



## **Leadership Creates a Compelling Vision, Translates into Action and Sustains It**

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# Leadership Creates a Compelling Vision, Translates into Action and Sustains It

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## Abstract

Transformational leadership emphasizes inspiring followers to go beyond self-interest and strive for higher-order needs. It's a subject of interest to many academics, practitioners, and leadership students. The study included Michelle Obama's transformational leadership as a practical example. The study aimed to explore transformational leadership, one of the most compelling approaches in leadership theory. A literature-based study method was employed, which involved an in-depth review and analysis of relevant theoretical constructs, scholarly articles, books, and other authoritative sources on transformational leadership. The study revealed transformational leadership's global relevance, alignment with higher-order needs and emphasis on ideals, inspiration, and innovation. The practical effectiveness of this approach was exemplified by Michelle Obama's initiatives, which showcased the potency of compelling vision, clear communication, and ethical commitment. The study also acknowledged the potential weaknesses, including measurement challenges and an overemphasis on the leader's personality trait. The study concluded that transformational leadership, despite its criticisms and potential weaknesses, conforms to idealized leadership models, making it effective on a global scale. The study recommended that future research and practice should maintain a nuanced understanding of transformational leadership, emphasizing global applicability and ethical commitments. Attention must also be directed toward potential weaknesses and comparative studies with other leadership approaches.

**Keywords:** *Leadership Compelling Vision, Translates, Action, Sustains It*

## 1.1 Background of the Study

Leadership is frequently viewed as the determining factor in an organization's success or failure (Bass & Bass, 2009). Leadership continues to be a topic with universal appeal yet very complex. Despite the abundance of writing on leadership, it still presents a major challenge to practitioners and researchers interested in understanding the nature of leadership (Northouse, 2016). Bass & Stogdill (1990) argue that leadership is one of the oldest preoccupations, serving as an important driver for innovation for thousands of years. He concludes that leadership has various definitions and should be defined based on the purpose of the definition. Northouse, (2018) noted that the main concern for most people is what makes good leaders, and individuals are looking for more information on how to be effective leaders. He defined leadership as a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. Michelle Obama, the former first lady of the United States of America, has been viewed by many as a leader of character with an inspiring vision for all the initiatives during her term in the White House. In this paper, I will explore how the traits and transformational leadership theories have been demonstrated in her life.

Many across the divide have been inspired by Michelle's vision which has brought a monumental change in the lives of people of America and across the world. According to Northouse (2018), charismatic qualities and the people's desire to follow a vision are what are essentially described by the charisma factor. Michelle has been described as a charismatic leader because of her willingness to go head to head and fight for issues that required tough conversations and transformative leadership. Michelle has been recognized for championing several initiatives and campaigns such as; "Let's Move"; "Let Girls Learn"; "Joining Forces"; "Reach Higher"; (M. Obama, 2022). Her influence has remained high during her term as the first lady and even after leaving the White House. She opened the space for larger and broader conversations to ensure diversity was recognized and celebrated as a strength. These initiatives have supported women empowerment and many girls and women across America and the world consider her a role model. In addition to supporting many upcoming designers, she has been a strong proponent of community empowerment through awareness, education, nutrition, physical activity, and healthy eating. Many people have referred to her as a fashion icon because of her sense of style.

## 2.1 Literature Review

This section presents a review of the literature on leadership theories, including trait theory, transformational theory and criticisms of both theories.

### 2.1.1 Leadership Traits Theory

The trait approach has its roots in leadership theory, which proposed that some people were born with special traits that made them great leaders (Northouse, 2018). He further argues that, leaders and non-leaders could be distinguished by a universal set of traits, so researchers were challenged to identify the unmistakable traits of leaders throughout the 20th century. He argues further that, after extensive research and general convergence; intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability were considered as the central traits that a leader should possess. Analysis on recent studies on intellectual ability and different leadership indices as pointed out by, Zaccaro et al. (2004 as cited in Northouse, 2018) indicates evidence in favor of the hypothesis that leaders

tend to have higher intelligence than non-leaders. Intelligence is a key trait that Michelle displayed through her academic qualification. She is a graduate of Princeton and Harvard Universities, institutions where one is admitted based on academic excellence. Her intelligence has also been demonstrated through her ability to develop several initiatives with a compelling vision, communicate it with impact and inspire many people to rally behind it. We all knew she was smart, cute, strong, and a wonderful mother, but President Obama said, "I think the way in which Michelle blended purpose and policy with fun so that she was able to reach beyond Washington... was masterful." (B. Obama, 2020).

Self-confidence is another trait exemplified by Michelle as a leader through her ability to influence others appropriately. Leaders have a high sense of self-efficacy and self-assurance to make a difference in the life of others (Northouse, 2018). At a time when Americans were not ready for a black president, Michelle had the self-confidence to go on the campaign trail and support her husband against all odds. Her self-confidence was able to persuade undecided voters to vote which enabled her husband to win the elections. In 2018, she put her energy towards "When We All Vote" initiative that was meant to empower voters and increase turnout at the polls (M. Obama, 2022). Her self-confidence came out of knowing her own light which became the platform from which she could better share her light with others by launching a bigger life through her initiatives.

Being determined includes being assertive and authoritative, especially in times when the followers need to be directed. A leader who is determined is willing to push on in the face of challenges and obstacles, persevere and take initiative (Northouse, 2018). Michelle has shown determination in her effort to empower the girl child through her education projects across the world. She began her efforts for social community mobilization when she left her job as a practicing advocate and went to work for the Chicago City Hall. She was determined and convinced that her true calling and where she would make the most impact was through working with people and serving communities. While in the White House, Michelle demonstrated determination when she went against tradition to transform the White house into a place where people of all races could visit comfortably. She hosted many events that showcased her passion to empower women, children, young people and her desire for a healthy America through the Kitchen garden project. Her slogan "When they go low we go high" is a demonstration of her determination to convert upsetting situations into actionable plans while building her legitimacy and credibility.

Our society is demanding leaders with high moral standing who are able to integrate their actions, words and deeds. Northouse (2016), noted that integrity is another crucial leadership quality and defines it as the quality of honesty and trustworthiness of a leader. The position that Michelle Obama has taken on her vision to empower girl's education through "Let Girls Learn" and "Girls Opportunity Alliance" initiative has inspired confidence in others. She has been able to support adolescent girls and grassroots leaders who are working to advance girls education across the world (M. Obama, 2022). She has demonstrated approachability, loyalty, dependability, and truthfulness in her words, actions and deeds and she can be relied upon to follow through on her commitments and convictions.

Sociability is an important trait for leaders and is the propensity to seek out constructive social relationships. According to Northouse (2018), leaders who are sociable are approachable, polite, tactful, and diplomatic; they pay attention to others' needs and express concern for their welfare.

Michelle has demonstrated great sociability skills by fostering diverse relationships with her followers across the political, racial divide, young, old and across several continents. While in the White house, Michelle hosted several events that embraced, diversity, inclusion and equity and made her very approachable. She would be seen interacting and engaging in different activities that enabled her display her sociability skills like playing and dancing with children as well as attending school event for young girls. Her “Joining Forces” initiative was so compelling that it rallied the entire nation of America to support service men, veterans and their families to access employment opportunities, education and health care.

### **2.1.2 Transformational Theory**

Transformational leadership has continued to be a subject of interest, and many academics, practitioners, and students of leadership are curious to study and research more on the topic. This has become the preferred approach for much of the research studies and application of leadership theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformative leadership, one of the broadest approaches to leadership, emphasizes that leaders must comprehend and be agile to the ever changing aspirations and motivations of their followers. Leaders are increasingly being asked to demonstrate how they are able to inspire followers to see things others don’t see. (Northouse, 2018). Leaders must have followers, and followers need guidance, which requires making decisions (Maxwell, 2013). Bass and Riggio (2006) further proposed that transformational leadership’s acceptance could be as result of its emphasis on internal factors that motivate and develop the follower. It also aligns well with the needs of today’s workforce who are looking for affirmation and inspiration from their leaders in the dynamic context they work in. Transformational leaders question the status quo, offering fresh perspectives on issues while encouraging people to think critically and creatively (Minja & Barine, 2012).

Transformational leaders are those who are able to grow their own leadership potential while inspiring their followers to achieve extraordinary results (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Michelle has been recognized as a transformational leader through her compelling vision in the different initiatives which she has translated into action, impacting many lives, bring long lasting change and achieving extra ordinary results. Northouse, (2018) noted that transformation leaders envision and communicate a compelling vision for their organization. They inspiring followers to aim higher and stretch their potentials, causing them to act in ways that inspire others to trust them, and give meaning to organizational life. In 2010, one of Michelle’s accomplishments was the launch of “Let’s Move!” campaign that was ambitious and whose vision was to solve the challenge of childhood obesity with a sense of urgency. This vision was so compelling that it inspired a national effort to combat this epidemic, bringing together various stakeholders including the community leaders, educators, medical professionals, parents, and others. As a transformational leader, Michelle’s vision was to ensure the smallest child was getting a healthy start through proper child care. To put this vision into action, Michelle ensured that children in school were provided with healthier food and involved in physical activities. She reached out to companies, challenging them to make and distribute healthier foods to children. To ensure “Let’s Move” Campaign was sustained, Michelle coached, mentored and empowered parents by giving them the support they need to make nutritious choices of food for their children. M. Obama (2022) claims that as of January 2013, more than 10,000 child care providers and organizations had registered to put new standards for diet, exercise, and screen time restrictions into place.



Maxwell (2019) argues that “If your actions inspire people to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, then you are a transformational leader” (p.215). Michelle has indeed lived up to this statement through her initiatives that have inspired many and caused them to learn, do and become more than what they had possibly imagine. Because of her strong values and believe in her vision, Michelle was able to engage and interactions with people across the world, increasing their motivation and morale to pursue her vision together.

Maslow’s higher order needs theory is supported by Bass & Bass (2009) when he argues that a transformational leader attempts to encourage their followers to reprioritize their needs by going over and above their self-interests and striving for higher order needs. Michelle made use of her position in the White house to identify the need for change, garner the U.S. government's support and commitment, and create a compelling vision that changed how Americans lived. She ensured the necessary legislations were passed so that the change could be institutionalized. Her “Reach higher” campaign whose compelling vision was to encourage young people in America to finish their education, caused many of them to go back to school She ensured, they were exposed to learning and financial support opportunities that would enable them to pursue their education.

Michelle is also an excellent example of a leader who has overcome obstacles on the way to becoming a transformational leader for others. Growing up in a racially segregated South West Chicago, her parents instilled in her the belief that with perseverance and hard work, she could achieve anything. This enable her to break the cycle of fear that would have limited her from being the first African American woman to occupy the White House. Significant success frequently necessitates sacrifice, and failure can present chances for learning, development, and—if necessary—changing course (Neck et al., 2019). As the first African American to occupy the White House, Michelle, demonstrated how self-leadership can help one overcome challenges and become a great leader. Transformational leadership requires that the leader has a high level of self-awareness on the impact of their own behavior on the needs of their followers and the changing context within their organizations. It also offers a broad perspective on leadership that places an emphasis on ideals, inspiration, innovations, and personal concerns (Northouse, 2018)

Bennis & Nanus (1995, as cited in Northhouse, 2018) identified four strategies that are commonly used by transformational leaders; First, transformational leaders have a clear vision for the possibilities of the future state of their organizations, which represented a bright, believable, and promising future. Second, transforming leaders communicate a direction that altered the values and norms of their organization. Third, the leader is able to communicate a clear direction and then consistently implement it, despite the high degree of uncertainty surrounding the development of the vision. Fourth, transforming leaders are able to remain focused and model the way in the execution of short-term activities and the overall objectives of their organizations because they are aware of their own competence. It is evident from the initiatives that Michelle championed that she applied these strategies to create a compelling, clear and futuristic vision. In addition, she was able to provide direction to her followers while modelling the way. M. Obama (2022) said “I had to make sure I was using my platform to make a meaningful difference, that the issues I worked on were well-executed and also complemented the president’s agenda”

### 2.1.3 Criticisms of Traits and Transformational Leadership

Despite the strengths and positive impact of the traits and transformational approach in leadership, it's been noted to have weaknesses (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Northouse, 2018). The traits approach has failed to provide a clear list of traits to look for in leaders as well as the impact-changing context has on leadership. The transformational approach covers a wide range of activities making it difficult to determine the criteria for measurement and the validity of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) for the measurement has been challenged. Second, it creates a framework that implies that transformational leadership has a personality trait and views transformational leaders as visionaries. Third, other authors (Avolio, 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Yulk 1999) contended that transformational leadership gives more focus to the leader failing to give attention to shared leadership between the leader and followers. Finally, transformational leadership may be abused and used counterproductively in some circumstances because of the strong influence that the leader has on the followers.

In conclusion, despite the shortcomings of the traits and the transformational leadership theories, Bass & Riggio (2006) noted that a transformational leader conforms to people's idealized models of leadership which is more effective on a global scale. He further says, since authentic transformational leaders put the needs of their followers before their own interests, they can be found in all cultures and organizational settings. Northouse, (2018) supports this argument by noting that the transformational approach is a popular model today that has received a lot of research attention because of its emphasis on participatory leadership where the follower is valued in the leadership process, including their growth, and places a high value on morals and values. Maxwell (2013) asserts further that change will not happen in individuals or in organizations unless transformational leaders commit themselves to make a difference in the communities and invite others to join them in the process.

### 3.0 Research Findings

Transformational leadership, as defined by Bass and Riggio (2006), is a multifaceted approach that focuses on the leaders' ability to understand and adapt to their followers' changing needs and motivations. It aligns well with the needs of today's dynamic workforce, which seeks affirmation and inspiration, by emphasizing internal factors that motivate and develop followers (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Leaders such as Michelle Obama have exemplified transformational leadership by translating compelling visions into actions that result in extraordinary outcomes (Northouse, 2018). Transformational leaders commonly use strategies such as having a clear vision for the future, communicating altered organizational values, consistently implementing the vision, and remaining focused on competence in execution, according to Bennis and Nanus (1995, as cited in Northouse, 2018). Michelle Obama's "Let's Move!" campaign exemplifies these strategies by presenting a compelling vision to combat childhood obesity, a problem that demanded immediate attention. She inspired a national effort to bring together various stakeholders by communicating this vision and consistently implementing it (Obama, 2022).

The alignment between transformational leadership and Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory emphasizes the importance of inspiring followers to strive for higher order needs above self-interest (Bass & Bass, 2009). Michelle Obama's efforts to gain government support, pass necessary legislation, and create compelling visions have directly addressed these higher needs. Her "Reach

Higher" campaign, which encourages young Americans to finish their education, exemplifies this alignment, demonstrating how transformational leadership can effect real change (Obama, 2022). However, transformational leadership has been criticized, particularly in terms of measurement criteria and the validity of instruments such as the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Because transformational leadership encompasses a wide range of activities, it is difficult to pinpoint specific measurement criteria, making assessing its effectiveness difficult. Some authors also contend that this approach may overemphasize the visionary aspect of the leader while overlooking shared leadership dynamics (Avolio, 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Yulk, 1999).

In addition, concerns have been raised that transformational leadership can be used in a counterproductive manner due to leaders' strong influence over followers (Northouse, 2018). This may open the door to abuse, as followers' strong faith in the leader's vision may lead to manipulation. To avoid potential pitfalls, it is critical to balance this influence with ethical considerations. Despite these criticisms, transformational leadership is still a globally effective approach that conforms to idealized models of leadership across cultures and organizational settings (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Its emphasis on follower growth, participation, and ethical values has aided its popularity and research interest (Northouse, 2018). According to Maxwell (2013), without transformational leaders committed to making a difference and inviting others to join them, change is unlikely.

Michelle Obama's journey, which exemplifies perseverance, self-leadership, and resilience, is one of the most inspiring examples of transformational leadership. Growing up in a racially segregated environment, she defied expectations to become the first African American woman to hold the presidency (Neck et al., 2019). Her leadership style exemplifies how transformational leadership necessitates self-awareness about the impact of one's actions on the needs of followers and the changing organizational context. Her leadership demonstrates the importance of engaging with people all over the world, motivating and boosting morale to pursue a common vision (Maxwell, 2019). Michelle demonstrated the effectiveness of transformational leadership in real-world scenarios by effectively utilizing her platform and ensuring the alignment of her initiatives with larger agendas (Obama, 2022). While influential, the traits approach to leadership has flaws, such as failing to provide a clear list of leader traits and failing to consider the impact of changing contexts (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In contrast, the broad perspective of transformational leadership, with its emphasis on ideals, inspiration, and innovation, provides a richer understanding of leadership (Northouse, 2018).

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

As demonstrated by this study, the study of transformational leadership offers profound insights into the complexities and richness of effective leadership in today's ever-changing context. Analyzing transformational leadership from a variety of perspectives, including theoretical foundations, application, criticism, and real-world examples, reveals the approach's multifaceted nature. A key finding is transformational leadership's global relevance, which resonates across cultures and organizational settings. Transformational leadership is distinguished by an emphasis on internal motivators for followers, alignment with higher-order needs, and an emphasis on ideals, inspiration, and innovation. Transformational leadership's practical effectiveness is reinforced by



its real-world application, most notably Michelle Obama's leadership. Her initiatives demonstrated how a strong vision, clear communication, consistent implementation, and an ethical commitment can have a significant societal impact. Despite its strengths, the study recognizes the criticisms and potential weaknesses of transformational leadership. Measurement issues, overemphasis on the leader's personality trait, and the possibility of abuse due to strong leader influence are all important considerations that should be addressed in future research and practice. Furthermore, the comparison with the traits approach emphasizes transformational leadership's broader, more participative, and morally centered nature, even though both have distinct advantages and disadvantages.

## 5.0 Recommendations

The study recommended that future research and practice take an integrated strategy to understanding and implementing transformational leadership, based on the complexities and multifaceted nature of transformational leadership identified in this study. This approach's global relevance, as well as its emphasis on ideals, inspiration and innovation, should be highlighted. Practitioners should learn from real-world examples, such as Michelle Obama's leadership, in order to create compelling visions and maintain ethical commitments. Finally, comparative studies with other leadership approaches, such as the traits approach, could broaden understanding and enable more integrative, participatory, and morally centered leadership practice. Continuous exploration of transformational leadership within various cultural and organizational contexts will result in a more comprehensive and applicable understanding of this critical leadership style.

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