



by: Joe Byerly

Command in the U.S. Army, regardless of echelon, is one of the greatest privileges (and stressors) bestowed upon commissioned officers. Unfortunately, many of us seem to stumble through these small windows of our military careers. Even with all the early mornings, late nights, and family sacrifices that we endure, we don't seem to make the impact or create the legacy that we originally envisioned. Usually, it's after these windows of leadership are closed that we realize there was a lot of activity (and good intentions), but little progress. I call this "water bucket" leadership.

A "water bucket" leader is someone whose leadership approach can be likened to sticking a hand into a bucket of water and creating a stir by splashing it around. Eventually, the leader pulls their hand out, and when they do, the water quickly returns to its original state. It's as if they never existed. Even though there was a lot of activity, in the end, the bucket of water looks no different than it did before

When we practice "water bucket" leadership, we are transactional leaders. Our commands are focused only on accomplishing tasks and keeping soldiers out of trouble, thus

maintaining the status quo. Karl W. Kuhnert, a professor at Kansas State University, [defines](#) a transactional leader as one who "gives followers what they want in exchange for something the leader wants". *Transactional leaders are carrot (rewards) and stick (punishment) leaders, who earn compliance not commitment.* While the Army's field manual on leadership recognizes that this approach is sometimes required to accomplish tasks, it's not the preferred approach to leadership. It will not get us any closer towards the adoption of mission command throughout the force. Examples of transactional leadership can be found across the Army every Friday at closeout formations. Many commanders focus their [weekend safety briefs](#) on illegal actions and consequences, missing great opportunities to inspire and motivate their units.

I do not think any of us *plan* to be "water bucket" leaders, but for many of us, the behaviors and practices that characterize transactional leadership are the only ones we've been exposed to in our previous assignments. So, how can we move beyond a transactional command towards something greater, and as one of my former commanders used to say, "Leave the woodpile a little bit higher than when we arrived"?

From Transactional to Transformational Leadership

One such approach is to practice transformational leadership. In his book, [Leadership: Theory and Practice 6th Edition](#), Peter Northouse defines transformational leadership "as the process whereby a person engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower."

Northouse identifies four factors that characterize transformational leadership:

1. **Idealized Influence**- Is the emotional component of leadership. Idealized influence describes leaders who act as strong role models for followers; followers identify with these leaders and want to emulate them. These leaders usually have very high

standards of moral and ethical conduct and can be counted on to do the right thing. They provide vision, a sense of mission, and instill pride in the organization and the individual.

2. **Inspirational motivation**- This factor is descriptive of leaders who communicate high expectations to followers, inspiring them through motivation to become committed to and a part of the shared vision of the organization.
3. **Intellectual stimulation**- It includes leadership that stimulates followers to be creative and innovative, challenging their own beliefs and values as well as those of the leader and the organization.
4. **Individualized consideration**- This factor is representative of leaders who provide a supportive climate in which they listen carefully to the individual needs of their followers and assists them in developing their own potential. These are leaders who sit down and take the time to develop their subordinates through counseling and coaching.

We see a number of these factors exhibited when we encounter great leaders. For example, I once worked with a [Sergeant Major](#) who put a lot of energy into taking all of his senior non-commissioned officers to the field for a 96 hour leadership crucible to develop teamwork, pride in the organization, and to push them physically and mentally. Idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation were all present in his leadership approach. He is a transformational leader. [My first company commander](#) inspired me to read, think, and write through his personal example. He also encouraged me to grow as a person and as a professional officer. He is a transformational leader.

I like these factors because *they emphasize behaviors, not traits*. We can all incorporate idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration into our commands if we take deliberate steps to do so. We can all be like my former Sergeant Major or my first Commander if we ask ourselves the following:

What can I do to provide a vision, a sense of mission, and instill pride in my organization?

What can I do to inspire and motivate my organization?

What can I do to foster a command climate that stimulates intellectual growth in my organization?

What can I do to help my subordinates develop to their full potential?

We do not have to walk away from our commands feeling like we just pulled our hands out of a bucket of water. We can make a difference and leave a legacy that will endure long after we are removed from the equation. Approaching leadership with the goal of being transformational, not only makes the experience more rewarding, it also ensures that the woodpile is a little bit higher on the back end.

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [LinkedIn](#)
- [Pinterest](#)