



Transactional vs. Transformational Leadership

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Employing transactional leadership in complex systems leads to predictable challenges: fragmented strategies, inadequate solutions, compliance and/or lack of internal motivation, resistance and cynicism.

Effective leaders discern which type of leadership is needed, given the nature of a system, e.g. transactional leadership is needed to establish clear routines around gathering daily attendance. Transformative leadership is needed to figure out how best to make significant changes in instruction and assessment in the midst of pressures around accountability.

- John A. Powell, Ruth Anderson & Reuben McDaniel, Jr.

Transactional Leadership: managing the existing system

This approach emphasizes getting things done within the umbrella of the status quo. It's considered to be a "by the book" approach in which the leader works within the rules to establish and standardize practices. As such, it's commonly seen in large, bureaucratic organizations. It's more effective in more routine or predictable systems.

Transformational Leadership: changing the existing system – and changing how it changes

Transformational leadership is about designing and implementing new ideas as a way to adapt to a complex shifting environment. This type of leadership continually learns and changes and stays flexible and adaptable. It is necessary in complex systems where problems, causes and solutions are not always clear. Impossible to control what happens to the system; no one actor/element can comprehend the system as a whole.

TRANSACTIONAL (in a Simple System)	TRANSFORMATIVE (in a Complex/Adaptive System)
Role defining: Job and task descriptions	Relationship building: Work with patterns of interaction
Top down: Use chain of command	Distributed leadership: Leadership across the system and team driven leadership
Decision-making: Find the 'best' choice	Sense-making: Collective interpretation, meaning-making
Knowing: Decide and tell others what to do	Learning: Act/learn/plan at the same time