Changing the Status Quo Through Leadership: Mary Breckinridge and Martin Luther King

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The concept of leadership is broad with many definitions. This paper will attempt to distill this idea into a few basic definitions through an examination of the available literature. The comparison of a nursing leader (Mary Breckinridge) and a non-nursing leader (Martin Luther King Jr.) and their leadership styles will expand on how the given definitions of leadership were applied in their actions and changed the lives of those around them.

**Description of Leadership**

For many members of the working world the term leadership often becomes synonymous with management, and historically this was the case. As Kippenberger (2002) discussed, a historical basis is important to understanding the current leadership culture. The industrial revolution and the use of machinery shifted work from being craft based to production focused. The hierarchical structure of the factories created an autocratic or authoritarian leadership style, where the supervisor was the only employee with a say in how things were done. Over the 20th Century manual production started to decline, and another shift occurred. Now knowledge-based work was a commodity and brought about new types of educated employees, which also required management to seek out new leadership styles (Kippenberger, 2002). Autocratic managers began transitioning to more democratic styles, where workers had more say in how projects were run, and more people were able to step into leadership roles. More recently more companies that run on creativity and innovation are adopting the laissez faire style of leadership by stepping back and allowing their employees to lead themselves on projects.

Forman (2010) defines management as “leading, organizing, directing, and controlling a workforce toward an organizational goal” (p. 69) while leaders “mobilize, motivate, liberate, facilitate, release potential, and pique the interest, energy and commitment of the workforce” (p.
70) regardless of the goals of the organization. Manager can be interchangeable with formal leaders who may have titles but who may lack the ability to gain followers. Informal leaders have followers and even though they may lack a high position in a company, systemic change is possible through the organization of those who support their goals (Forman, 2010). Leadership implies a person who is committed to action, not just a position or title held as part of a job.

The best leaders can adapt their style to what best suits their needs to reach their followers. Situational leadership allows leaders to meet their followers at their individual level and provide guidance on the scale between autocratic to laissez faire depending on the follower’s skills. The style used by the leaders in this paper is a subset of situational leadership known as transformational. Transformational leadership adds the elements of inspiration, vision, and accountability to the situational framework (Weiss, 2015). Bass & Avolio (1994) define the “four I’s” of transformational leadership: Idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation. Idealized Influence is when a leader serves as a role model. Inspirational motivation is the leader’s ability to motivate or inspire followers. Individualized consideration is the leader’s ability to show genuine concern for the needs and feeling of their followers. Intellectual stimulation challenges followers to be creative and innovative, finding new ways to further the leader’s cause.

*The Leadership Challenge* is a source that continued to show up in bibliographies when looking into how leadership is defined. Kouzes and Posner (2017) focus on the features good leaders have in common rather than their specific style of leadership delivery. They call these leadership qualities The Five Practices. The first, Model the Way, focuses on the way everyone involved should be treated and how goals should be achieved. Leaders create the standards and then set the example for others to follow. Second is inspiring a shared vision, which focuses on
the leader’s belief that they can make a difference. Their vision of the future creates an ideal of what can be. Next is challenging the process. To make change a leader searches for opportunities to change and make improvement in areas they see are lacking. After that is enabling others to act which focuses on interactions with followers. Active involvement of others and mutual respect is what keeps followers participating and engaged. The final practice is encouraging the heart. Celebrating the accomplishments of followers fosters teamwork and keeps everyone working toward the goals. These traits are readily applied to the transformational style of leadership. The Five Practices are a comprehensive summation of the essential qualities a leader must have and can be found in both Mary Breckinridge and Martin Luther King’s leadership journeys. Kouzes and Posner’s book also provides a concrete framework for developing skills for anyone looking to become a leader.

**Analysis of Non-Nurse Leader**

Historically great leaders create influence that lasts long after they are gone. On the topic of leadership, Martin Luther King Jr. is quoted as saying “A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus” (Avila, 2007). Few leaders better exemplify the power to change the societal consensus more than Martin Luther King Jr. During his life King created a culture of change that continues to inspire activists today.

King’s greatest power was in his words. By travelling across more than five million miles and delivering over 2,500 speeches, he made sure as many people as possible heard his message. His use of skillful oration inspired others to join him on his mission for equality without resorting to violence or intimidation (Adonis, 2016). King also put an emphasis on doing work behind the scenes by sitting in strategy meetings, meeting with government officials, and spending time in the poor neighborhoods most affected by segregation.
Martin Luther King Jr.’s humility was a leadership quality that made him easy to follow. As his name began to have significance during the Montgomery Bus Boycotts, King remarked “Help me, O God, to see that I’m just a symbol of a movement…Help me to realize that I’m where I am because of the forces of history and… I stand because others helped me to stand there and because the forces of history projected me there. And this moment would have come in history even if M. L. King had never been born” (Jackson, 2008). His continued efforts at remaining humble even as his recognition grew, allowed his followers to see him as an approachable leader who was worthy of their efforts.

Analysis of Nurse Leader

Mary Breckinridge lived from 1877-1965. The Breckinridge family name, as well as her diploma from a respected nursing program, gave her an influential societal advantage. Both played a key role in her ability to convince government officials to establish the licensing exam in Arkansas, further legitimizing the nursing profession. She believed in the traditional role of women as wives and mothers, but the deaths of her two children and her first husband inspired her to dedicate her life to nursing with a focus on improving maternal-child health care (Forrester, 2016). Mary’s time in France during the end and after World War I and her work with starving families further inspired her to make a change. In 1923 she called upon the administration to improve care for children in rural areas calling the U.S. “lack of care for its most vulnerable citizens a national disgrace” and that “a country that so enthusiastically embraced progress and promised justice for all allowed its little ones, by the hundreds of thousands to pass from one dark cradle to another with hardly a gap between” unacceptable (Goan, 2008).
Finding the cause of bringing quality healthcare to rural mothers and children allowed Mary to become a true leader. Breckinridge used her connections from the war to influence foreign nurses to come bring the role of nurse midwife to the United States which demonstrated her leadership skill through the mobilization of others to help achieve her goals (Forrester 2016). She also used her social networking ability and her family name to inspire wealthy Kentucky residents to provide financial support to her new nursing endeavor. Mary further modeled her commitment by funding the Kentucky Committee for Mothers and Babies for the first 3 years of its operation by pledging money from her personal inheritance (Goan, 2008).

Mary’s nickname as an “angel on horseback” was fitting (Forrester, 2016). She inspired others by leading through example. She rode to the mountain people every day and would often be too tired to ride home, showing her continuing commitment to be an active participant in the care of the mountaineers. Mary Breckinridge committed more than 40 years to the development and maintenance of the Frontier Nursing Service (now Frontier Nursing University) to provide professional maternal-child health care to the poor and rural Appalachian Mountain region of Kentucky (Fitzpatrick, 2010) and her impact is still felt today.

Comparison of Leaders

While Martin Luther King Jr. is certainly more well known, both he and Mary Breckinridge made a positive historical impact. By identifying a need that impacted their respective local communities, both Breckinridge and King were able to create widespread change. MLK’s local bus boycott sparked a movement that would soon impact the entire nation. Mary Breckinridge’s introduction of the nurse-midwife to America and her subsequent founding of a school to train more nurses, paved the way for a whole new field of nursing. The awareness
of the needs of their communities came from their upbringing which helped provide the impetus for their desire to create a lasting impact by becoming leaders.

While Mary wanted to further women’s traditional roles as mothers, Martin Luther King Jr. wanted to completely change the role of African-American people in society. Their extensive educations allowed both leaders to transform the concept of change into real-world actions. Breckinridge focused on her fundraising efforts to fund the care the citizens of Kentucky while King focused on implementing non-violent action to impact the imbalanced social structure. The transformational style of leadership can be applied to both leaders. MLK’s “I have a dream” speech epitomizes the ideals of transformational leadership through its inspirational message and lasting impact. Mary Breckinridge’s desire to implement affordable and attainable care for an underserved population through the implementation of a new field of nursing changed the scope of what nurses could do.

**Self-Analysis of Leadership Potential**

Throughout my research for this paper it was clear that everyone has the capacity to be a leader. The scope and impact of that leadership can vary with the tasks undertaken. Even though I may not have a major historical impact like Breckinridge and King, but as a potential nursing leader I have the power to positively impact and improve my work environment. Being part of a team is important to me, as well as gaining knowledge and skills to further my leadership potential.

I know that I have much to overcome when it comes to leading others, especially introversion and wanting to avoid conflict. I feel most comfortable leading in a teaching role. After working for a few years, I would like to be a preceptor for new nurses. A good preceptor
can make a world of difference for the graduating nurse when it comes to transitioning from student to new nurse.

**Summary**

Leadership is more than position, it is the ability enact action and make change when it is needed. Martin Luther King Jr. and Mary Breckenridge both exemplified the Five Practices during their lifetimes, resulting in concrete changes in their respective fields. These principles can also readily be applied to many other leaders throughout history. The study of leadership allows each individual to decide how to apply the most appropriate definition of leadership to its implementation in practice.
References


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