good eye [a generous nature], a humble spirit, and a modest soul [i.e., modest desires]."

## **(2) Abraham had courage and confidence**

The Bible (Genesis 14) relates how Abraham mobilized his clan and, with only 318 people, waged war with four powerful kings in order to rescue his nephew Lot. Abraham was greatly outnumbered but pursued four powerful adversaries who had just soundly defeated five powerful kings (the Kings of Sodom and Gomorrah and three allies). Abraham was not only courageous but loyal to the members of his clan, even one who left to live in Sodom. Transformational leaders need courage to take risks and confidence to carry out their visions (Black and Porter 2000, pp. 434-435; Nahavandi 2000, p. 189; Northouse 1997, pp. 141-143).

## **(3) Abraham cared about people and had a strong sense of justice**

Abraham was the first person to tithe his possessions (Genesis 14:20). Abraham was also extremely hospitable to strangers. The Bible (Genesis 18) relates that on one hot day, Abraham was sitting at his tent's entrance and noticed three strangers. He ran towards them and invited them to come to his home and "wash their feet" and eat a "morsel of bread." Abraham did not offer them very much in order to make it easy for them to agree. In actuality, he provided them with freshly baked bread, curd and milk, and a tender calf. Moreover, Abraham stood over them and acted as host and waiter. Abraham was an elderly man, yet the Bible states (Genesis 18:6, 18:7): "And Abraham hastened to the tent..." "Abraham ran to the cattle." When they left, the verse states (Genesis 18:16): "Abraham went with them to send them on their way." Abraham even showed his guests the courtesy of accompanying them part of the way. His nephew, Lot, also practiced hospitality in Sodom, a place that was violently opposed to treating strangers with hospitality (Genesis 19).

Abraham's concern for others was also manifested when he heard that God intended to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham was so upset that he dared to ask God (Genesis 18:25): "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?" Abraham's "haggling" with God to save Sodom and Gomorra from destruction indicated a great love for people and an optimistic nature (Genesis 18:20-33):

Abraham: 'What if there are 50 innocent people in the city? Will you still destroy it?'

God: 'If I find 50 innocent people in Sodom, I will spare the entire area.'

Abraham: 'Suppose there are 45  $\frac{1}{4}$  ?'

God: 'I will not destroy it if I find 45  $\frac{1}{4}$  '

Abraham: 'What if there are 40?'

God: 'I will not act if there are forty  $\frac{1}{4}$  '

As this conversation continued, Abraham proposed and God agreed to allow for 30, 20, 10 in succession, until Abraham finally gave up presumably because 10 innocents could not be found in those evil towns. Had Sodom and Gomorrah had ten righteous individuals, the towns would have been spared. Unfortunately, ten innocent people could not be found in the entire city of Sodom, and it was destroyed (Genesis 18: 23-33).

This story demonstrates Abraham's great love of humanity and his optimism. Abraham could not believe that some people were so wicked that they were hopeless. A transformational leader cares for his followers and is nurturing and supportive (Black and Porter 2000, p. 434; Nahavandi 2000, p. 188-189; Ross and Offerman 1997).

#### **(4) Abraham was humble**

Abraham was an individual of great humility. He referred to himself as "but dust and ash" (Genesis 18:27). When his wife Sarah passed away, Abraham approached the Hittites because he wanted to purchase a burial site. Abraham said regarding himself: (Genesis 23:4): "I am a stranger and a sojourner with you." The Hittites, however, knew who Abraham was and referred to him as a "prince of God"

(Genesis 23:6). Abraham spoke to the Hittites with the greatest respect and even bowed to them several times. He ultimately paid Ephron the Hittite the outrageous sum of 400 silver *shekels* for his land. (Jeremiah (32:9) paid only 17 *shekels* for a similar parcel of land.) Abraham knew what Ephron really wanted for the land since he stated the value while he was offering it for free. Ephron said to Abraham, in the presence of his fellow Hittites, (Genesis 23:14): "My lord, listen to me, land worth 400 silver *shekels*, between me and you, what is it? Bury your dead." Abraham understood that Ephron was simply posturing and did indeed want 400 *shekels*; Abraham refused to take advantage of an offer that was not genuine.

When Abraham and his nephew Lot left Egypt they both had a considerable amount of cattle. Their respective shepherds began to quarrel because there was insufficient grazing land for the two herds. Abraham was a lover of peace and said to Lot (Genesis 13:8-9): "Please let there be no strife between me and you and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen... Is not the whole land before you? ... If you will go left, then I will go to the right, and if you will go to the right, then I will go to the left." Abraham, though Lot's uncle and the head of the clan, was not arrogant and allowed his nephew to decide first in which direction to head.

Arrogant people generally have difficulty providing subordinates with individual attention and often lack sensitivity to the needs of others. Clearly, some measure of humility is an important characteristic of transformational leaders. It comes as no surprise that coldness and arrogance are major reasons for leadership failure (Nahavandi 2000, p. 65).

#### **(5) Abraham had charisma.**

Charismatic leaders have the ability to influence others because of their inspirational qualities. The Greek word *kharisma* means 'divine gift' and individuals with charisma have the power to secure the devotion of large numbers of people. Conger and Kanungo (1988, p. 79) state that the followers of charismatic leaders make attributions of heroic and extraordinary abilities to them after observing certain behaviors. They are the inspiration of their followers, and are themselves models of the desired behaviors.

Abraham had the ultimate divine gift since God assured him that (Genesis 12:3): "I will bless those that bless you, and him that curses you I will curse." Moreover, almost four thousand years after his death, he is still a role model for billions of

people. His burial place, the cave of Machpelah in Hebron, is a holy place that is visited by hundreds of individuals every day.

Abraham was obviously able to attract a following and, as noted above, 318 people joined him in dangerous battle against four powerful kings. The Hittites respected him and referred to Abraham as a "prince of God" when he approached them about purchasing a burial plot for Sarah. His followers were very loyal to him and Abraham was able to send his servant with ten camels laden with goods to a distant country without worrying that the servant would abscond with his property (Genesis 24). His servant did indeed do an excellent job of finding a wife for his master's son and brought back Rebecca.

Abraham must have been quite influential since even King Abimelech and his captain, Phicol, desired to make an alliance with him. Their primary reason for wanting an alliance with Abraham was because (Genesis 21:22-33): "God is with you in all that you do." Apparently, Abraham, the man from Ur, was so well known and revered throughout the world that even a king wanted to make a covenant with him.

#### **(6) Abraham was willing to make sacrifices for his beliefs**

The story of Abraham's test, in which God asked him to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac, indicated Abraham's willingness to make a personal sacrifice for God (Genesis 22). It is interesting to note Abraham's reaction after being told by an angel of God (Genesis 22:12): "Lay not your hand upon the lad nor do anything to him for now I know that you are a God-fearing man." Abraham did not speak to his son, but "lifted up his eyes and saw, and looked, and behold behind him a ram." Abraham was looking for another offering since he was totally dedicated to God.

What was the reason for this trial of Abraham? This may have been God's way of indicating to Abraham that spreading monotheism would require great sacrifice on the part of believers. Indeed, it took thousands of martyrs before monotheism prevailed over paganism. Charismatic transformational leaders must be willing to make sacrifices on behalf of an organization (Black and Porter 2000, pp. 431-434). Moreover, transformational leaders motivate followers to sacrifice their own self-interests for the greater good (Northouse 1997, pp. 134-136). Abraham was a person who was willing to make a great sacrifice and that is why he proved that he was the right choice as the first patriarch. Throughout the centuries,



Abraham's followers – believers in monotheism – also made great sacrifices to spread his values in a pagan world.

### **(7) Abraham dared to be different. He was a change agent.**

It is not easy -- and may often be dangerous -- to be different from the people around you. Abraham's clan was distinct and very unlike the people that surrounded them. One obvious difference is that they were monotheists in a pagan society.

Abraham's view of hospitality to strangers was also the diametrical opposite of the philosophy of Sodom and Gomorrah, places that hated strangers. Sodomite "hospitality" involved raping strangers entering their country (Genesis 19:4-5); Abraham showed hospitality to strangers by personally serving them. Strangers were not treated well in much of the ancient world and Abraham himself was afraid when traveling with his wife to Egypt. He feared that he would be killed so that his wife could be stolen away (Genesis 12: 11-13).

Transformational leaders are change agents that have the ability to completely alter the direction of an organization (Northouse 1997, p.143). Abraham not only dared to be different in his own time, but also changed the religious direction of humankind.

### **Conclusion**

The major accomplishment of Abraham was to spread the belief in a single God in a world filled with paganism. Today's world has been dramatically changed because Abraham spread monotheism and the concomitant philosophy of caring for one's fellow human being. His philosophy eventually became institutionalized as the law of "you shall love your fellow as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). What traits did many of the influential Biblical leaders, especially Abraham, possess? The same characteristics that any transformational leader needs to change an organization: a vision, some charisma, confidence, courage, a willingness to be different, concern for others, and a willingness to make great sacrifices for one's vision. Abraham's philosophies can serve as a paradigm or touchstone for the successful leader of today and may be summarized as shown in Figure 1.

- vision
- courage
- confidence

- caring about people, a love for humanity
- hospitality, generosity
- a strong sense of justice.
- humility
- charisma
- a willingness to make sacrifices for one's beliefs
- daring to be different from the establishment
- a change agent

### **Figure 1**

#### ***Summary of the Key Attributes of Abraham as a Transformational Leader***

Leaders of organizations who wish to be successful transformational leaders should study the character of Abraham, and of the other great Biblical leaders, and learn what it takes to communicate a new vision to the world, a vision that has dramatically changed mankind. Changing a firm is probably going to be a great deal easier than changing the world, but it sure does not seem easier. The leadership traits needed are those possessed by many of the Biblical leaders.

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