

# TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP: NOT FOR THE WARRIOR

by Captain Thomas St. Denis

In the Spring 2004 issue of *Canadian Military Journal*, Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Bradley and Dr. Danielle Charbonneau presented a convincing argument for the adoption and practice of transformational leadership by the Canadian Forces. However, I suggest that such a course faces an insurmountable impediment: this style of leadership is entirely incompatible with the warrior ethic. While transformational leadership may indeed work wonders in the civilian world, it is simply unsuited for an environment shaped and informed by a warrior culture.

A fundamental difference between the two concepts concerns the desirability of change. According to P.G. Northouse, a noted author on leadership, one of the distinguishing features of transformational leadership is that it describes how leaders can “initiate, develop, and carry out significant changes in organizations.”<sup>1</sup> The whole purpose of transformational leadership is to foster change, and “significant” change at that. In contrast, the warrior ethic values the status quo. In fact, according to retired Lieutenant-General Walter F. Ulmer Jr, the characteristics especially prized in military leaders specifically include “respect for the status quo.”<sup>2</sup> He notes that the shared philosophical orientation and endurance of hardship among military personnel serve to form interpersonal bonds rarely seen in the civilian world, and that these bonds are strongly motivational – on the one hand, producing exceptional team efforts toward achieving the mission, and on the other reinforcing a conservative approach to institutional change.<sup>3</sup>

A second major difference concerns the importance of the followers. Transformational leadership sees followers as individuals and is concerned with empowering and developing them, while the warrior ethic ignores them and centres on the personality of the leader. For transformational leadership to be effective, two factors are critical and both depend on the followers, not the leader. The first is that the followers commit fully to the vision proposed by the leader, and the second is that the followers believe they are capable of achieving the vision. The followers’ efforts and their commitment and loyalty to the leader stem from these two factors. The change in the followers’ attitudes and values, therefore, results essentially from the leader’s empowerment of his or her followers.<sup>4</sup>

The warrior ethic gives pride of place to what John Keegan calls the “heroic leader,”<sup>5</sup> the echo of Alexander. Through complete loyalty and subordination,

followers share in the success and glory which the leader and they win. Major John Vermillion, an American army officer and leadership authority, provides a modern context when he writes of the current focus in the US military: “By spotlighting the commander, by exalting his image to the neglect of the follower, the Army ... has engendered the erroneous notion that the wheel of command will turn only on the strength of the commander.”<sup>6</sup> According to the organizational leadership expert Peter Senge, “our traditional view of leaders – as special people who set the direction, make the key decisions, and energize the troops – is deeply rooted in an individualistic and non-systemic world view.” Especially in the West, he writes, “leaders are *heroes* – great men (and occasionally women) who rise to the fore in times of crisis.”<sup>7</sup> He is seconded by leading researcher Gary Yukl, who states that most research and theory “have favoured a definition of leadership that emphasizes the primary importance of unilateral influence by a single ‘heroic’ leader.”<sup>8</sup>

For the military, the direct result of this is the elevation of an extreme (though perhaps not incorrect) interpretation of the warrior leader. This is the individual described by former American general Clay Buckingham as “the man who drives his people hard, ... who goes for the jugular, who works his people fourteen hours a day, and who takes his objectives in spite of heavy and possibly unnecessary casualties. We set these people up and idolize them.”<sup>9</sup> Such a development can exist only in a system that features highly centralized control. Another retired US general, John C. Faith, observed that many American officers are intentionally centralized in their approach to leadership. They believe that their mission, their need for rapid response, plus their own demonstrated experience and competence dictate that they must run the show. He said that these “are often the *macho* types, and unquestionably some of them are impressive leaders.” But their weakness is a failure to develop and use the full potential of their subordinates.<sup>10</sup> His concern is that in this culture there is little or no latitude for the inefficiencies of decentralized team building. “Measurable results are all important. War, after all, is serious business. There is no place for second best...”<sup>11</sup>

A third notable difference between transformational leadership and the warrior ethic is the view each takes of the nature of the follower. Within transformational leadership there is a strong belief in the malleability and perfectibility of followers. The essential feature of transformational leadership, the reason it is so

named, is that the followers are changed substantially – they are transformed. Northouse writes that, “transformational leadership is concerned with the performance of followers and also with developing followers.”<sup>12</sup> For him and for others, transformational leadership is inconceivable without a corresponding belief on the part of the leader that his or her followers are capable of self-betterment.

The warrior ethic perpetuates a different view of humanity. The very *raison d'être* of the military profession implies a belief that human nature is “weak, egoistic, savage ... and prone to conflict.”<sup>13</sup> This Hobbesian perspective is held by many observers to be essential to the military ethic.<sup>14</sup> To quote from his work, *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes believed the “natural condition” of man to be chaotic, selfish, and marked by violence. He said that “during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man.”<sup>15</sup> Of course, the common power that keeps men in awe today is the state, but originally it was the warrior leader. It is still the contention of many observers that only armed might keeps such peace as there is in the world. And it continues to be the view of many military leaders that only authoritarian control, not empowerment of followers, can achieve the necessary ends. Retired US Army colonel and author Lloyd J Matthews has noted that despite all the evidence to show that empowerment makes for better leadership, the US military is still grappling with the question of “which of the two broad control philosophies – authoritarian or empowering – is most likely to serve the cause of military effectiveness.”<sup>16</sup> What is interesting is that even though “enlightened empowerment” is, in fact, the official leadership and managerial philosophy of the US Army, authoritarian control continues to be the dominant leadership style. There remains a persistent gap between the leadership policy officially professed in the doctrine and the one unofficially practised in daily operational activities.<sup>17</sup> Empowerment, it seems, is a fine idea, and may be effective in situations where the stakes are not high. But, as Faith pointed out, there is no second best in war.

As Col. Bradley and Dr. Charbonneau wrote, a pioneer in the field by the name of Bernard M. Bass in 1985 identified behaviours that are illustrative of transformational leaders. Such leaders inspire followers by being charismatic, and motivate their followers with the idea that they are capable of accomplishing great things with extra effort. Transformational leaders are individually considerate – that is, they attend to their followers’ emotional needs. And transformational leaders provide intellectual stimulation – they are willing and able to show their followers new ways of looking at problems.<sup>18</sup>

Bass’s leader behaviours are contained in four transformational factors, the first being **Idealized Influence**, another term for charisma. This describes leaders who act as strong role models. Followers identify with such leaders and want very much to emulate them. In essence, this factor describes leaders as individuals who are special and who make others want to follow the vision they put forward.<sup>19</sup> On the face of it, this is an attractive factor for the military, since the touchstone of Western military leadership, from Alexander to Douglas MacArthur, has been charisma. But while leaders in the warrior culture may seem strong role models, and followers may wish to emulate them, more than a few writers have noticed something wrong with the model. A strong condemnation was voiced by General Buckingham, who said: “We have fostered the image of the successful leader as the one who doesn’t get ulcers, but gives ulcers; as the one who is hard, unfeeling, even vicious.”<sup>20</sup>

In the world of the warrior ethic, there can also exist the belief that commitment on the part of followers is not a requirement. If one takes a strictly transactional view of the leader-follower relationship, it is easy to develop a rather stark image of military leadership. Orders can be seen as justified *because* the military leader gives them (he is authorized by contract to do so), not because they make sense or are appropriate to the task at hand. A legitimate answer to the query “Why?” in this analysis would always be, “Because the general said so.” While such leadership might elicit nothing more than compliance from the followers, compliance by soldiers in combat differs fundamentally from compliance by workers in a factory or an office. Thus a general need not create and present any particular vision, given that the desired outcome, whether success in a single battle or the war in general, is equally the goal of all.

The second transformational factor is **Inspirational Motivation**, which describes leaders who communicate high expectations to their followers, inspiring them through motivation to become committed to and a part of the shared vision in the organization. Team spirit is enhanced by this type of leadership.<sup>21</sup> Again, this is a factor that, at first sight, seems virtually to define military service, since military success can result only from sustained team effort. Success in war depends critically on the subordination of the individual to the group.

But the subordination of the self to the group comes with a price. So central is the notion of conflict to the military world view that in all its beliefs, values and customs the military ethic emphasizes “the instrumentality of force and violence in accomplishing its security mission.”<sup>22</sup> This being so, civilized societies and professional armies have always recognized the

need for limits, and have sought to impose limits on the use of force.<sup>23</sup> Chief among those limits is the necessary restriction of the soldier's freedom to make choices as an individual. Soldiers are required to sublimate in many ways their own individualism for the sake of the group, for without the conservative values of loyalty, obedience, and self-restraint, the military function disintegrates. As more than one commentator has noted, this represents a paradoxical discrepancy between civilian values and military virtues.<sup>24</sup> In a civilian factory or office, a worker can be motivated to be part of the team and still retain a high degree of individualism. Soldiers must face a situation that is completely different. As former US Army Chief of Staff General Edward C. Meyer said: "The obligation of service ... inherent in the military ethic imposes burdens not customary in the larger society ... For the soldier, the obligation is complete: to death if necessary."<sup>25</sup>

The burdens Gen Meyer talks about are, in themselves, sources of motivation – of a kind virtually unknown outside the military. Alien to the civilian world, for example, is what Professor Morris Janowitz called the military's "single overriding directive: the professional soldier always fights." To refuse a combat task, he says, "is to commit the most serious offence against one's military honour and to break faith with one's peers."<sup>26</sup> No refusal of an assignment in the civilian world incurs so high a cost. Not surprisingly, it is in this aspect of the warrior ethic that the subordination of the individual within the group is most emphatically felt. For most of military history, a soldier's motivation had a direct causal relationship with the nature of his work – that is to say, close-quarter fighting. As ethics and leadership specialist Malham Wakin writes:

"When ...the majority of persons wearing uniforms were likely to confront an enemy in direct combat, the primacy of courage was so obvious as not to require commentary. When unit survival in battle depended on each soldier's fulfilling his assigned task, the need of subordination of self to the common good, conceptions of loyalty and obedience were all so clearly seen as fundamental and functionally imperative that example and encouragement were adequate to guarantee their inculcation ..."<sup>27</sup>

In other words, it was then obvious to every individual that his self-interest was best served by being as committed as it was possible to be to the group and its collective efforts. Group cohesion grew out of this realization, and was strengthened by shared experience – rendering superfluous any notion of special motivational efforts by the leader. Only 'heroic' example and direction were required. Modern militaries continue to be influenced by this legacy.

So, in the end, while transformational leadership and the warrior ethic might use the same words – commitment and motivation – the meanings they assign to each are utterly different. No manner of transformational leadership demands commitment "to death if necessary," which the warrior ethic commonly and unconditionally expects. Also, for transformational leadership, motivation is something to be deliberately instilled and nurtured, while for the warrior ethic it is inherent, fully potent, in the very nature of the military function.

The third transformational factor is **Intellectual Stimulation**, which describes leadership that stimulates followers to be creative and innovative, and to challenge their own beliefs and values as well as those of the leader and the organization. This type of leadership encourages followers to think things out on their own, to try new approaches and develop innovative ways of dealing with problems.<sup>28</sup> But military success depends on absolute authority being wielded by the leader,<sup>29</sup> and this same absolute authority works strenuously against the idea of encouraging followers to challenge beliefs and values, and to work things out on their own. It also works against the notion of empowering individuals to seek innovative solutions.

Absolute authority is exercised, and expressed, through highly centralized control. As Faith noted earlier, many US officers are intentionally centralized in their approach, and there are long-established and deep-rooted reasons for this. To locate some of the reasons, Ulmer suggests looking at how military leadership functions. He distinguishes between two arenas in which military leaders operate. The one is the familiar realm of combat-oriented training and operations, "where immediate action and centralized control are the guiding parameters." This is the world of standard operating procedures and crew drills, with inherent "expectations for prompt, discernable, measurable results." The linkage between cause and effect is clear. "Hard data are usually available for decision-making. Reflection or contemplation is out of place." The typical general officer personality, says Ulmer, fits well into this situation. Any tendency of personality toward immediate action is strongly reinforced in the junior leadership years when prompt, aggressive control of the tactical situation represents laudatory behaviour.<sup>30</sup> The arena which gives military officers more trouble is the one which requires "contemplation before action, patience with ambiguity, and an appreciation for broad participation in the decision-making process." In this arena, which is conducive to such intellectually stimulating behaviour as coaching and mentoring, "the links between cause and effect are tenuous, and results – even when discernable – are difficult to quantify."<sup>31</sup>

Finally, one of the most subtle and yet strongest elements of the warrior ethic also argues against the empowerment of individual followers, and this is the loyalty that is owed to the commander. For Western militaries, the origins of contemporary attitudes toward military honour and propriety lie in the aristocratic traditions of the early European armies. The codes of conduct practised by the Canadian and American armies specifically were, as Janowitz has written, “inherited from the British, and contained, among other tenets, the notion that personal loyalty is owed to the commander.”<sup>32</sup> That this is still a very potent force is suggested by Ulmer’s observation: “An idea long enunciated by many respected senior Army leaders – disagreement is not disloyalty – has not permeated the fabric of the institution.”<sup>33</sup>

The final factor is the one most closely identified with transformational leadership, and this is **Individualized Consideration**. This describes leaders who create a supportive climate in which they listen carefully to the individual needs of followers. Such leaders act as coaches and advisors to assist individuals in becoming fully actualized.<sup>34</sup> Once again, the focus is the individual follower. The purpose here is to encourage his or her development as a human being. And, just as with Intellectual Stimulation, the warrior ethic’s emphasis on subordination to the leader works against Individualized Consideration. As previously noted, because success in war depends so critically on the subordination of the individual, the warrior ethic cannot be anything other than fundamentally anti-individualistic.<sup>35</sup> The value of the individual lies not in his individuality but in the depth of his conformity with the group. The focus of the warrior ethic is on group development, not individual betterment.

It would seem, then, that the two concepts – transformational leadership and the warrior ethic – cannot be compatible. The differences that separate them are irreconcilable. Transformational leadership is predicated on change, is centred on the follower, and is successful when followers use their full potential as individuals to reach for higher goals. The warrior ethic resists change, exalts the leader over the followers, and enforces a strict and limiting hierarchy through authoritarian control. Transformational leaders and warrior leaders use different behaviours to

achieve their ends. The transformational leader works to develop a desirable vision and then motivates followers to commit to its attainment. At the same time, the leader is also stimulating followers to exercise independent thought, and is supporting them in their efforts at self-actualization. In contrast, the warrior ethic does not develop visions – this being unnecessary when total victory is the only outcome conceivable. Similarly the warrior ethic makes no concessions for motivating followers to commit to the organization’s goals – warriors are self-selected and soldiers who do not become warriors do not last. Finally, since the warrior ethic does not seek to develop followers as individuals, there is no attempt to stimulate independent thought or to support followers in personal growth. In fact, the warrior ethic actively discourages both inclinations.

The problem that the student of leadership faces is one of perception. In all the historical narratives, the warrior ethic in action *appears* unmistakably like transformational leadership being intuitively applied to achieve remarkable results. Closer inspection, however, reveals the warrior ethic to be nothing of the kind. The impulses that animate the warrior ethic are emphatically not the ones that make transformational leadership possible.

The inescapable conclusion is that transformational leadership cannot be implemented in a culture dominated by the warrior ethic. Whatever its achievements in the field of civilian leadership, and whatever its successes in the military’s non-combat environments, transformational leadership will not be used by warrior leaders in command of other warriors. Any attempt to graft transformational leadership onto the warrior culture will have one of two results. Either transformational leadership will be modified, in which case it may no longer be transformational leadership, or the warrior ethic will be modified, in which case it may no longer be the warrior ethic. But unless one or both are modified, they cannot be joined.

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### NOTES

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20. Buckingham, p. 139.
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22. Lieutenant Colonel Karol W.J. Wenek, "Behavioural and Psychological Dimensions of Recent Peacekeeping Missions", unpublished paper, p. 15.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Wakin, p. 549.
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26. *Ibid.*, p. 542.
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28. Northouse, p. 136.
29. Ulmer, p. 20.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
32. Wakin, p. 541.
33. Ulmer, p. 20.
34. Northouse, p. 137.
35. Wakin, p. 541.



Stellar leadership abounded in the Canadian Corps during the latter months of the Great War. This well-known war painting by Alfred Bastien depicts the 22nd Battalion's assault on the Drocourt-Quéant Line in August 1918.