



Book essay on “The Dark Side of Transformational Leadership: A Critical Perspective”[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The recent economic misfortune challenges the legitimacy of business leadership and those presented as heroic, charismatic and transformational visionaries. This book contributes to the lively debate about the role of transformational leadership in business and society. *Tourish* parallels transformational leadership with cults; and argues that the noticeable overlaps should caution against the potential of moving organizations further along the dysfunctional cult continuum than is desirable. In addition to dissent, *Tourish* promotes consideration of an alternative perspective based on institutionalized feedback into the organizational decision-making process. This book sets out to prepare students of leadership to critically analyze and reflect on leadership behavior and decisions, and to warn, against trusting too much in the judgment of others and not enough in our own.

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1. Introduction

The recent economic misfortune of corporations who, not so long ago, were held up as indispensable for human prosperity, challenges the legitimacy of business leadership and those presented as heroic, charismatic and transformational visionaries. More studies appear nowadays to explore the dark or bad side of leadership (Dong, 2012, Ehrich, Ehrich, & Knight, 2012; Resick, Whitman, Weingarden, & Hiller, 2009). This book sets out to warn and prepare scholars and students of leadership to critically analyze and reflect on leadership behavior and decisions, and to warn, like Schein (1989, 1999), against trusting too much in the judgment of others and not enough in our own. The book is very dark and could perhaps benefit from a few more rays of hope and sparks of brightness from the brilliant leaders who are so good at empowering others to the benefit of the organization and society as a whole, but perhaps since the aim is to highlight a neglected area, this is to be expected.

This book is rich with densely-packed research findings and contemporary examples from many well-known organizations, and is presented in such a fashion that it is an easy read for those schooled or interested in leadership theory. Dennis Tourish convincingly expands on the works of scholars Keelye (1995), Bass (1989, 1990), Solomon (1996) and Khoo and Burch (2008), and demonstrates that not all

leaders are heroic, charismatic and transformational visionaries. Many historic examples exist of influential leaders with a disastrous impact on society, such as Hitler and Stalin, but sadly, many counterparts are also alive and prospering in today's corporate environment. Despite the clear proof of the decision and implementation failures of leaders and the resulting recent global financial crisis, it is still erroneously and generally believed that transformational leadership is always a good thing and that leaders should have unbounded power in deciding what should be done. *The Dark Side of Transformational Leadership* challenges this prevailing belief and critiques theories of transformational leadership. Tourish argues that the orthodoxy assumes that all leaders' actions are inherently rational, and does not recognize that unquestioning conformity to the coercive controls of some power-hungry senior executives may have harmful, even disastrous consequences for both employee and organization. “Coercive persuasion refers to the way in which leaders socially construct discursive systems of constraint that are difficult for followers to challenge and resist” (p.40). Tourish encourages practitioners and educators to revisit stakeholder perspectives and to critically consider the disproportionate role of those at the top in the decision-making process. He warns against the dangers of excessive, unquestioning conformity and promotes the role of dissent to disable the negative impact of mono-cultivism and androic followership — and to remove the mask of “dedication”, which is rather the product of ideological persuasion than of true commitment and undivided support.

Tourish parallels the key ingredients of transformational leadership with those of cults; and argues that the noticeable overlaps should caution against the potential of moving organizations further along the dysfunctional cult continuum than is desirable. In addition to

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dissent, Tourish promotes consideration of an alternative perspective based on institutionalized feedback into the organizational decision-making process.

In Chapter 3, Tourish likens coercive persuasion to the Stockholm syndrome, in that followers are likely to over-identify with charismatic leaders, resist rescue and resist contradicting their kidnappers. The rest of the chapter covers the conditions that facilitate such outcomes in contemporary leadership practices within organizations. *Tourish* admits that it is necessary for groups in organizations to share norms and have a shared vision of what they should achieve, but when leaders get power-drunk and view organizations in a narcissistic way as vehicles to achieve their own personal agendas, several problems arise at great expense to all stakeholders. These problems are addressed in the first part of the book. Some parts of the book are rather extreme and may leave the reader with a sense that the author might be exaggerating the sense of danger and catastrophe to make a point. Also, employees who have benefitted from truly great leadership might wish for the silver lining to show more often in these dark clouds. I was left with a sense of unease about the size of the problem, and would have liked to see some quantification of the problem. Just how dark is it in the corporate leadership domain?

The book is written in three parts. Part I covers the dark side of leadership. Part II provides several contemporary cases studies which demonstrate the key points and highlights the warnings and cautions expressed in Part I. Part III, although titled Conclusion, re-imagines leadership and followership in the light of several leadership theories and supplies key implications for practice.

Although Part I of the book clearly focuses on the harmful effect of leaders' narcissism, megalomania and unitaristic management's attempts to exploit the emotional side of people's spirituality to increase commitment to organizational goals, and limit all forms of dissent and resistance – leading to business cultures where a limited repertoire of feelings, attitudes and behavior is permissible – the book also contains several guiding principles and strategies to overcome the fundamental failings of the negative impact of some transformational leadership. *Tourish* emphasizes that “one of the most malignant and commonplace symptoms of leadership's dark side is the way in which dissent from powerful leaders is constrained and often eliminated.” Over-powered leaders who quell feedback become fatally out of touch with reality and have an exaggerated sense of support and unlikely to consider a sufficiently wide range of alternatives to make pivotal decisions. In addition narcissistic leaders are largely bereft of true followers on the organizational battlefields. Fortunately Part I also contains a range of suggestions regarding approaches to promote critical upward feedback by reducing and eliminating barriers such as the fear of punitive action, self-efficacy bias, the co-construction of leader and follower identities, group think and narcissistic behavior (where all success is credited to a select few in senior positions and all problems or failures are blamed on the frailties of lower ranks).

In Chapter 5 readers can learn about his ten commandments for improving upward communication in order to get a more realistic grasp on the organization's problems and on alternatives to master those problems. “Inevitable debates and disagreements on strategy are best brought into the open, where they can be engaged by leaders, rather than repressed, denied or ignored” (p. 95).

Tourish spares no punches when he argues that business schools' (including world-renowned schools such as MIT, Sloan and Stanford) dominant approach to the teaching of leadership contributes and strengthens the failings of leaders. He laments the simplistic way in which case studies are portrayed; ideologically unexamined with limited or no critical analysis and reflection, nor due care to provide alternative agency perspectives. These “heroic models of leadership have legitimized an overconcentration of power, created hubris rather than humility, helped to disempower employees and played a significant part in business scandals.” Although clearly intended for business school scholars,

and perhaps MBA graduates, the suggestions he offers to “transform how business schools approach” leadership teaching will provide readers with valuable ideas on how to bring the positive aspects of their own practices and development interventions much more to the light side of mindful leadership.

The book's evidence-based approach makes it a credible guide for scholars, senior executives and those interested in improving their own prowess as leaders and corporate decision-makers. *The Dark Side of Transformational Leadership* is rigorously researched and carefully written and provides a frank account of how the charisma of some leaders is often an illusion to their followers. “It is about the limits on the ability of leaders to do good and the tendency of many to put their own self-interest above the collective good of their followers” (p17). Tourish provides several well-documented case studies to demonstrate the perils of transformational leadership. While I suspect readers will already be convinced of the willful negligence, lax ethics, purposeful deceit, greed and the abuse of power by some leaders, Tourish douses any specter of light caused by doubt into absolute darkness in Part II of the book. He makes it abundantly clear, through numerous cases – from the Jonestown tragedy in 1978 where more than 900 people committed suicide or were murdered, to the demise of Lehman in 2008, the corporate quintessence of greed and corruption – that the practice of leadership has gone badly wrong.

The first case Tourish discusses in Part II, describes some of the defining characteristics of ideologist totalitarianism and readers are sadly sure to find some of these characteristics in the organizations they work for, liaise with or get discussed at the copier or in tea-room gossip. Deified cult leaders prey upon people's aversion to uncertainty and disallow any free thinking or the expression of ideas, thus engineering “self-thinking paralysis”. Employees quickly learn that to question the belief system and theoretical foundations of the cult/political group is to be branded as deviationists, even heretics. Chapter 9 continues to embroider on the theme of over-confidence in leaderships' insight and their absolute power over pivotal decisions, where leaders act as benevolent beings who are keen to help followers succeed, but instead ask total obedience to the point of asphyxiation of all self-thought, dissent and resistance re-action.

Tourish shines a bright spotlight on bankers involved in the 2008 global financial crisis and scrutinizes them as leaders – highlighting their uncanny ability to blame others for their failures and to invoke the “consensus effect” as rationalization for decision they made. These narcissistic leaders see themselves as passive victims of unpredictable environmental events – especially those caused by decisions by others – that overwhelmed them. The bankers thus avoid accepting responsibility for their part in the “turn of events” and invoke the role of third parties. In contrast to this, in boom time leaders often express organizational success as the result of effective decisions – their own agency and cleverness to use their power to control others, using images such as “architect, commander and saint” to discuss their role in popular media and communication with their stakeholders. Implications and lessons learnt are abundant, and readers will find them well documented and handy throughout the book, but also specifically in the lessons section of the case studies and the Conclusion (Part III).

The Dark Side of Transformational Leadership is an engaging and useful book and I highly recommend it for leaders, leadership scholars and aspiring executives who want to circumvent the harmful effects of their practices and decision-making attitudes and habits for the good of all stakeholders. I suspect that scholars reading this provocative book will be inspired to research deeper into how the practice of leadership can be improved and will find it a rich source of ideas for future research projects. I recommend this book to students in leadership courses who wish to broaden their view with a more critical perspective and contrast the leadership research which depicts all leaders only as fair, heroic and visionary, with the well-supported alternative perspective offered in this book. I also recommend this book for senior

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