

**Title:**

Transformational leadership, corporate cultism and the spirituality paradigm:

An unholy trinity in the workplace?

**Abstract**

Leadership is a perennially popular topic in the academic and practitioner literature on management. In particular, the past twenty years have witnessed an explosive growth of interest in what has been termed ‘transformational leadership’ (henceforth, TL). The theory is closely linked to the growth in what has been defined as corporate culturism – an emphasis on the importance of coherent cultures, as a means of securing competitive advantage. This paper outlines the central components of TL theory, and subjects the concept to a critical analysis. In particular, similarities are identified between the components concerned and the characteristics of leadership practice in organizations generally defined as cults. This connection has been previously unremarked in the literature. These similarities are comprehensively reviewed. Trends towards what can be defined as corporate cultism in modern management practice are also discussed. We conclude that TL models are overly concerned with the achievement of corporate cohesion to the detriment of internal dissent. Such dissent is a vital ingredient of effective decision-making. It is suggested that more inclusive and participatory models of the leadership process are required.

## **Introduction**

Leadership can be defined as ‘...the reciprocal process of mobilizing, by persons with certain motives and values, various economic, political and other resources, in a context of competition and conflict, in order to realize goals independently or mutually held by both leaders and followers’ (Burns, 1978, p.425). The topic has never been more popular, particularly as applied to management, among both practitioners and academics. In one survey, 250 British chief executives were asked to identify the most important management skills for ensuring business success. Leadership emerged as the top ranked item (Smith, 1997).

This paper does not seek to systematically review the vast amount of material now published on this subject. Instead we focus on one aspect of the leadership phenomenon – TL, and its relationship to the dynamics of cultic forms of organization, especially as they might apply in the business world. The suggestion is that the downside of TL models has been insufficiently examined, and may have the potential to move organizations in destructive directions, thereby undermining their competitive capacity. We begin by outlining the nature of TL, and then explore the links between its key characteristics and what is known of cultic forms of organization and leadership. There have been many more or less uncritical discussions of TL in the literature: here, we devote most of our analysis to a critique of its effects.

## **The paradoxes of transformational leadership**

Theories of TL draw sustenance from arguments stressing the central importance of culture to organizational success. Organizational cultures consist of cognitive systems explaining how people think, reason and make decisions (Pettigrew, 1979). At the deepest level culture consists of a complex set of values, assumptions and beliefs that define the ways in which a firm conducts its business (Pettigrew, 1990). In some accounts, cultures are conceptualized in classical Durkheimian functionalist terms, as expressing what 'has worked well enough to be considered valid'(Schein, 1992, p.12), and accordingly passed on to new organizational members. The defect, in such discussions, is the absence of adequate explanations for the rise of dysfunctional cultures. One review of research in transformational and charismatic leadership has therefore noted that the literature has had very little to say about cross-cultural issues in general (Hunt and Conger, 1999).

Furthermore, the notion of universally held values suggests minimal to non-existent dissent, or dissent which is confined to the periphery of a firm's operations. A number of texts, in some instances inspired by the success of Japanese companies in the 1970s, attempted to document the competitive advantages that they maintained flowed from organizations built around embedded shared values (Pascale and Athos, 1981; Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Peters and Waterman, 1982). The trend was to move away from seeing organizations as machines, and instead take more account of beliefs, behavior, knowledge, sanctions, values and goals (Hawkins, 1997). Clearly, theoretical models of a leadership process capable of delivering the superior outcomes envisaged would have enormous advantages in the competitive marketplace of ideas.

It is therefore scarcely a coincidence that most interest in TL can also be dated from the late 1970s. At this point, Burns (1978) proposed that leadership could be conceptualized in two factor terms, as being either transactional or transformational. His work is considered seminal in the field.

With transactional leadership, the independence of both leaders' and followers' goals is a given (Flauto, 1999). Goods, services and other rewards are exchanged so that the various parties achieve their independent goals. The object of this transactional approach 'is not a joint effort for persons with common aims acting for the collective interests of followers but a bargain to aid the individual interests of persons or groups going their separate ways' (Burns, 1978, p.425). The emphasis is on exchange relationships between followers and leaders, in line with the traditional nostrums of social exchange theory (e.g. Homans, 1961). The resultant culture is likely to be one characterized by dissent, which may be more or less tolerated, and reduced cohesion.

Transformational leadership is different. Here, the leader changes the goals of followers, subordinates or (in the case of cults) devoted members. Put in its most positive form, the new goals are assumed to be of a higher level in that, once transformed, they represent the 'collective good or pooled interests of leaders and followers' (Burns, 1978, p.426). Clearly, such a positive assumption requires a large leap of faith. There is no a priori reason to presume that the goals proposed by a transformational leader need to represent a deeper mutual interest among organizational partners, and hence express the best interests of all concerned. If a leader secures sufficient power to adjust the psyche of his or her followers (in the form of transforming their independently determined goals in a communal direction) such

power could just as likely be used for the sectional good of the designated leader. This dilemma has been dubbed 'the Hitler problem' (Ciulla, 1995): in essence, can Hitler be viewed as a transformational leader? Is he in the same category as Gandhi, or other more moral leaders? If so, who sets the standards for what constitutes morality, using what criteria, and validated by whom?

Thus, the model proposed by Burns (1978) is in essence a highly idealized version of an inherently problematic process. This is evident in the following depiction of the process: 'In contrast to the transactional leader who practices contingent reinforcement of followers, the transformational leader inspires, intellectually stimulates, and is individually considerate of them... The transformational leader emphasizes what you can do for your country; the transactional leader, on what your country can do for you' (Bass, 1999, p.9). Despite the invocation of Kennedy, this description could also characterize the regimes of Hitler, Lenin and other totalitarian leaders.

By definition, transformational leaders need more power rather than constraints (or 'regulation'), presumably in order to restrain the power of their potential dissidents. Their eccentricities must be tolerated. Bass (1990, p.26) argues: 'Organizational policy needs to support an understanding and appreciation of the maverick who is willing to take unpopular decisions, who knows when to reject the conventional wisdom, and who takes reasonable risks.' The conception, however, is clearly one in which the leader is liberated to act as a maverick, while limiting the ability of followers to behave in an equally outrageous fashion.

The dangers are considerable. Research has long shown that new group members, or those with low status, only acquire influence within a group by over-conforming to its emergent norms (Brown, 2000). Otherwise, they are penalized, usually through the withdrawal of valued social rewards. Leaders, on the other hand, have greater status, authority and power. They therefore have more freedom than followers to violate long established norms. The risk for non-leaders is of followers premature complying with destructive forms of action, thereby ingratiating themselves with leaders (Jones, 1964). The leader, meanwhile, takes the absence of overt dissent as assent, and moreover views it as supplementary evidence that the given course of action is correct – what has been termed consensual validation (Zebrowitz, 1990). TL is liable to exacerbate these problematic processes yet further, with negative consequences for decision making.

#### *Charisma, vision and individual consideration*

Bass (1990) extended Burns's ideas from the political sphere and into small group and organizational settings. This trend has been maintained in the research of others, including Tichy and Ulrich (1984), Bennis and Nanus (1985) and Tichy and Devanna (1990). Three transformational attributes have been consistently identified in this literature: charismatic leadership, individual consideration and intellectual stimulation. The transformational leader is assumed to possess and energetically communicate 'a vision' for the organization. A vision has been defined as a mental image that a leader evokes to portray an idealized future (Conger, 1989). As Awamleh and Gardner (1999, p.346) point out, 'an idealized vision is generally considered to be a prerequisite for a leader to become transformational or charismatic.' Charismatic leaders have been

defined as people who ‘by the force of their personal abilities are capable of having profound and extraordinary effects on followers’ (House and Baetz, 1979, p.339). Thus, charisma is something that has variously been described as residing in the person (House and Howell, 1992), a behavioral phenomenon (Conger and Kanungo, 1994), concerned with some aspects of social exchange (Bryman, 1992) or ultimately an attributional phenomenon (Lord and Maher, 1993).

The vision (again, in the most optimistic rendition of the process) performs an integrative role, combining the members into a collective whole with a shared set of aspirations capable of guiding (or molding) their everyday behavior. The act of communicating such a vision is highly dynamic, requires intense charisma, and transforms relational dynamics throughout the workplace. In particular, Shamir et al. (1993, p.577) summarize the literature on this by saying that transformational leaders ‘cause followers to become highly committed to the leader’s mission, to make significant personal sacrifices in the interests of the mission, and to perform above and beyond the call of duty... Theories of charismatic leadership highlight such effects as emotional attachment to the leader on the part of the followers; emotional and motivational arousal of the followers; enhancement of follower valences with respect to the mission articulated by the leader; follower self-esteem, trust, and confidence in the leader; follower values; and follower intrinsic motivation.’ This is clearly a radical agenda, proposing a collective rebirth into new organizational configurations, self-perceptions, and transformed relationships whereby one dominant culture is likely to emerge.

What of the people required to be transformational leaders, and hence spearheads of this new revolution? Most managers do not exude charisma in the manner assumed to be necessary. Indeed, quite a few have a well-deserved reputation for being boring. It is possible that a significant number of those exceptionally endowed with charisma possess uncommon personality traits, good and bad. In particular, Maccoby (2000) suggests that many charismatic leaders are likely to be narcissists – that is, people with an inordinately well-developed self-image, in which they take great pride and on which they reflect frequently. They are also likely to have a strong need for power, high self-confidence and strong convictions (De Vries et al., 1999). Their own feedback is the most important thing to them, rather than, for example, critical feedback from subordinates or the marketplace. Such commentary is likely to be disparaged, as ill befitting the ideal and idealized self-image. Rather than flexibly responding to feedback, the narcissistic but charismatic visionary leader is inclined to perceive reality through the distorting prism of his or her vision.

In this scenario, the leader may be able and willing to impose his or her vision on recalcitrant followers, however erroneous it is. The edge of a cliff might seem the starting point of an adventurous new journey. Thus, skeptics are pushed and pulled to the precipice. They may be unable to resist the argument that an overwhelming external threat leaves no room for doubt and dissent – they leap, to death or glory. However, whatever their virtues, narcissists tend to be overly sensitive to criticism, can be poor listeners, lack empathy, have a distaste for mentoring and have an intense desire to compete (Maccoby, 2000). Precisely such behaviors and traits have been found to be characteristic of cult leaders, in all manner of cultic organizations (Tourish and Wohlforth, 2000).



The handling of dissent is one of the most problematic aspects of TL theory, and one where comparisons with cultic organizations are most pertinent. Even managers introducing change who are not explicitly guided by the precepts of TL theory frequently view resistance as something to be overcome, rather than useful feedback (Lewis, 1992). Researchers into TL are especially prone to this conceptualization (Yukl, 1999a). An alternative perspective, based on the institutionalization of feedback into organizational decision-making, is rarely considered (Tourish and Hargie, 2000). The problem is inherent to myths of heroic leadership, and the behaviors that are associated with it. As Yukl (1990a, p.40) has argued: ‘... expressing strong convictions, acting confident, and taking decisive action can create an impression of exceptional expertise, but it can also discourage relevant feedback from followers.’

### **Illusions in leadership**

A number of psychological processes facilitate undue faith in transformational models of leadership, despite their weaknesses. Firstly, an abundance of research evidence suggests that people have a tendency to exaggerate the contribution that designated leaders make to organizational success (Pfeffer, 1977; Meindl, 1995; Pfeffer and Cialdini, 1998). This may be particularly so in extreme situations, irrespective of the validity of the notion itself (Meindl et al., 1985). Under pressure, our need for causal explanations (with both an explanatory and predictive power) increases, enabling us to reduce uncertainty. As Gemmill and Oakley (1992, p.115) have pointed out, ‘As social despair and helplessness deepen, the search and wish for a Messiah (leader) or magical rescue (leadership) also begin to accelerate’ (p.115). It is evident that the explanations

generated by this endeavour need not be accurate in order to feel compelling. Sense making in organizations is often driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995). In particular, experimental evidence suggests that positive leadership attributions are increased when the saliency of leadership behaviours is exaggerated (Pfeffer and Cialdini, 1998). The transformational model lends itself to such processes, stressing as it does the central contribution that TL is assumed to make to business success.

Within cults, the saliency of leadership behaviours is also routinely exaggerated. For example, most of a cult's key documents (usually billed as articulating seminal developments in the ideology of the group) are written by the leader, who also makes the key note speeches at cult gatherings and is in every way deferred to by a largely passive and uncritical followership (Tourish and Wohlforth, 2000). Such followers are heavily penalized if they dissent. The absence of overt dissent encourages the wide adoption of the fallacious view that everyone agrees with the general line, and imbues it with a spurious legitimacy it lacks in reality. Typically, CEOs come under pressure to replicate these dynamics, and can derive theoretical sustenance for this effort from the writings of TL theorists.

We noted, earlier, the tendency of subordinates to ingratiate themselves with people of higher status by exaggerating the extent to which they agree with the person's position. Research also suggests that those at the receiving end of such defective feedback wrongly imagine that it is sincere, accurate and well meant. This has been termed 'the boss's illusion' (Odom, 1993). The effect is to further heighten a

manager's belief in the efficacy of his or her own leadership, and in the value of the general concept.

Once committed, self-enhancement biases make it hard to detour from the road already well traveled. An extensive literature shows that people tend to regard themselves as more intelligent, skilled, ethical, honest, persistent, original, friendly, reliable, and even more attractive than others (Myers, 1996). One survey found that 95% of British drivers rated themselves as better than the average driver (Hargie et al, 1999). (Mishaps are always the fault of some other S.O.B.). This can be defined as a self-efficacy bias (Gist, 1987). Thus, once we have embarked on a course of action our assumptions about our own abilities cause us to exaggerate its virtues, minimize its problems and exaggerate its gains. This research also suggests that leaders are liable to rate their own leadership behaviors as more effective than those of other people – perhaps more so, if they have explicitly developed a self-image consisting of charismatic attributes. From this, it is a small step to assuming that an organization's successes are the result of the leader's efforts, while its problems derive from uncontrollable external factors. It follows that more rather than less charismatic leadership is required. For example, investigations of annual reports show that bad performance is attributed to general economic or industry conditions. Good performance, on the other hand, is attributed to management and internal organizational factors (Salancik and Meindl, 1984).

Such a flawed conception is not limited to leaders. De Vries et al (1999) surveyed 958 people and found that subordinates with charismatic leaders had a higher need for leadership than those with noncharismatic leaders. The evident encouragement of such

dependency attitudes is scarcely consistent with the empowerment imperative. However, it is wholly consistent with the flawed group dynamics of cults.

It will be apparent that, given such dynamics, TL theories may well become unfalsifiable – i.e. whatever happens, whatever could possibly happen, is evidence of the theory's correctness, and leads to its wider implementation. Success is due to the correct application of the TL model. Failures are due to external factors beyond its control. In either case, the solution is more TL. Thus, the theory of TL becomes impervious to refutation. Again, this flawed dynamic underlies many cultic belief systems in all spheres of human activity, including the business world.

Conger (1990, p.44), in the main an enthusiast for TL, acknowledges that '... though we tend to think of the positive outcomes associated with leaders, certain risks or liabilities are also entailed. The very behaviours that distinguish leaders from managers also have the potential to produce problematic or even disastrous outcomes for their organizations. For example, when a leader's behaviors become exaggerated, lose touch with reality, or become vehicles for purely personal gain, they may harm the leader and the organization.' The problem is that the model tends to preclude the possibility of corrective feedback. Influence is conceived of in unidirectional terms – it flows from leaders to subordinates, rather than vice-versa (Yukl, 1999b). In some cases, this might have little adverse impact – some organizations are led by inspiring people, capable of fashioning competitive strategies that help their organizations to survive. However, the ubiquity of TL ideas can persuade even the most uncharismatic that they too must develop, articulate and inculcate a compelling vision. In many cases, it is as though the tone deaf have become convinced that they are the bearers of

songs which must be sung. Thus, organizations are sometimes led by CEOs who are esteemed by the stock market, but who turn out to be wrong, mad, bad or daft (Tourish, 1998).

In such circumstances, corporate paranoia, frenetic activity and cultic norms that penalize open discussion may rapidly take root. Organizational problems are inevitable when leaders develop a monomaniacal conviction that there is the one right way of doing things, and believe that they possess an almost divine insight into reality. The potential for this development is inherent to TL theories of leadership. Thus, Conger (1990, p.50) acknowledges the following possible liabilities in the leader's communication and impression management skills, of particular importance in this case:

- ‘Exaggerated self-descriptions.
- Exaggerated claims for the vision.
- A technique of fulfilling stereotypes and images of uniqueness to manipulate audiences.
- A habit of gaining commitment by restricting negative information and maximizing positive information.
- Use of anecdotes to distract attention away from negative statistical information.
- Creation of an illusion of control through affirming information and attributing negative outcomes to external causes.’

The consequences of such defects are clear. They include the elimination of dissent; the accumulation of power at the center; a failure to sufficiently consider alternative courses of action, when they appear to conflict with a centrally ordained and divinely inspired vision; and a growing belief on the part of the leader that, other evidence notwithstanding, he or she is ever more essential to the organization's success. As Pfeffer and Cialdini (1998) point out the general environment seems designed to reinforce such illusions. Business students are routinely treated to presentations from

senior executives, billed as ‘the view from the top.’ Rarely do they hear presentations from entry-level employees, offering their perspectives on organizational life. The *Harvard Business Review* regularly publishes interviews with top CEOs, endorsing the view that they have an uncommon wisdom from which the rest of us can only learn. One result is a growing conviction among leaders that they have a duty to fashion a vision and – come what may – push it down the ranks of their organizations.

The popularity of transformational leadership, despite its weaknesses, can be viewed as a form of nympholepsy (i.e. a state of ecstasy or frenzy caused by a desire for the unattainable). On the one hand, it aspires to produce a turned on, highly motivated and even largely self-governed workforce. On the other hand, it seeks to position CEOs as the font of all wisdom, and certainly as the final arbiter of anything resembling an important decision. This ‘vision’ has a ready appeal for CEOs, frequently motivated by a noble desire to produce results for shareholders, but also convinced by the literature that they are charismatic visionaries rather than people in suits. The contradictions to which these mutually antagonistic conceptions gives rise inspires ever more frenzied activity, rather than a re-evaluation of the original concept. As often seems to be the case, the more elusive the goal, the more intense the effort devoted to its attainment.

### **The nature of cults**

The above discussion suggests that the key elements of TL can be distilled into the following core points:

- *Charismatic leadership* (which may be a socially engineered construct in the minds of the followers, rather than representing innate qualities on the part of the leader);
- *A compelling vision* (one of a transcendent character, which imbues the individual's relationship to the organization with a new and higher purpose, beyond that of self interest);
- *Intellectual stimulation* (generally, in the direction of transforming the follower's goals, so that they are subsumed into a new, collectivist objective on the part of the whole organization);
- *Individual consideration* (or a feeling that the followers' interests are being attended to, and perhaps that they are in some way important to the charismatic leader);
- *Promotion of a common culture* (a given way of thinking, doing and behaving, which is likely to minimize the overt expression of dissent, other than within carefully patrolled boundaries).

Our purpose, here, is to suggest that these components are remarkably similar to the defining traits of cults, as identified in the research literature on the topic. The field of cultic studies is beset with controversies between secular critics of the phenomenon and some sociologists of religion, who reject the term 'cult' in favour of what they term new religious movements (see Langone, 1995). We have no wish to rehearse this debate at length. However, it is worth noting that most researchers who employ the word cult concentrate the brunt of their critique on what the movements concerned *do* rather than what they *believe*. Thus, cults have been defined as organizations which remold individuality to conform to the codes and needs of the cult, institute taboos

which preclude doubt and criticism, and generate an elitist mentality whereby members see themselves as lone evangelists struggling to bring enlightenment to the hostile forces surrounding them (Hochman, 1984). A standard definition proposed by the premier research and educational organization on this issue defines cults as 'A group or movement exhibiting great or excessive devotion to some person, idea or thing, and employing unethical manipulative or coercive techniques of persuasion and control... designed to advance the goals of the group's leaders, to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families or the community' (AFF, 1986, p.119-120). Members typically display high commitment, replace their pre-existing beliefs and values with those of the group, work extremely hard, relinquish control over their time, lose confidence in their own perceptions in favour of those of the group (especially of its leaders), and experience social punishments such as shunning by other group members if they deviate from carefully prescribed norms (Langone, 1988; Singer, 1987).

The extent to which these practices obtain varies widely from group to group. Accordingly, it has been suggested that the typology of cult behavior represents a continuum, along which individuals, groups and whole communities can move from time to time (Tourish and Irving, 1995). It can thus be argued that cults are socially harmful. Such harm will be all the greater depending on the degree of control exercised by a cult's central leadership, the more power its leaders have to fashion the belief systems of their followers, the more followers become uncritical acolytes for the ideas of others, the heavier the workload demanded of enthusiastic converts, and the more unethical the persuasive processes (e.g. the withholding of crucial information) that are employed to maintain feverish support for the group's ideology. We do not



suggest that the practice of TL will automatically transform host organizations into cults, on a par with the Moonies, Scientology or such organizations as the suicidal Heavens Gate cult, no more than we would claim that one episode of drunkenness turns someone into an alcoholic. However, we do argue that the core defining traits of TL have the potential to move organizations further along the cult continuum than is desirable, and that this tendency becomes particularly marked when TL ideas are fused with the drive towards promoting spirituality in the workplace.

This approach creates a pressing need for converts, drawn from among the unredeemed masses within the corporate environment. Moreover, if the leader succeeds in altering the psyches of the organization's members, one person's vision (or delusion) becomes that of many. A mass conversion will have occurred on the road to Damascus. However, depending on the nature of the vision, this could just as well become a detour on the road to Hell. Such a possibility can be clarified if we consider how the dominant traits of TL theory (as summarized above) overlap with the dysfunctional world of cultism.

### *Charismatic leadership*

Charismatic leadership is an indispensable ingredient of cultic organization (Hassan, 1988; Langone, 1993; Tobias and Lalich, 1994; Singer and Lalich, 1995; Oakes, 1997; Galanter, 1999). It has been observed in doomsday cults in the 1950s (Festinger, 1957), the Jonestown cult of the 1970s (Layton, 1999), the suicidal Heavens Gate cult in California (Booth and Claiborne, 1997), and more recently in the homicidal Aum cult in Japan (Lifton, 1999).

Frequently, the leader's charisma turns out to be no more substantial than the magical powers possessed by the Wizard of Oz. Cult leaders have been variously exposed as alcoholics, drug addicts or semi-literates, whose major pronouncements are often written for them by others (Langone, 1993) – the equivalent, in a sense, of over-reliance on a corporate PR department. However, such is their position of prominence and the desperate need of their followers to believe, that manifold glowing qualities are attributed to them. In turn, such attributions activate powerful expectancy effects (Blanck, 1993). Followers often believe that their leaders are people of genius, insight, outstanding organizational ability and uncommon compassion. They then perceive only munificent qualities in the leader's behavior, irrespective of what they actually do: expectations have become self-fulfilling prophecies. Likewise, we suspect that the charismatic reputation of many corporate gurus, dutifully chronicled in the literature, is much exaggerated by the social attributional processes sketched here.

*A compelling vision/ intellectual stimulation*

Typically, cults are organized around what has been defined as a 'totalistic' vision of a new world order. The group's leaders suggest that their vision is capable of fundamentally transforming an impure reality. The resulting mood of absolute conviction has been defined as 'ideological totalism' (Lifton, 1961). Ideas are embedded so deeply in people's heads that they grow inoculated against doubt. Provisional theories about the world become sacred convictions, dependent on the word of hallowed authorities for their validation rather than evidence. In religious cults, the worship of God is transformed into the worship of his messenger on earth -

the leader of the group (Tourish and Wohlforth, 2000). In the corporate world, a similar tendency can be observed, in which the messianic leader of the organization seeks ever more enthusiastic expressions of agreement from the organization's employees. Dissent is resistance, to be overcome. Plausibility is often simply a question of uncontested belief. Hence, the absence of feedback loops reinforces blind belief in the sacred vision of the leader.

In its sharpest form, Lifton (1961, p.427-428) defines ideological totalism as follows:

‘The totalistic milieu maintains an aura of sacredness around its basic dogma, holding it out as an ultimate moral vision for the ordering of human existence. This sacredness is evident in the prohibition (whether or not explicit) against the questioning of basic assumptions, and in the reverence which is demanded for the originators of the Word, the present bearers of the Word, and the Word itself... the milieu... makes an exaggerated claim of airtight logic, of absolute ‘scientific’ precision’.

Thus, a compelling vision, passionately argued for, has a head start over a sober presentation, in which doubt, uncertainty and an acknowledgment of the possibility of error hold sway. On this basis, utterly irrational beliefs are often passionately held – e.g. a poll conducted on behalf of *Time* magazine found that 80% of Americans believed the government was concealing information about extra-terrestrials (Kaminer, 1999). Likewise, a corporate vision whose truth is held to be self evident, whose tenets cannot be questioned, and whose acceptance is assumed to be indispensable for the organization's salvation has the potential to provide considerable intellectual stimulation, and unleash passionate forms of ideological totalism, which

unleash passionate forms of ideological totalism, which are reliant upon irrational viewpoints.

### *Individual consideration*

Cults make great ceremony of showing individual consideration for their members. One of the most commonly cited cult recruitment techniques is generally known as 'love bombing' (Hassan, 1988). Prospective recruits are showered with attention, which expands to affection and then often grows into a plausible simulation of love. This is the courtship phase of the recruitment ritual. The leader wishes to seduce the new recruit into the organization's embrace, slowly habituating them to its strange rituals and complex belief systems. At this early stage resistance will be at its highest. Individual consideration is a perfect means to overcome it, by blurring the distinctions between personal relationships, theoretical constructs and bizarre behaviors.

Thus, cult leaders and other members go out of their way to praise the potential recruit's contributions in group meetings. Points of similarity with the group (such as dress codes, positive statements about aspects of the sacred belief system, a concern for the welfare of the underprivileged, attendance at meetings or participation in demonstrations) are celebrated and encouraged. This could be defined as 'individual consideration.' It certainly represents an enormous amount of individual attention. However, we think it more appropriate to define it as *manipulation*.

A more technical term for the practice of love bombing, derived from the literature on interpersonal perception, is *ingratiation* (Jones, 1964). As one of the pioneer researchers in this area summarized it (Jones, 1990, p.178)

‘There is little secret or surprise in the contention that we like people who agree with us, who say nice things about us, who seem to possess such positive attributes as warmth, understanding, and compassion, and who would ‘go out of their way’ to do things for us.’

People generally cling to those who encourage the further expression of their opinions, display approving non-verbals such as smiles and eye contact, express agreement with our beliefs and shower us with flattery or compliments. Meanwhile, the *law of attraction* (Byrne, 1971) holds that the more similar attitudes people have in common then the more they will like each other. Cults encourage the fallacious notion that all members are more alike than they really are, and are more dissimilar from non-members than is actually the case (Tourish and Wohlforth, 2000). The clear objective is to create an overwhelming sense of group identity, infused with a spirit of cohesion, loyalty and commitment to the group’s goals – all outcomes generally valued in the corporate world, and esteemed in most writing on TL. When this is combined with ingratiation, the consequences are that the people ingratiating themselves become perceived as familiar and similar to us (Jones, 1990). They become a liked ‘insider’ rather than a stereotyped ‘outsider’ (Goldhammer, 1996). Joining with them to form a group seems a natural and risk free next step.

Furthermore, relationships are often characterized by an *imbalance of power*. This is especially true of cults, and is certainly true within most corporations. For example, in 1990, the average pay of a corporate chief executive in the United States was 135

times greater than that of the average worker, compared to thirty times greater in 1960 (Esler, 1997). Normally, a person of lesser status attaches more importance to being liked by those of higher status than the other way round (Rosenfeld et al., 1995). This encourages them to agree with such a person's opinions, ape their mannerisms, and adapt to their belief systems, as a means of ingratiating themselves, minimizing the risks faced by dissenters and hopefully achieving significant influence. Thus, those solicited by the cult find themselves inherently motivated to offer the organization's leaders the most positive feedback possible - agreement with their opinions, and compliance with their demands. Meanwhile, potential recruits are showered with attention from precisely these figures. Cognitive dissonance theory suggests (Aronson, 1997) that most of us would be inclined to rationalize this shift in attitudes as genuine and freely chosen – thereby ensuring that it takes even deeper root in our psyche.

Clearly, we are not suggesting that leaders should avoid showing consideration to others, individual or otherwise. We are suggesting that when *an imbalance of power* is institutionalized into the relationship, and dissent is equated with subversion, such consideration becomes a form of manipulation. It may not represent an expression of the follower's real best interests. In particular, individual consideration is often predicated on the following assumptions:

- The leader knows best;
- All change must come from the top;
- The leader must have a compelling vision and communicate it energetically;
- We need one unifying culture around here.

Under these conditions, individual consideration can become a form of love bombing likely to blur the recipient's ability to freely determine where their own mind ends and that of the organization begins. The dynamic is inherently cult-like. The negative consequences implicit to this characterization become even more apparent if we look critically at the issue of corporate culture.

### *Promoting a common culture*

We have, earlier, pointed out that notions of corporate culture, particularly as articulated in the literature on TL, under-theorizes the role of dissent. Monoculturalism is the implied ideal state, in which difference is banished to the margins of the group's tightly policed norms. In a coercive environment with totalistic overtones, '...tremendous overt and covert pressure is brought to bear on everyone to conform publicly, to participate actively, and to work hard, while a facade is maintained that such conformity and dedication is entirely voluntary or the product of successful ideological persuasion' (Schein et al., 1961, p.80). Total conformity along these lines leads to the disabling and well documented phenomenon of groupthink, an infection which thrives particularly well in the overheated atmosphere of cults (Wexler and Fraser, 1995).

Various techniques are employed to achieve a monocultural environment within cults, some of which seem tailor made to realize the conformist vision implied in the TL literature. In Exhibit One, we summarise the defining traits of TL and, alongside these, indicate how they are replicated within cults. In particular, cults express an insistent demand for purity, in which '...the experiential world is sharply divided into the pure

and the impure, into the absolutely good and the absolutely evil' (Lifton, 1961, p.423). Dissent is demonized, rendering it all the more unappealing, since people quickly grasp that to associate with dissenters is to volunteer for a Salem style witch-hunt. They are consoled with the view that the group's vision offers a superior insight to any other perspective on offer. Surrender therefore means capitulating to bliss. Dress codes, language, and styles of interaction are all highly regulated (Tobias and Lalich, 1994), reinforcing the monochrome environment that has come to define the members' social world. Reluctant converts eventually become True Believers. Typically, the culture is one of impassioned belief, incessant action to achieve the group's goals, veneration of the leader's vision and a constraining series of group norms designed to quell dissent.

### **Insert Exhibit One Here**

The general literature on influence would suggest that when people freely embrace such norms (or, more accurately, can be convinced that their conversion is a voluntary and enriching process) then the dominant belief system will be internalized still further (Cialdini, 1993). People are in urgent need of some justification for whatever irrational behaviors they have adopted. The one most readily available is the conviction that their actions made sense, and were freely chosen. It also seems to us that much of the literature on excellence and cultural change is very likely to activate this process of self-deception. It seeks to limit people's scope for maneuver, while simultaneously convincing them that they are empowered and autonomous individuals. We thus have 'the twinning of freedom and control' (Hope and Hendry, 1995, p.61). It has been suggested that this is part of '...a broader drift of Anglo-American business away from



enforceable employee rights towards a discretionary, enlightened despotism' (Ackers and Preston, 1997, p.679). There can be few better illustrations of Orwellian Doublethink (Willmott, 1993).

All change has unintended as well as intended consequences. The same holds true for theories. The emphasis on corporate culturism enormously expands the leader's influence over a vast range of issues, of enormous import to his or her followers. A democratic ethic would suggest that we interpret such an effect with caution. The problem, however, is that the dominant models of leadership and power generally work with a crucial missing variable – that of tyranny (Bies and Tripp, 1998). For that matter, power itself is a frequently unacknowledged variable in organization theory (Clegg, 2000). It is assumed (but never proven) that the monocultural environment envisaged will be integrative, progressive in intent and benign in content. Cult leaders, of course, make precisely such claims for their belief systems and organizations. They routinely scoff at any suggestion that their authoritarian practice is less than democratic (Tourish and Wohlforth, 2000).

More fundamentally, the twinning of freedom and control rests on a mutually contradictory set of assumptions. People are habitually assured that they are empowered and free, and indeed are often encouraged to roam in any direction that they wish. The problem is that they roam at the end of a leash, constrained to move within an orbit sharply defined by the governing cultural assumptions of the organization. Culture thus becomes another form of social control. That such control is less overt than that found with traditional bureaucratic models simply makes the process more insidious.

Within cults, the dominant culture is likely to be totalistic, punitive, self-aggrandizing and all embracing in its messianic scope. The leaders of modern corporations may feel compelled to move in similar directions. As Du Gay (1991, p.53-54) summarizes it: 'Excellence in management theory is an attempt to redefine and reconstruct the economic and cultural terrain, and to win social subjects to a new conception of themselves – to 'turn them into winners', 'champions', and 'everyday heroes'. As much as anything, Culture Excellence is a struggle for identities, an attempt to enable all sorts of people, from highest executive to lowliest shop-floor employee, to see themselves reflected in the emerging conception of the enterprising organization and thus to come increasingly to identify with it.' In this environment, those who insist that a burger is just a burger, bereft of transcendent qualities, may get short thrift. Thus, autonomy is simultaneously affirmed and negated. Through imposing a uniform definition of meaning we have also an attempt at thought control. TL theorists, who generally approach the leadership phenomenon with the minimum of skepticism, have liberally dispensed licenses endorsing such mind-altering practices. In contradistinction to this, and in common with others (Shermer, 1997; Kaminer, 1999), we view skepticism as the indispensable basis of rationality.

None of this might matter, unless TL theories and the cultic habits that they facilitate are becoming more commonplace. We believe that they are, and furthermore that many problems of employee commitment, loyalty and efficiency are rooted in the misplaced ethics of TL theory discussed above. It is to these trends that we now turn.

### **The spirituality paradigm, and the perils of corporate 'training'**

The messianic undertones to many conceptions of managerial leadership have been widely noted. For example, Hopfl (1992, p.23) describes much of management speak as a sort of 'corporate gospel' which stresses 'how much the company loves, cherishes and needs (its) poor unworthy servants; how, if they will only give their heart, soul and mind to the company, they can take their place with the chosen ones, the elect.' If taken too far, managerialism can become the new Crusades, drawing inspiration and a blessing from the bulging archives of TL theory. There is now growing evidence that much management practice is indeed moving beyond a purely metaphorical similarity to the rituals and mindsets of religious devotion. Increasingly, management development programmes seek to transform the personality of managers along with their belief systems, rather than merely increase their repertoire of skills (Ackers and Preston, 1997), engaging in practices that seek to emulate the conversion experiences of charismatic religions. A frequently expressed rationale is that organization change efforts often fail because they insufficiently engage the emotions of employees. It follows that employing the techniques of TL to communicate a spiritualized vision can mobilise the psyches of followers behind reengineering, downsizing or whatever programme is deemed necessary for the realization of the corporate vision (e.g. Dehler and Welsh, 1994). Moreover, it has been argued that 'for transformational leadership to be 'authentic', it must incorporate a central core of moral values' (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999, p.210). Spirituality can be readily mobilised as the crux of such a moral vision. Thus, increased attempts are being made to introduce spirituality into the workplace, beyond the cadre of management. As one advocate of this approach puts it: 'Work itself is also being rediscovered as a source of spiritual growth and connection to others' (Mirvis, 1997, p.199). Spiritual growth is intended to heighten devotion to

the corporate ideal, by imbuing routine organizational life with a heightened sense of the mystical. The hope is that 'workers will begin to move from the *it's-just-a-job* perspective to the *this-is-my-mission* view of their work' (Laabs, 1995, p.70). Such spirituality may encompass so-called New Age thinking (an uneasy mix of the 1960s counter-culture, humanistic psychology, systems theories, 19<sup>th</sup> century spiritual movements, ancient Eastern philosophical mysticism, and much more) or rest on more traditional Christian assumptions (Nadesan, 1999). In either event, the objective is transformational leadership. Organizational problems will be dissolved by vapors emanating from another world. Employees too will benefit - their souls will be washed whiter than white.

A theoretical rationalization for this has been proposed. Neck and Milliman (1994, p.14) write that '... organizations must seek to develop any option possible that can result in a competitive advantage. Developing a spiritual vision can bind an employee to the company and enhance job performance. Unfortunately, many employees perceive their jobs negatively due in large part to their lack of purpose or spirituality in work.' The possibility that there may be other reasons for negative attitudes in work – such as poor leadership, or inherently meaningless tasks - is not considered. However, such visions are articulated in a growing volume of literature (e.g. Holland, 1989; Dale, 1991; Hawley, 1993). Consistent with a transformational agenda, this means that nothing is off-limits. Thus, Nash (1994) reported that evangelical CEOs became actively involved in their employees' home lives, spiritual health and sexual habits on the assumption that these had a direct impact on business affairs.

There are now many utilitarian variations on such themes. For example, Kunde and Cunningham (1999) have published a book entitled *Corporate Religion*. The authors argue that more spiritually motivated employees are more productive. The dust jacket informs us that ‘management has to unite the organization around a strong idea, a shared vision, and then manage accordingly. That makes tough demands. In the company of the future there will only be space for believers. Dissenters must look elsewhere.’ Their book provides tips for the creation of a corporate religion, suggesting that employees be screened for ‘attitude’, in order to eliminate dissenters from the search process.

As our discussion above should make plain, we believe that this approach is fundamentally flawed. Research suggests that the quality of decision-making improves when groups encourage minority dissent (Nemeth, 1992). Dissent prevents powerful majorities from erring. It stimulates the detection of correct novel solutions, promotes the deployment of multiple strategies to problem solution, and improves recall of information (Hargie et al., 1999). Dissent also encourages people to examine an issue from multiple perspectives: precisely what seems to be associated with improved performance and decision-making (Janis, 1982). Diversity has the same effect (Gilbert and Ivancevich, 2000). Research into culturally heterogeneous workforces finds many of the same benefits as arise from dissent (Oluremi and Hartel, 2000). However, Mitroff and Denton (1999) – who have conducted a ‘spiritual audit’ in the workplace - propose that managers concern themselves with the deepest mysteries of the universe, and in the process seek to transform the individual goals of their employees far beyond job related issues. Cult like conformity (‘there will only be space for believers’) is a likely outcome. The promotion of spirituality is one obvious means of engendering a

corporate religion: after all, it is more economical to utilize a product that is already there, rather than invent one of your own. This is still an under-explored area. However, in Exhibit Two, we list various examples of management inspired spiritually programs that have been identified in the US.

It should be clear that we are not attacking notions of spirituality *per se*. Everyone is entitled to believe what he or she wishes. But that is precisely our point. Promoting spirituality in the workplace is to declare that those who dissent from the ideology no longer belong. It is an attempt to reengineer the thought processes of employees. Ironically, this effort is often driven by very non-spiritual concerns – the desire to increase profits. The fundamentally transformational agenda can draw inspiration from the nostrums of TL theory. However, to the extent that it cherishes corporate devotion, the effort has the potential to transcend the division between personal and public space, thereby promoting corporate cultism. Already, many employees have taken legal action against corporate training programs, alleging unwonted interference with their belief systems, and citing stress caused by the confrontational approaches inherent to the transformational agenda that has often been forced on them (Mitchell, 1990; Singer and Lalich, 1995).

## Exhibit Two

### Spiritually oriented developments in the workplace

- 300 Xerox Corp. (XRX) employees have for over six years participated in ‘vision quests’ as part of the company's \$400 million project to revolutionize product development. On the look out for new ways to boost productivity, leading executives from Ford, Nike, and Harley-Davidson have come along to get a closer look at what’s going on.
- Prayer groups are held at Deloitte & Touche.
- 150 business leaders in Minneapolis have organized a monthly lunch where chief executives such as Medtronic Inc.'s William George and Carlson Co.'s Marilyn Carlson Nelson suggest business solutions inspired by the Bible.
- In Boston, some leading executives hold an invitation-only prayer breakfast called First Tuesday, but take care to maintain secrecy about the details of what goes on.
- The Chairman of Aetna International (AET), Michael A. Stephen, argues within the company for the benefits of meditation and urges employees to see spirituality as a means of enhancing their careers.
- At least 10,000 Bible and prayer groups now meet regularly in US workplaces.

Conlon, M. (1 November, 1999) Religion in the workplace: The growing presence of spirituality in corporate America, *Business Week*

Ironically, in view of the spiritual superstructure erected on profit motivations, what most springs to mind is an historical analogy with the efforts of an earlier transformational leader – Lenin. One of the greatest sources of Bolshevism’s appeal to so many was its assertion of the role of volition in human history (Furet, 1997). Humanity was offered the prospect of liberation from capricious destiny. An act of will could push history in new and hitherto unfamiliar directions. In particular, Lenin stressed the absolute primacy of the subjective factor (conscious leadership, in the

form of his party) over objective processes (Volkogonov, 1994). TL, and its spiritualized offshoots, can be conceived in a similar light. Whatever the perils of the marketplace, salvation and redemption is at hand – with the correct leadership. The charismatic leader can turn around an ailing corporation, providing meaning as well as riches to millions, and reinvent fate. An enormous part of Bolshevism's appeal was 'the attractiveness of the proclaimed goal'(Yakovlev, 1993). Likewise, corporate renewal and salvation is a beguiling message, and for many has the same appeal as that promised by Lenin's Brave New World of 1917.

Thus, TL theorists also suggest that their agenda points only in desirable directions. Thus, Bass (1998, p.171) writes: 'Leaders are authentically transformational when they increase awareness of what is right, good, important, and beautiful, when they help to elevate followers' needs for achievement and self-actualization, when they foster in followers higher moral maturity, and when they move followers to go beyond their self-interests for the good of their group, organization, or society.' The message sounds uncannily like Lenin's invocation of universal brotherhood. His socialist paradise has been reincarnated as corporate nirvana. However, each of the categories cited by Bass is problematical. Not everyone agrees on a definition of what is 'good,' or moral. Downsizing, delaying, multi-skilling, re-engineering and job enhancement are just some examples of management practices venerated by some and reviled by others. Who should determine what is good for society? With what authority? In the final analysis, the transformational leader need not defer to anything other than his or her own conscience. A compelling justification for all programs of revolution can readily be derived from such starting points.



It is interesting that reengineering, among other management fads of the past twenty years, shamelessly promoted itself as a revolution (Hammer and Champy, 1993; Knights and Willmott, 2000). Unfortunately, such seductive agendas eventually corrupt the critical faculties of True Believers. Evidence is no longer evaluated on its merits, but on the extent to which it supports the belief system. Revolutions are not easily undone. Once companies put to sea inspired by a transformational agenda, and especially if leading executives reengineer themselves as spiritual auditors, it is hard to row back to the mundane shores on which perplexed onlookers are gathered.

As the writer Saul Bellow (1977, p.162) once remarked: ‘A great deal of intelligence can be invested in ignorance when the need for illusion is deep.’

## **Conclusion**

Our paper suggests that TL theories encourage authoritarian forms of organization. This is despite the intention of many, although not all, of its advocates. For example, two of the original advocates of corporate culture have recently argued that the downsizing, outsourcing and mergers which characterized so much of management practice over the past twenty years undermined relationships, trust, cohesion and corporate cultures, all by entrenching division (Deal and Kennedy, 1999). The proffered solution is more intense cultural leadership. Thus, in Deal and Kennedy's new model, all inspiration still comes from the senior management team, and is communicated unidirectionally from above. The leader remains a charismatic visionary, rather than someone engaged in the more modest practices of dialogic communication. However, an over emphasis on the primacy of transformational

leadership risks the promotion of undue conformity, the suppression of dissent, and the growth of cultic forms of organization. The consequences for leaders may also be less than pleasant. Socrates (1993, pp.565-76), in *The Republic*, long ago pointed out that authoritarian leaders are compelled to be suspicious of dissenters: 'He has to keep a sharp eye out, then, for anyone with courage, self-confidence, intelligence or wealth. He has no choice in the matter: he's bound to treat them as enemies and to intrigue against them, until he's purged the community of them. That's the nature of his happy state... They never have any friends, then, throughout their lives: they can only be masters or slaves. Dictatorial people can never experience freedom and true friendship.'

This analysis suggests the need for a fresh look at models of group identity and affiliation. Dyck and Starke (1999), in a fascinating study of group values and conflict therein, have pointed out that group members are normally more driven towards action by the underlying purpose of the group rather than by over-identification with other group members or the group's leaders. TL models of leadership, on the other hand, assert the primary goal of visionary leaders in shaping and communicating group goals. Monolithic cultures are promoted, in which dissenters are encouraged to look elsewhere. Such leaders risk foregrounding their own supposedly charismatic personalities, at the expense of engaging the thinking of their employees. Ultimately, as the literature on cults has also documented, this eventually pushes the leader towards the articulation of grand strategies increasingly detached from reality. With members in turn excluded from active involvement in decision making, a process of disenchantment may set in, leading to embedded conflict, organizational disintegration and (at best) the formation of breakaway organizations.

Our review suggests that an alternative model should

*1. Emphasise the key elements found in transactional leadership.* These include recognising the independent goals of leaders and followers; the exchange of rewards in systems of reciprocal influence; people's right to retain a sense of identity, place and purpose beyond their employer's orbit.

*2. Acknowledge the ubiquity of power differentials in the workplace, and the damaging effect such differentials can have on perceptions, attitudes, relationships and organisational effectiveness.* We have, for example, alluded to the fundamental difficulty of people with superior status obtaining accurate feedback about their performance from people with lower status. This impairs decision-making and may encourage those at the top of organisational charts to exaggerate their contribution to obtaining corporate goals while diminishing that of others. Alternative leadership models would legitimise the existence of multiple visions, and facilitate their resolution through processes of negotiation, conflict resolution, debate and free speech.

*3. Look again at democratic and stakeholder perspectives for organisational restructuring.* TL models presume the right of those at the top to a disproportionate role in the decision-making process. We suggest a new ethic of managerial leadership, in which both sides recognize the need to frequently cross the line between leadership and followership.

It is not our intention to question the need for leadership per se. It is our intention to argue that the dominant models within the rubric of TL are fundamentally flawed. In particular, they may facilitate, unintentionally or otherwise, the growth of corporate spirituality and new age training programmes, which in turn can promote group dynamics more often found in cults than in business organizations. More inclusive and participatory models of the leadership process are clearly required.

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