

Transformational Leadership: Illustrated by Martin Luther King, Jr.

Sam Campbell

Sam Campbell



Sam Campbell from Birmingham, Alabama is a rising junior Business major and a student in the Distinction in Leadership Studies program. This paper, titled "Transformational Leadership: Illustrated by Martin Luther King, Jr.," was written for Dr. Victoria Ott's "Leadership Studies: Theory and Practice."

He served as the founding president of BSC's chapter of Relay For Life his freshman year. He also serves as a representative on Student Government Association.

He's a contributor and founder of an upcoming blog www.the-bitterstudent.com. You can find Sam on Instagram at [@secampbell1](https://www.instagram.com/secampbell1), or LinkedIn.

Transformational leadership is defined by James MacGregor Burns as "the ability of a leader to create a vision and move followers to act, keeping them motivated and invested in the larger goals while achieving smaller tasks at hand" (Burns 100). Transformational leaders are those who build relationships with their followers, instead of using followers for the sake of a business transaction or to merely reach a goal; the latter is more commonly referred to as a transactional leadership (Burns 101). Martin Luther King, Jr. is an example of a person that exhibited transformational leadership; King used transformational leadership to fight for equality and civil rights for all Americans as illustrated through his vision, universal message, and rhetorical speech.

One example of King's transformational leadership style is seen through his dream or vision. One scholar notes, "King was never a master strategist" (Grint 405). One might question where that vision rooted from if King was not an excellent strategist. Burns makes it clear that King's vision came from the passion he had for securing equal, civil rights for all Americans (Grint 405). King's goal was also to build relationships with his followers so they would believe in him as a leader, which would lead to them to eventually believing in his vision. Because of his transformational leadership, he was able to communicate his vision to his followers to the point they took those same beliefs and acted upon them (Grint 395). Burns also notes that a transformational leader is someone that not only creates a vision, but a transformational leader creates a vision that sustains and resonates long after that leader moves on or passes away. King is a testament of a transformational leader because he built relationships with his people, relationships that ultimately allowed his vision to transform the hearts and minds of generations long after his death in 1968 (Grint 401).

Another example of King's transformational leadership style is seen through unification. While King was not a master strategist, he understood the civil rights movement was not about defeating or battling those who were opposed to his beliefs or opposed to the civil rights movement in general. To King, leadership was about a relationship – even with the people who disliked him; the goal was to gain followers, not fight fire with fire (Grint 379). Further, King stated, "Now is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God's children" (Grint 395). This statement by itself demonstrates that his speech was inclusive. King was creating a universal message that targeted blacks and whites for a purpose (Grint 396). In King's speech, he made it clear that this purpose was for all Americans, who would benefit from unification through higher moral goals. Burns clears this up for the reader by noting, "transformational leadership becomes moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, and thus it has a transforming effect on both" (Burns 101); King elevated all people (blacks and whites) in his speech in hopes that all people would become active and engaged in this movement (Grint 396).

A final example of King's transformational leadership is seen through the rhetoric he used in his speeches. Rhetoric is defined as persuasive speech (Grint 359). King used rhetoric throughout his entire speech, and he used a number of elements to persuade his audience. Elements he used were, but not limited to, emotional appeal, energy, passion, and language (Grint 365). He used these elements and more for an intentional purpose. The author notes, "Successful speeches are asymmetric dialogues: the