

# Capstone Draft

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What Role Does Transformational Leadership Play in Decentralized Command Structure to  
Empower Subordinates to Lead?

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# SUBORDINATE LEADERSHIP THROUGH DECENTRALIZED COMMAND

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### Abstract

The purpose of this capstone project is to discuss the theory of transformational leadership and the role it plays in empowering subordinate leadership through decentralized command. This paper will examine how transformational leadership influences decentralized command and henceforth empowers subordinates to lead and grow. Through use of transformational leadership, leaders enable subordinates to take charge and ownership of obstacles presented before them and lead. Ultimately, this type of leadership will become infectious and subordinates will want to lead each other and perform their best.

*Keywords:* Transformational Leadership, Decentralized Command

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### What Role Does Transformational Leadership Play in Decentralized Command Structure to Empower Subordinates to Lead?

#### Introduction

The United States military has been in existence for nearly 250 years and throughout that time there have been leaders and there have been followers. There have been people in command positions making decisions and giving orders, and there have been subordinates following and executing the given orders. Throughout the majority of this time, leadership has been top-down, it has been 'centralized'. My research will focus on how this type of leadership may not be the most beneficial to the United States military. It will show how transformational leadership within a decentralized command empowers subordinates to work harder. My research will help answer the question of "What role does transformational leadership play in a decentralized command structure to empower subordinates to lead?" This research will also help display that everyone may have leadership qualities and should be given the chance to lead no matter their age, rank, title or anything else. First, this capstone will discuss the theory of transformational leadership and its role in the public and military sector. In doing so, this paper will demonstrate the aspects of transformational leadership and how it effects a decentralized command structure, which in turn enables subordinates to lead. It will also show how transformational leaders are endeared by their subordinates and organization alike. By concentrating on the theory of transformational leadership and its effect on decentralized command structure, this paper will exhibit how and why transformational leadership in a decentralized command structure is more efficient and achieves better results than the traditional top-down leadership style that is most common. It allows the strengths of every person involved

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in executing the mission to show. It allows everyone to lead, to step up. It inspires people. From personalized experience, my chain of command used this type of leadership on my last deployment to Iraq. We were in a very hostile war zone and we performed our job on a daily basis 'outside the wire' in harm's way. As air traffic controllers, our job was to move airplanes safely and efficiently, and to keep airplanes separated. Our mission was to keep coalition aircraft on point and on task. However, when other things or issues came up, I, as a supervisor, was expected to figure it out for myself and make the best decision I could. There were many scenarios and situations on when I would call back to the tactical operations center or TOC, to see if my supervisor had some insight or a direction he wanted me to go in. Most times, he wasn't available to take the call and I had to figure it out for myself. On one occasion, we had several departing aircraft taking significant small-arms fire immediately after departing the airbase. As the supervisor in the radar approach control facility, I did have a 'surface to air fire' or 'SAFFIRE' checklist to follow. I completed everything on the checklist except the notification calls to the higher-ups because this scenario happened in the middle of the night and nobody was around to answer the phones. So at this point, I was all alone in my decision making and had to make a decision for me and for my facility that would help keep American and coalition jets safe. I took a moment to detach myself from the situation, from the airplanes being shot at and thought critically. I did not want to stop all departures because that would stop the mission and air support needed to be in the sky for servicemen in need down range. I also knew that stopping all departures would keep the planes on the ground and sitting targets for the enemy if they chose to advance their attack onto the base itself. I decided to change the set-up of

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the airport. I stopped all departures and arrivals to the active runway that was receiving hostile fire and designated a separate runway to use that was away from the fire by the insurgents. I kept the airplanes moving and the mission never stopped. My commander and supervisor came in to work later on and discovered a situation that had been diffused and remedied by a subordinate leader. A situation that could have easily used their guidance, expertise and direction as they were more senior and more experienced. But a situation that had been overcome because I knew our mission and I knew my commander's intent. What would he want me to do? With that question in mind, I stepped out of the box, I detached emotionally and I thought critically to ensure the safety of flight as well as the mission continuance. This is just one of many personal examples that underscores the practical importance of how transformational leadership within a decentralized command environment empowers subordinates to perform their best, even under some of the most dire of circumstances. Next I will discuss the theoretical importance and literature related to transformational leadership and its role in a decentralized command.



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### **Literature Review**

The genesis of military leadership can be traced back to the earliest conflicts in human existence. The concept of decentralized command also had beginnings in early conflicts. Von Moltke (as cited in Straight, 1996) knew that he could not reliably anticipate the course of an operation beyond first contact with the enemy. To compensate, he employed decentralized decision making through “mission-oriented” orders. This command technique directed what to do and why it must be done without specifying how to do it. Von Moltke’s (as cited in Straight, 1996) mission-oriented orders attempted to enlist “the total independent commitment of troops from the lowest private up. His goal was to unleash subordinate initiative in order to both accommodate the unexpected and capitalize on opportunity” (Straight, 1996, p. 13). This type of leadership, this transformational leadership rarely seen at that time empowered Von Moltke’s men. They understood the mission, the intent Von Moltke had and they were able to lead themselves and figure out how to accomplish it in a way they saw fit. I see this as an important point in the overall question that I am pointing out here. Subordinates do not need direction, checklists or step by step orders for everything they need to accomplish. Let them lead themselves and figure out solutions to problems on their own.

### **Transformational Leadership Defined**

Transformational leadership is a relatively new concept that has gained momentum and popularity only in the last few decades. “Leaders use a transformational approach that focuses on inspiring the team members to achieve the leader’s vision and go beyond their task

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requirements creating high-performance self-directed project teams” (Burke, 2014). This theory on leadership is vastly different than the traditionally top-down style that is prevalent in many organizations around the world, especially in the military. Like Burke (2014), Bass (1990) agrees as he developed the most widely researched version of transformational leadership theory. He stated that “transformational leadership: occurs when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their self-interest for the good of the group” (Bass, 1990, p. 21). When leaders employ this leadership theory the results they get are more than just the completion of the mission or task at hand. They get vested employees and subordinates that want to not only do well and achieve the overall goal of the organization, but they want to do it for their leader. They feel a sense of duty, of loyalty to the people or person who enabled them to lead themselves. This leadership theory also forces subordinates to take some ownership of the problem and operation. When you feel it is your task, your charge to accomplish certain things, you develop a much deeper connection and concern when the ownership of the situation is yours. The feelings of ownership also bring along inspiration. As a subordinate, when you feel inspired and motivated you can achieve boundless goals and objectives. Peter Northouse contends “Transformational leaders are recognized as change agents who are good role models, who can create and articulate a clear vision for an organization, who empower followers to meet higher standards, who act in ways that make others want to trust them, and who give meaning to organizational life” (Northouse, 2016).

### **Commanders Intent**

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A very important aspect of transformational leadership is the commander's or boss's intent. Yes, the mission and end goal may be laid out completely but what happens if different problems or situations arise while trying to accomplish said mission? How do subordinates react? Are they supposed to go back to command with the new issue, the new speedbump and ask for clarification or guidance in overcoming that obstacle? According to Dr. Milan Vego, (2010) a Professor of Operations in the Joint Military Operations Department at the Naval War College, the answer is no. "The main purpose of commander's intent is to provide a framework for freedom to act for subordinate commanders. In general, the broader the broader the operational commander's intent, the greater the latitude subordinate commanders have in accomplishing assigned missions. The intent should allow the subordinate commanders to exercise the highest degree of initiative in case the original order no longer applies or unexpected opportunities arise. In issuing the intent, the higher commander informs subordinate commanders what needs to be done to achieve success even if the initially issued orders become obsolete due to unexpected changes in the situation" (Vego, 2010, p. 138). This transformational leadership approach allows people to think on their own, to think for themselves. Transformational leadership also gives subordinates a voice. When subordinate's voices are heard, they feel more valued and have more of a willingness to lead. Lieutenant Colonel Christopher T. Daniels argues that leaders must hear the voices and opinions of their people. "As commander's push the limits, we need perspective and advice from the people we lead. I have learned that the front, rear and center leadership skill set must remain congruent with – as well as capitalize and build upon – the leader's own strengths and talents" (Daniels,

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2007). Transformational leadership empowers subordinates to come forward and to lead, especially within a decentralized command structure.

### **Decentralized Command**

Transformational leadership within a decentralized command structure allows subordinate employees to 'lead' themselves and their peers. Having to ask for permission to do every little thing, to solve every little problem is not only a burden on the team facing the issue, but also a burden for the actual leadership team. If the leadership team has to stop focusing on the bigger picture, the overall objective to help solve a minor issue it detracts from the entire unit as a whole. By allowing subordinates the latitude to lead up the chain of command, it empowers them to want to do their best, and to want to complete the bigger mission as safely and efficiently as possible. With a more centralized command, or top down leadership, it is easy to see in today's military how it may lead to contentment and ease. According to Major Eric Theriault (2015) of the United States Air Force, there must be a bit of a balance between centralized and decentralized command. "The reliance on centralized control and cyberspace superiority, though, has led to complacency and atrophy. Nonconventional warfare, counter-insurgency, and operations in a combat zone all demonstrate that Airmen must not only operate from centralized control or distributed control but also flex back and forth between the two – and do so while maintaining momentum, preserving efficiency, and honoring the Combined Forces Air Component Commander's intent. This daunting requirement is obtainable when subordinate commanders are properly empowered" (Theriault, 2015, p.101). It is imperative that leaders look to a decentralized command structure within a transformational leadership environment to

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establish a healthy workforce within their organizations. Leaders in all walks of life must make clear their intent and the mission of their organization. Then they must find ways to empower their people to perform their best. “Traditionally the metrics of law enforcement have focused on short-term numerical reductions in crime, rather than lasting gains in prevention, which prove harder to quantify” (Phibbs, 2016). Agencies have used a “leadership- manager” model where chiefs instruct subordinates and then manage them as they perform tasks. This works well in short-term assignments. However, to increase effectiveness as they advance in their organizations, leaders must become more strategic and less involved in day-to-day operations. By nature, law enforcement represents a hands on affair and gravitates toward commanders who have remained tactical and involved. But if chiefs focus too heavy on tactics, they risk the appearance of micromanaging and distrusting the abilities of lower-level personnel” (Phibbs, 2016). Recognizing the importance of not micro-managing and empowering employees should be of the utmost priority for managers or leaders. Letting people work and progress through problems on their own is beneficial to all parties involved.

Phibbs goes on to address commander’s intent and how it is bold thinking.

“However, the time-tested Commander’s Intent concept can offer a successful guiding structure to help agencies meet modern policing challenges. Its forward-thinking, mission-oriented execution differs from traditional narrow-focused policing. It uses a “leader-leader” approach aimed at broader, long-term issues. Although it also employs a centralized decision-making process, commander’s intent strategy based policing objectives require decentralized leadership and management styles, recognizing that more than one way exists to complete tasks” (Phibbs,

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2016). This decentralized command approach style is still focused on the mission, on the job at hand. But, it's a different type of focus. It allows the strengths of every person involved in executing the mission to show.

### **The Role of Transformational Leadership to Empower Subordinates**

The literature quoted has displayed how effective transformational leadership can be. A decentralized command structure is a perfect environment for transformational leadership to be utilized. "At their most elemental level, centralized control and decentralized execution require leader vision and subordinate initiative" (Link, 2001). The central command or leadership uses transformational leadership to empower subordinates to lead by creating a decentralized command structure. The leadership lays out the intent of what needs to be accomplished and essentially lets their team figure out how to do it. So not only are subordinates now required to think and make decisions on their own, they also have some ownership of the outcome. This is empowerment, and this is why transformational leadership is so effective in a decentralized command environment.

### **Summary**

To summarize my results in the literature review, I maintain that transformational leadership is a highly effective form of leadership, especially in a military environment. Traditionally, some leaders in a top-down or 'centralized' command environment tend to use their power to force people to what they want instead of giving them a why. Leadership is about getting people to do what you want. However, it doesn't have to be forced upon people. Results can be achieved in better ways and be mutually beneficial to both the employer and employee.

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As Burke suggested in discussing theory, “Leaders use a transformational approach that focuses on inspiring the team members to achieve the leader’s vision and go beyond their task requirements creating high-performance self-directed project teams” (Burke, 2014). Leaders should provide a leaderful environment to their subordinates and enable them to grow and lead.

### **Framework for Analysis**

For my research method I used a traditional approach by using many textbooks and peer reviewed scholarly articles. I was able to go back and use academic textbooks from previous classes in the curriculum to research useful information, especially when discussing the theory of transformational leadership. I considered my question “what role does transformational leadership play in a decentralized command structure to empower subordinates to lead?” and picked out key factors to discuss such as the theory of transformational leadership, decentralized command, and commander’s intent. To keep my paper relevant, I tried to incorporate only the literature with the strongest evidence and most pertinent.

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### **Discussion**



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### **Conclusion**

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>[Add footnotes, if any, on their own page following references. For APA formatting requirements, it's easy to just type your own footnote references and notes. To format a footnote reference, select the number and then apply the Footnote Reference. The body of a footnote, such as this example, uses the Normal text style. *(Note: If you delete this sample footnote, don't forget to delete its in-text reference as well.)*]