

Forsaking transformational leadership: Roscoe Conkling, the *great* Senator from New York

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Abstract

This essay explores the opportunities for transformational leadership within legislative bodies, particularly the U.S. Senate. Burns asserted that legislative leaders would rarely exercise transformational leadership. He appears to be correct. Even in those rare instances when a House Speaker (Joe Cannon or Newt Gingrich) appears to have a transforming affect, the leadership proves short-lived. Roscoe Conkling, the fiery tempered Senator from New York, possessed many of the individual traits or skills necessary to achieve transformational leadership. That he fell short of achieving this transformative potential is attributable to a combination of contextual and personal factors. This essay examines Conkling's failure to achieve transforming leadership and the institutional impediments to transformational leadership in an attempt to explain why transformative, legislative leaders are rare. © 2007 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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In 1859, the state of New York sent Roscoe Conkling, one of its most powerful and promising politicians to Washington. During and immediately following the Civil War he attempted to bring his considerable oratorical skills to bear on and exercise transformational leadership with respect to one of the most important public issues of his day: the treatment and political status of former slaves. As the years passed, however, Conkling functioned mainly as a transactional leader, subjugating his ideals, his aspirations and ultimately his career, to his role as king of patronage and representative of the Grant Administration. In the early part of his career, Conkling introduced Lincoln's Compensation for Emancipation Bill, crafted a version of the 14th Amendment that attempted to encourage states to expand suffrage. As he became an established leader within the Republican Party and in the Senate, however, Conkling devoted less time and energy to civil rights and more time to President Grant's agenda and patronage. Conkling supported President Grant's political appointments and policies, though Grant's appointments often proved themselves unfit both in terms of competence and ethics, and supporting Grant often required dramatic confrontations with fellow Republicans. Moreover, Conkling served both as an informal advisor to President Grant on economic policy and as Grant's representative in the Senate during the controversial election of 1876.

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This essay will provide evidence that the difference in the types of issues Conkling addressed early in his career and in the later stages of his career is striking, and throughout all the intra- and inter-party rancor, Roscoe Conkling cared deeply about race relations. The treatment and political rights of former slaves should have been a sufficiently compelling, moral, philosophical and legal, issue to propel a gifted Senator to greatness. Yet Roscoe Conkling's career did not live up to its promise, despite his skills and the opportunity to improve humanity that was presented by the end of the Civil War. Chauncey DePew, a later Senator from New York, places the responsibility for this squarely at Conkling's feet. "Roscoe Conkling was created for a great career." That his career did not live up to its promise was "entirely his own fault" (DePew, 1922, 79). Finally, this essay will question DePew's interpretation, by bringing recent developments in leadership and legislative studies to bear in a case analysis of a once promising legislator, in order to explain the barriers to transformational leadership in the legislative arena.

1. Understanding leadership

In an effort to remedy what he described as an intellectual crisis of leadership (Burns, 1978, 1), Burns offered a definition of leadership with a strong normative component. He attempts to distinguish between power and leadership in a formulation reminiscent of Dahl (1957). In so doing, he rejects the more formalized or institutional definition which finds leadership in a position or an institution with formal authority (Paige, 1977). Moreover, he rejects the notion that 'naked power wielding' or coercive methods constitute leadership. Leadership requires attentiveness to the needs and aspirations of one's followers. Leadership at its most exceptional (transforming) not only creates a loyal following, it actually transforms both the leader and followers by moving them *both* along Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Burns, 1978, 65–67). In the more mundane form of leadership (transactional), leaders meet only the short term needs of their followers.

As Seligman (1980) pointed out in his review of *Leadership*, these categories are not mutually exclusive. Great reform, elevating reform, humanistic reform occasionally requires power broker politics. Transformation leadership augments transactional leadership; it does not replace transactional methods (Bass & Avolio, 1993, 1994; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1998). Moreover, organizational constraints affect the type of leadership that develops (Burns, 1978; Bass & Avolio, 1993, 1994; Yukl & Howell, 1999). For example, legislative leadership is primarily transactional, since leaders find themselves constrained by the aims of their followers, and legislative leaders have multiple constituencies (a geographic constituency, a partisan constituency, membership of the chamber) with incongruent aims (Jones, 1968; Sinclair, 1999).

2. Transformative, transactions and authenticity

Transformational leaders forge a connection with their followers that elevates both followers and leader along Maslow's hierarchy of needs through the 4 Is of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration (Bass, 1985; Avolio, Waldman & Yammarino, 1991). Recently, Bass incorporated the moral component of leadership that Burns advocated and made a distinction between *authentic* and *pseudo-transformational leadership*. *Pseudo-transformational* leaders utilize transformational methods but they are lacking the moral authority of *authentic* transformational leaders. Authentic transformational leaders advance the common good and they do it through morally defensible means, by paying attention to the needs and interests of their followers, by arousing a concern for others and encouraging their followers to transcend their own self-interest in the pursuit of the common good. Pseudo-transformational leaders may have the public interest in mind or they may be serving self-interested goals, but they usually advance those goals by using followers as a means, without regard for the needs, interests or growth of their followers. As Bass and Steidlmeier put it, "the component that ordinarily is missing in the personalized leadership of the pseudo-transformational leader is individualized consideration" (1998, 6). Additionally, pseudo-transformational leaders motivate their followers by encouraging a "we-they" competitiveness" and vilification of some enemy.

Transactional leadership, on the other hand, is less likely to deviate significantly from existing practices and involves lower immediate risk (Burns, 2003, 43), which is particularly of interest to legislators who are continually focusing on the next election. Transactional leadership is typically characterized by a contractual relationship with followers. This relationship is most often described as including two primary behaviors: contingent reward and management by exception. Since the leader-follower relationship is not based on a shared vision and follower

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