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Transformational Leadership: An Analysis of Adolf Hitler
and his Ability to Charismatically Connect with Followers

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Abstract

Since 1978, transformational leadership has been defined by four distinct traits and is widely known as a behavioral theory, which assumes that transformational leadership can be learned. Research has been conducted to determine if there is any correlation between transformational leadership and the big five personality traits, which could indicate that an individual needs to possess these traits rather than be able to learn them. Through researching extensive literature, this study will review agreeableness, known as charisma, as having a strong association with the transformational leadership trait of individualized consideration, and discusses the importance of being able to connect with your followers. To illustrate the importance of charisma in transformational leadership, this study will explore the charisma of Adolf Hitler and how he was able to connect with his followers to lead a post-World War I Germany out of economic depression. Furthermore, this study will explore Hitler's leadership style, how he was able to have followers participate in his ethnic cleansing goals and acknowledge that the outcome would have been significantly different if his skills were used for a positive outcome. This study is important to determine the importance of charisma in transformational leaders as they inspire followers to connect with a vision.

Keywords: transformational leadership, charisma, agreeableness, Hitler, followers.

Introduction

The concept of transformational leadership was discussed by Burns (1978) and further explored by Bass (1985) when he analyzed the four traits that distinguish transformational leadership from transactional leadership. Transformational leadership is viewed as a behavioral theory, which assumes that the four traits of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration can be learned. However, Judge and Bono (2000) studied the 5-factor model of personality in relation to those traits to determine if there was a direct correlation and whether they could predict transformational leadership traits in individuals. Their research positively linked extraversion and agreeableness to transformational leadership, along with a positive correlation for openness to experience. Agreeableness is also described as charisma and has a strong link to individualized consideration, which is sharing a vision with followers. Extensive research has been conducted into the life of Adolf Hitler as a transformational leader and he has been credited by many as possessing charisma with the ability to inspire followers to connect with his vision. This study will provide an analysis of transformational leadership traits, Hitler's charisma, and how he was able to finesse this trait to connect with followers. This study is important to determine how important charisma is for a transformational leader and whether these traits can be learned or finessed.

Literature Review

There has been extensive research on leadership styles and traits, with the concept of transformational leadership first being discussed by Burns in 1978. There are four distinct traits of transformational leadership and this study will focus on the trait of agreeableness, known as charisma

Transformational leaders have led countries to soaring highs and sometimes extreme lows, but no historical figure garners as much notoriety as Adolf Hitler does. Transformational leaders are defined as individuals who gain support by inspiring followers to connect with a vision that reaches beyond their own individual needs and self-interests (Burns, 1978). There is a further assertion that there are four dimensions of transformational leadership: idealized influence; inspirational motivation; intellectual stimulation; and individual consideration (Bass, 1985).

Idealized Influence

Idealized influence is when a leader is viewed as a charismatic role model and Bass asserts that charisma is the single most important trait for successful transformational leaders (Bass, 1985). Charisma is having a presence in the room and having people drawn to you because of the energy you exude. Certain groups possess copious amounts of charisma, such as actors and politicians. Hitler was not someone who exuded abundant charisma and his physical appearance was not particularly attractive, but he was able to share his vision effectively using both charisma and its inverse, presence. As a speaker, Hitler was able to engage his followers by delivering emotional speeches, which is the most effective way for individuals to remember and reflect. Gershman (2019) asserts charisma is focused on the speaker and presence focuses on the audience by being able to be present and focused on the message. Hitler wrote his own speeches and practiced them many times, finessing the delivery so it had the right amounts of strength, passion, and an abundance of emotion.

Inspirational motivation

In describing inspirational motivation, Bass (1985) asserts that this trait is being able to articulate a clear and inspirational vision to followers. Leaders inspire their followers through prompting both attractive and inspirational visions. In a study by Schuesslbauer, Volmer, and

Goritz (2018), they assert that inspirational motivation helps focus individuals on the future and they are forward-looking and proactive. By focusing on the future, change can be anticipated and the end goal is more focused. They hypothesize that inspirational motivation determines overall career adaptability, concern, control, curiosity and confidence. Inspirational motivation was measured using the subscale of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire using statements of “talks optimistically about the future” and asking the participants to rate on a 5-point Likert scale. They also measured career adaptability by asking about concern, control, curiosity, and confidence, which are all components of adaptability. They concluded that leaders who provide inspirational motivation as a way to communicate their vision are enhancing followers and helping them to deal with challenges. The citizens of Germany were facing significant challenges; the country was devastated after World War I and there was a dire need for an inspirational vision to bring it out of the economic depression. Unemployment was high and there was debilitating poverty, so the country was desperate for strong leadership. Hitler was able to connect with his countryfolk by having a vision to rebuild Germany and the country was primed for success. Hitler’s speeches were rousing and caused riots, which resulted in a period of incarceration for Hitler in 1923. During his incarceration, he penned the political propaganda *Mein Kampf, My Struggle*, which outlined his vision, including his anti-Semitic theories (Biography.com Editors, 2019). Hitler was a genius by focusing on what his followers needed to hear and being forward thinking.

Intellectual motivation

The third trait of transformational leadership, intellectual motivation, is necessary to question assumptions and challenge the current state. In a study about inspirational motivation and intellectual motivation, job embeddedness was shown as the attachment between an individual and their job (Maqsood, Shahid-Tufail, Sardar, & Gill, 2019). There was have a direct correlation with

employee empowerment and job embeddedness, which creates feelings of autonomy, value, and a sense of belonging for the follower, and transformational leaders can motivate their followers.

Hitler utilized the condition of the country to his advantage; Germany was both economically and morally depleted and it was primed for someone to come in and lead it out of disaster. Hitler was able to provide that motivation through his charismatic speeches about dissatisfaction with the current state following the signing of the Treaty of Versailles (1919), which blamed Germany for World War I and made them pay war reparations (Husain & Liebertz, 2019). There was a sense of value and embeddedness for the followers, which was generated through both inspirational and intellectual motivation.

Individual consideration

The fourth and final trait of individual consideration is tending to the individual needs of the followers. Transformational leadership in sports has shown a wide range of outcomes for success, depending on the level of tending to individual needs. In a study that looked at the relationship between the transformational leadership behavior of individual consideration and the coach-athlete relationship, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire based on the Differentiated Transformational Leadership Inventory; the survey included questions about the coach and whether they used inspirational language or talked about succeeding, being a good role model, and working together as a team (Gorgulu, 2019). The study concluded that transformational behavior and leader-inspired extra effort were positively associated with impact on performance and tending to the individual brings a closer relationship. When applying this conclusion to the German citizens, Hitler was able to tend to individuals through leader-inspired extra effort; he was able to monopolize on the country's depression, the need to rebuild, and to provide a vision to allow people to provide for their families. In his speeches, Hitler focused on what were the pain points for his followers, and

then address those concerns and questions with a goal of solving their problems. This garnered trust and connection, and his followers were loyal to him and his vision.

Big Five personality traits

When considering the necessary personality traits for transformational leadership, Judge and Bono (2000) discuss the Big Five personality traits of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional adjustment and openness to experience, which was developed by Tupes and Christal in 1961. In their study, Judge and Bono utilized survey packets which contained three surveys: a personality survey; one to be completed by the participant's supervisor; and one to be completed by subordinates. The purpose of the study was to show a correlation between personality traits and transformational leadership behavior. While the study illustrates reliable relationships between transformational leadership and the Big Five, the strongest trait that emerged was agreeableness, which is strongly related to charisma. Being a leader is dependent on followers, and agreeableness predicts team interaction and is a social trait (Judge & Bono, 2000). Hitler was able to engage countryfolk and other followers through his charisma.

Charismatic connection with followers

Caspi, et al., (2019) discuss their study into the perception of charisma with regards to delivery and content of a speech. The authors discuss previous studies in perception of charisma where the speech is visionary or non-visionary and the delivery is strong or weak, which concluded that a strong and visionary speech is perceived as charismatic. Their research consisted of two experiments; the first one to replicate previous studies where delivery and content determine perceptions of charisma, and the second traces charisma perception throughout the experiment. For experiment 1, 80 participants were split into four groups and an actor delivered his educational vision to each group. The visionary presentation was written using Strange and Mumford's Vision

Formation Model (2002, 2005). Delivery of the vision followed Holladay and Coombs' (1994) manipulation by maintaining eye contact, dynamic gestures, facial expressiveness, confidence and varying levels of voice tone. Collection was via a questionnaire and participants rated the presentation and results showed that the first experiment replicated previous studies. The second experiment had 117 participants and a perception analyzer was continually used to monitor perceived charisma. The results showed that the participants who watched the strong delivery rated it higher than a weak delivery; in addition, the results for visionary vs. non-visionary showed a higher rating for visionary. This study concluded that the effect of delivery is immediate for perceiving charisma (Caspi, Bogler, & Tzuman, 2019). The study supports Hitler's election campaign approach for creating a strong vision by his use of aircraft, loudspeakers, and high-profile speaker appearances. In his presidential campaign of 1932, Hitler used dynamic campaign strategies, but they were targeted to heavily populated and easily accessible areas, which ultimately was not enough to get Hitler elected. However, there is discussion about charismatic leaders and their importance for electoral success, but the findings of the study indicate skepticism of this view (Selb & Munzert, 2018).

Hitler was described by many as charismatic and personable, which extended beyond his country folk. English Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain met with Hitler in 1938 to discuss avoiding going to war. Chamberlain was influenced by Hitler's charisma and later reflected:

“In short I had established a certain confidence which was my aim, and on my side in spite of the hardness and ruthlessness I thought I saw in his face I got the impression that here was a man who could be relied upon when he had given his word.” (Gladwell, 2019).

As Hitler's intent of a world war was starting to become a reality, he used his charismatic demeanor to win over Chamberlain; additionally, he spent time with British aristocrats who were

sympathetic to his cause. Fascist socialite Diana Mitford mused that he could be very funny when he wanted to be. Other world leaders refused to meet him, and their view of him as a diabolical leader were accurate because they were not swayed by his charisma and presence (Gladwell, 2019).

Storytelling

An important construct of transformational leadership is influence and manipulation, and one of the most effective is through the power of storytelling. Storytelling is a way to convey leadership power through a range of different stories based on myths, legends, heroes, and anecdotes. The storyteller holds the power of the narrative and is often seen as an ethical approach to leadership. The use of historically correct data is imperative to provide a true recounting of events. It has been the practice for scholars to romanticize historical figures for leadership examples, but Gutmann (2018) discusses the necessity of using a professional historian to contextualize the historical figure appropriately and recount events based on facts (Gutmann, 2018). This accurate depiction of events means that the truth is maintained instead of being diluted over the years.

Hitler is seen as one of the most influential leaders of the 20th Century, even though his leadership was unethical and manipulative. Takala and Auvinen (2016) discuss three types of storytelling surrounding Hitler, which are the stories Hitler told, the stories told about Hitler, and leadership stories that include historical data that include Hitler (Takala & Auvinen, 2016). Their focus on Hitler is because "...what we do not know is all the details, elements and episodes that brought about such an influential and vicious leader...that is another reason why the story of such a great (and vicious) leader should be dissected carefully" (Takala & Auvinen, 2016). In their analysis, they discuss the beginning of the story, the cult of the Fuher, and then the fall. The beginning of the story tells of a troubled childhood that was filled with emotional and physical abuse at the hands of his father, who died when Hitler was young. In 1907, his mother was gravely ill

with cancer and being attended to by a Jewish doctor; her death is believed to have laid the foundation for his hatred of Jews. In addition, he was extremely disappointed when he failed to be accepted for a second time into the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, and was living in boarding rooms and homeless shelters (Faulkner, 2015). As a young man, Hitler practiced his skill as an orator while giving political speeches to his fellow homeless men, and he became a respected member of the community and attracted supporters. This early finessing of storytelling paved the way for when he joined the German Labor Party and became a propagandist and a demagogue. During the re-establishment of the Nazi party, Hitler made a speech about his leadership skills and he needed to “bring back together those who were moving in different directions”, which extols the transformational leadership trait of inspirational motivation (Takala & Auvinen, 2016). Hitler’s formative years were challenging and between the years of 1919 and 1944, Hitler perfected his storytelling and speech giving skills, repeatedly speaking about blind obedience and trust of his followers. His military command was obedient and loyal, despite that it was becoming apparent he would lead the country to ruin.

The story of Hitler and his rise to power is true but raises the question of how he was able to rise to such immense influence. Takala and Auvinen (2016) assert that Hitler had a strong will but that it does not explain his immense influence as a leader. To further explain the success, they discuss the leadership storytelling and power in relation to a devastated Germany following World War I, a country that was primed for a transformational leader. Additionally, to become the leader required luck and cold-bloodedness and “Hitler was a great orator and an opportunist who mercilessly used the weaknesses of his opponents and enemies in an efficient manner” (Takala & Auvinen, 2016). It is stated that Hitler’s charisma was not fully realized in the beginning, so his

inner circle created and repeated stories of his charisma to create a persona that Hitler had yet to grown in to.

Leadership: Ethics and Morals

It is beyond question that Hitler was an effective leader; similarly, it is beyond question that his treatment of Jews, gypsies, mentally and physically challenged, and homosexuals was horrific. Jones (2019) asserts that three conditions are necessary for ethical choices and behaviors, which are being able to anticipate the consequences of our actions, being able to make value judgments, and the ability to choose a different action (Jones, 2019). Jones discusses moral codes in relation to judging behavior, and how they differ between cultures. He asserts that the moral systems that we currently have are those that have culturally evolved but people are capable of misguided and evil leadership. In that realm, there are many diabolical and unethical leaders, Hitler included (Jones, 2019).

From an early age, Hitler based his ideology on the concept that the strongest always wins. Under his leadership, three values determined an individual's fate – blood or race, personality, and the will to fight for self-preservation. These values were personified in the Aryan race and these themes were the main topics of his speeches (Takala & Auvinen, 2016).

Despite being dead for nearly three-quarters of a century, Hitler is still used as a comparison for current political leaders, to include Presidents Trump, Obama and Bush. Commentators have offered differing conclusions to the purpose of these comparisons. Some opine that the comparisons have contemporary relevance because of global nationalism, authoritarian leadership, and neofascism; others opine that comparisons to Hitler are counterproductive and instead choose early American or European history (Rosenfeld, 2018). However, it is interesting to discuss the need to make comparisons to make sense of leadership issues and traits. When Hitler started his political

career, he was compared to notorious revolutionaries, religious fanatics, historical villains, dictators and warlords (Rosenfeld, 2018). However, the analogies served to portray the events of abhorrent behavior of the Nazi party as comprehensible by comparing them to historical behaviors, and that the events were just newer versions of old behaviors. As the extreme behaviors surpassed previous events, and Hitler's behavior became more erratic, it showed more differences than similarities with historical events, and Nazism was a unique phenomenon. New analogies were sought to describe Hitler and observers were forced to compare events to the barbarism of medieval times and the French Revolution. As Hitler consolidated power and continued his ethnic cleansing, observers were unsure of who to compare him to. "There is no single figure denoting evil in the same uncontested way that the former Fuhrer does today... We should hope that Hitler's crimes are never eclipsed by anyone else and that they remain the benchmark of evil" (Rosenfeld, 2018).

We can take this knowledge and apply it to current leadership skills within organizations. Toxic leadership is also known as the dark side of leadership or "little Hitler", with recognized behaviors and traits of bullying, threatening and shouting. Indradevi (2016) discusses the combination of self-centered attitudes, along with behavior and motivations, all which negatively impact employees, teams, and the organization as a whole. Toxic leadership is defined as "...poisonous, not far from destructive or harmful...behavior which is exploitive, abusive, destructive, psychological and perhaps legalistically corrupt and poisonous." (Indradevi, 2016). The impact on individuals can include feeling helpless, job insecurity, reduced innovation, reduced job satisfaction, depression and anxiety. All these feelings will impact the morale and negatively affect organizational performance. In *The Leadership Odyssey: from darkness to light* (2016), the authors provide history of toxic leaders, including Hitler, who were powerful leaders but in a brutal and evil way towards others. As a comparison to those brutal leaders, the authors discuss leaders who used

power for the welfare of society and worked tirelessly to uplift humankind (Singh, Bhandarker, & Rai, 2016). In the study by Takala and Auvinen (2016), they discuss two leaders who used their charisma for good; Gandhi and his peaceful act of rebellion, which brought about positive change for India, and Martin Luther King, who used his charisma to engage followers to share his vision of equality. Through speeches and storytelling, they were able to bring positive change that was ethical and good for their followers.

This study discusses the traits of transformational leadership and the importance of charisma to engage with followers. Literature indicates that Hitler had the personality traits associated with transformational leadership and was highly charismatic in his speech making, resulting in his ability to connect on an emotional level with his impoverished countryfolk. He was also able to charismatically connect with world leaders and convince them that he was not going to go to war, despite his political propaganda outlining his plan. However, Hitler used the traits of transformational leadership for his own personal agenda and persecution of Jews, mentally and physically handicapped, homosexuals and gypsies.

It is unclear from the literature whether the traits of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual motivation, and individual considerations are behavioral, which can be learned. The importance of this study is to discuss the relevance of charisma in transformational leadership, and how to ethically and morally use these traits to connect and inspire followers for a positive vision.

Framework for Analysis and Methods

The purpose of this study is to gather information about transformational leadership traits, and whether charisma, or agreeableness, is necessary for engaging followers. It compares transformational leadership traits with one of the most infamous leaders in history, Adolf Hitler.

The primary audience for this study will be leaders, whether they are leadership practitioners, teachers, or scholars.

This study was conducted entirely on literature review, which was challenging because of the volume of literature for both transformational leadership and the comparative subject, Adolf Hitler. From the start it was apparent that strict boundaries needed to be adhered to, and placing those boundaries prevented the excessive scope creep. When looking at the transformational leadership traits, themes became apparent, which necessitated an analysis of the traits and how Hitler exhibited skills around those traits. Judge and Bono (2000) compared the transformational leadership traits to the 5-factor personality traits, which showed a significant correlation between charisma and individualized consideration or the ability to share a vision. This theme was further developed through literature review into charisma and Hitler's ability to connect with his followers. It is without question that Hitler was able to make a connection with his countryfolk, but the depth of that connection was unknown when he came into power. Through charismatic speeches, which led to him gaining blind obedience from his followers, he was able to manipulate people into performing dark, unethical, and vicious acts.

Discussion

This study had a few unavoidable limitations. The most significant limitation was the sheer volume of literature that was available regarding both transformational leadership and Hitler. The personal and political life of Adolf Hitler has been so well documented and continues to be discussed, but finding unbiased literature was a limitation; to manage that limitation, I attempted to focus on the transformational leadership traits and then introduce relevant literature to support those traits.

Transformational leadership has been discussed by scholars since its inception in 1978 to the present day. Some scholars believe that transformational leadership is behavioral and can be learned, while others believe that the associated traits are linked to personality, which could indicate that you either possess the traits or not. This area is ripe for further study.

The title of this study could be viewed as a limitation because of the reaction most people have to Hitler. When discussing the study with peers, the strength of their reactions was varied but all based around shock, surprise and revulsion. As the discussion evolved, people would inevitably agree that Hitler was a strong leader, but all agree that he was evil. If a reader is not part of a bigger discussion, the title itself could be a significant limitation.

Conclusion

Transformational leadership has four defined traits of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration. When compared to personality traits, idealized influence is strongly linked to charisma, which is a necessary component for engaging with followers.

All the reviewed literature discussing Hitler and his ability to connect with his followers speaks about his charisma. It is irrefutable that Hitler possessed both charisma and presence; he was able to foster a deep connection with followers who were in desperate need of a vision to move forward after World War I and its ensuing economic disaster. His speeches were energetic and spoke about his vision to bring about change for his economically depressed country. Even if he was not able to speak directly to all his followers, he was able to connect through the stories that were told about him and his vision. Therefore, storytelling plays a significant part in perpetuating his charismatic presence, and the stories talked about significant events that could be used to manipulate the narrative through propaganda.

Recognizing the significance of charisma in gaining followers is important to present-day leaders. Using Hitler's model of connecting with followers, he emphasized his leadership skills of being able to bring the country back together, pick up the pieces, and that he was at the center of bringing the country back to being a super power, which was exactly what his countryfolk needed to hear. However, he used the message to push blind obedience, laying the path for his own personal agenda of anti-Semitism. Hitler's charisma relied on the approval of his followers and, when Germany was facing defeat, Hitler isolated himself and his charisma started to fade.

For present-day leadership, having a vision that inspires followers can be enhanced through empowering storytelling, but without charisma and presence, communicating that vision is challenging. To be a transformational leader, you have to connect with your followers and continue to nurture that relationship through morals, ethics, motivation and positive influence.

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