

# Transformational Leadership: The Key to Employee Engagement and Commitment

By Joanne L. Smikle



Employee engagement— commitment, they are two sides of the same coin. Building and sustaining the level of commitment required to have a cadre of employees who are fully engaged and excited about the mission and the work of the enterprise requires thoughtful work on the part of human resource professionals. This article identifies practical strategies for using the principles of transformational leadership to create commitment and, ultimately high levels of engagement.

## Defining the Terms

Before moving to application, let's define the basic terms. The Corporate Leadership Council provides a sound, acceptable definition of employee engagement. In their 2004 paper on the topic, they define it as "the extent to which employees commit to something or someone in their organization, how hard they work and how long they stay as a result of that commitment."

This naturally moves us to a definition of organizational

commitment. There are many operational definitions of this term. For the purposes of this article we will blend elements of the two most widely accepted. In the 1970's Porter et al. explained organizational commitment in the context of how individuals identify with and involve themselves in an organization. That definition is still accepted and used. Meyer & Allen define commitment as a mindset, a psychological state reflecting separate components: desire, need and obligation. They further break organizational commitment into three components: affective, continuance and normative commitment. Of the three, affective commitment is the most desirable. It refers to an emotional attachment, identification and involvement with an organization. Employees who hold a strong affective commitment stay because they actually want to be a part of that organization.

Transformational leadership is an especially interesting concept that has not received enough attention from practitioners. It has been studied by academics, but has yet to be fully embraced by those of us in the trenches. Bernard

Bass is the foremost theorist on this approach to leadership. He states that it happens when leaders both broaden and raise the interests of employees, build awareness and acceptance of the purpose and mission of the group, and move employees from self-interest group interest. Transformational leadership has four key elements: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

### **The Four I's**

The four elements of transformational leadership, when consistently utilized, have the potential to build engagement and commitment. Before exploring the application of each element, it is important to define them. Confidence-building is the ultimate goal of idealized influence. The leader uses this skill to build confidence in themselves and the organization. This extends to building confidence in the organization's mission and vision. It encompasses a leader's capacity to act based on their values, beliefs, and ideals. Further, idealized influence addresses whether the leader is viewed as both confident and committed to noble ideals.

Inspirational motivation prompts followers to behave in a manner deemed acceptable and appropriate. Leaders must constantly stimulate action so that others follow their ideas and ideals. This element seeks to build enthusiasm by creating meaningful challenges, promoting workforce cohesion and continuing to inspire confidence. Inspirational motivation involves identifying successes, promoting collaboration, demonstrating optimism, enthusiasm and energy.

Innovation, creativity, and a new way of considering problems emerge from intellectual stimulation. This element encourages curiosity, questioning and the emergence of new ideas. The goals include creativity and inventiveness.

Individualized consideration involves being attuned to the needs of followers. Transformational leaders use this element to include followers in change processes. These leaders pay attention to follower's skills, abilities, values and interests.

### **Why the Four I's Matter & How They Work**

As we consider each of the four elements it is fairly obvious why they are of vital importance to HR professionals who not only want to add value, but also become stronger strategic partners in the upper echelons of the enterprise. It stands to reason that a leader who can employ these tools will be a role model for others. Case in point, Ed, the HR manager of a professional association, seems almost like a zealot for the organization, its mission and members. He genuinely believes that their mission to enrich, inform and elevate their members is second to none. He gets excited about opportunities to support staff in their work to meet member needs. While Ed definitely takes some teasing from his peers, he embodies idealized influence. People see the mission of the association through him. They see a leader who has committed to

something larger than himself and have greater confidence in their employer because of his behavior. While he is not the most senior person on the HR team, he reports to a director, some would argue that he is the most influential.

Motivation can be the toughest job for any leader in any organization. It is especially difficult for HR people who often have to deliver bad news. Yet, motivation is essential. It is not simply wearing t-shirts with catchy company slogans or having a plastered on smile at company events. Kevin, a training manager for a community credit union, has mastered inspirational motivation. He is fond of saying that he and his team are not just there to deliver learning, they are there to inspire exploration. As a result, he insists that training be challenging, fun and very interactive. He believes didactic learning is the kiss of death for adults and sufficiently engages employees in their learning. Kevin also uses many different learning modalities to prevent boredom and stagnation. His own behavior is such that it is obvious how much he cares about the credit union, its employees and members.

Blaine manages the organizational learning and organizational development function for a financial services firm. She readily admits that her own ceaseless intellectual curiosity led her to get two master's degrees and then a doctorate. She has always recognized how important it is to make the desire to learn contagious. As a result, she has

**Ready to make the step?**

**Graduate programs  
for tomorrow's workplace**

**Nights - weekend - online**

**Regionally accredited nonprofit**

**Serving Kentucky from Louisville,  
Radcliff, and online**

**Webster  
UNIVERSITY**

[www.webster.edu/louisville](http://www.webster.edu/louisville)

naturally mastered intellectual stimulation. When her team is asked to support a business unit in addressing a particular issue they begin their process by sitting with the client and asking a series of out-of-the-box “what if” questions. This positions them as people who are interested in exploring a wider range of options for solutions than typically imagined in a stodgy financial services firm. Blaine also sends her team out for learning from vastly different disciplines. She encourages them to find seminars, conferences and other learning opportunities in the arts, sciences and social sciences. She contends that this makes them more well-rounded and better able to propose innovative solutions.

Deborah is the HR Vice President of a consulting firm specializing in federal contracting. She does a superb job modeling individualized consideration. She devotes more of her monthly staff meetings to listening than to talking. She has implemented Individual Development Plans for everyone on her team. Rather than just letting the plans get dusty on a shelf, she meets with her direct reports quarterly to discuss their progress on their plans. She requires them to do the same for their team members. This has served to create a culture where the focus is on individual growth in a very structured, thoughtful manner.

Each of these leaders displays a different element of transformational leadership yet the outcomes are similar. They all use themselves to engage others and build deeper commitments to their organizations. They also use themselves as examples of the values desired in their organizations. Skillful self-management, one of the key elements of emotional intelligence, is something leaders must be conscious of in order to maximize their efforts.

## Summary

Building engagement and commitment can be done with concentrated focus on using the principles of transformational leadership. This approach provides a framework for engaging hearts and minds. It provides a way to build and leverage commitment to the organization and its aims. The Four I’s can be used by any HR leader, in any role, in any industry. The challenge is deciding where to begin and then making the conscious effort to employ the principles consistently.

## References

- Bass, B.M. (1990). From transactional to transformational leadership: Learning to share the vision. *Organizational Dynamics*, 18(3), 19-31.
- Corporate Leadership Council. (2004). *Driving performance and retention through employee engagement*. Washington, DC: Corporate Executive Board.
- Meyer, J.P. & Allen, N.J. (1991). A three-component conceptualization of organizational commitment. *Human Resource Management Review*, 1(1), 61-89.
- Meyer, J.P., Allen, N.J. & Smith, C.A. (1993). Commitment to organizations and occupations: Extension and test of a three-component conceptualization. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 78(4), 538-551.
- Joanne L. Smikle provides insightful consulting and leadership education to corporations, associations and government agencies. She specializes in leadership development. Visit [www.smiklespeaks.com](http://www.smiklespeaks.com) for articles and resources. She can be reached at [joanne@smiklespeaks.com](mailto:joanne@smiklespeaks.com) or 301.596.3140.

## your one and only

As the most trusted and respected name in workforce solutions, Kelly Services® is the only business partner you need to meet your workforce needs.

[kellyservices.com](http://kellyservices.com)

<p>Contract / Contract to Hire / Direct Hire / On-site Management / Payroll Services</p> <p><b>Areas of Expertise</b> Automotive / Contact Center / Creative Services / Education / Electronic Assembly / Engineering / Finance and Accounting / Government / Healthcare / Industrial / Information Technology / Law / Marketing / Office / Science</p> <p><b>Project Services</b> Project Teams / Project Management / PMO Integration / SOW-based Services</p> <p><b>Outsourcing &amp; Consulting Solutions</b></p>	<p><b>Contact us today!</b></p> <p><b>Bowling Green</b> Phone: 270.842.2906 E-mail: 2855@kellyservices.com</p> <p><b>Cincinnati</b> Phone: 513.533.0388 E-mail: 4720@kellyservices.com</p> <p><b>Lexington</b> Phone: 859.373.0422 E-mail: 2821@kellyservices.com</p> <p><b>Louisville</b> Phone: 502.425.7131 E-mail: 2811@kellyservices.com</p>
---	---

An Equal Opportunity Employer © 2010 Kelly Services, Inc. V1391