

**Using a Transformative Leadership Lens to Enhance Professional Development: A  
Higher Education Case Study**

**Daryl Pierson**

PhD Student

Wayne State University

ar1086@wayne.edu

**Dr. Carolyn M. Shields**

Professor, Educational Leadership

Wayne State University



Bass (1993) posits that leaders can have a significant impact on cultural norms based upon their focus, reactions to crises, modeled behaviors, and attracting talent to their organizations. An established culture can experience difficulties at the arrival of new leadership or during a shift in organizational priorities, thus having the appearance of being resistant to change. These challenges are both historic and global and influence organizations throughout the world.

While the exploration of leadership dates back centuries as great minds sought to understand the ways to become a more effective leader. Sun Tzu, an ancient military commander, let us know many years ago that “indirect methods will be needed in order to secure victory” (Shields, 2016). Alexander the Great believed that the leader establishes the tone for his followers. A familiar quote from the ancient military hero exclaims, “I am not afraid of an army of lions led by a sheep; I am afraid of an army of sheep led by a lion.” The viewpoints of Sun Tzu and Alexander the Great reflect two strategic leadership perspectives that add historical significance to the study of leadership. Historical contributions toward the study of leadership have increased understanding of the many complexities related to the discipline which offer insights upon modern day approaches.

Many posit that leadership is a journey, an exploration that reveals many questions en route to understanding. In this journey, the existing culture will play a role in how a group or organization reacts to leadership. One question that might arise is how one may achieve successful outcomes for the organization and at what cost to the organization and the individuals within its structure. Another question that might arise relates to the choice of an approach to leadership, and whether theories such as autocratic, democratic, strategic, participative, contingent, transformational, moral, team, cross-cultural, facilitative, laissez-faire, or

transformative theories may provide guidance. Each of these types of leadership has the possibility of achieving various organizational outcomes. Each approach has its proponents, its advantages and disadvantages,

The focus of this presentation is to examine the utility of transformative leadership to enhance leaders' commitment to equitable change as a result of professional development programs in higher education. To do so, we will compare and contrast transformative leadership with a pilot organizational leadership training program offered to senior leaders in an American research university. This training will be analyzed by presenting several vignettes (identified in italics) which include content examined through the lens of Shields' (2016) tenets of transformative leadership. The names used in the vignettes are pseudonyms, as this information was captured during one of the authors' participant observation.

### **Context**

The higher education training program was intended to create high performing teams. The program utilized the term D.R.I.V.E. to establish its focus. D.R.I.V.E. is an acronym that means Embrace Diversity, Create Your Roadmap, Inspire Team Commitment and Demonstrate Value & Excellence. Figure 1 below represents the dominant ideas of the D.R.I.V.E. Program. Each respective point in the acronym represented a different focus area within the program which was created as part of a human resources leadership development program. D.R.I.V.E. was intended to create a support network of peers and align departmental efforts around the university's strategic priorities. The content of the program was to be taken back to the respective departments of the participants.

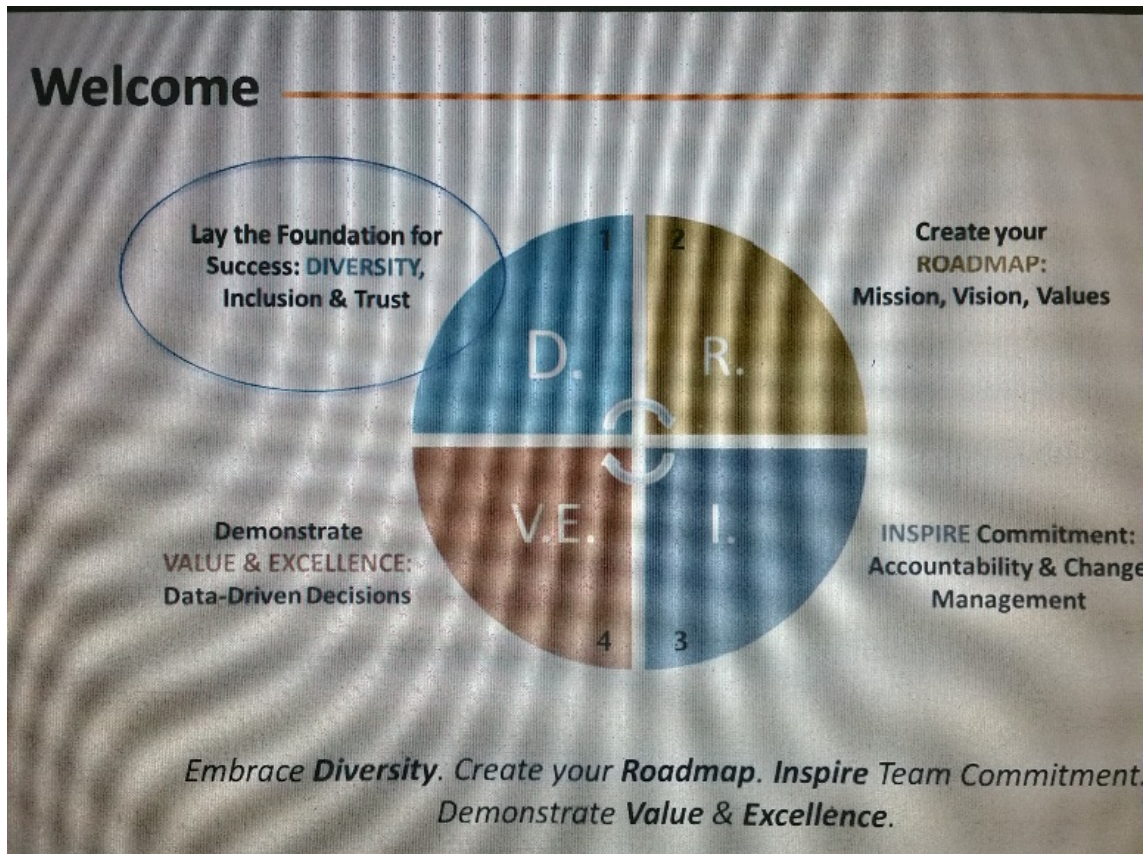


Figure 1. Diagram of D.R.I.V.E. Principles

A pre-survey was given to gather comments about each departments’ strengths and overall capabilities. The pre-survey was expected to provide a baseline for individuals on each participant’s team relative to each of the four core components of the program. The data from the pre-survey were used to set goals and develop an action plan for improvement. In addition, all D.R.I.V.E. participants and their non-participating, non-union subordinates were asked to complete an AcuMax Index assessment. AcuMax is a psychometric tool developed to increase communication, understanding, and collaboration between the supervisor and employee. The AcuMax Index would increase understanding around what motivates individuals; how they best communicate; their approach to work; how they process work; and their approach to decision-making.

## **Theoretical Perspectives**

To analyze the effectiveness of this new program, the authors have chosen to examine the D.R.I.V.E. training through the lens of transformative leadership. Transformative leadership is meant to deliver highly effective change within an organization by focusing on inclusion, equity, excellence, and social justice. Inspired by the work of Burns (1978) and drawing on the insights of others who have written about transformative leadership (e. g., Dantley, 2005; Foster, 1989; Weiner, 2003), Shields (2016) identified the following eight tenets of transformative leadership:

1. a mandate for deep and equitable change
2. the need to deconstruct knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity and injustice and to reconstruct them in more equitable ways
3. the need to address the inequitable distribution of power
4. an emphasis on both private and public good
5. a focus on emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice
6. an emphasis on interconnectedness, interdependence, and global awareness
7. the necessity of balancing critique with promise
8. the call to exhibit moral courage

Similarities can be found to Shields (2016) eight tenets listed above with those of other models that have consistent steps that lead to social change within an organization, although Shields' emphasis on equity and social justice is more central and more explicit than in other leadership theories. Similarly, most models place high regard on principles and values leading to individual and group transformation. In a transformative environment, the transformation is continuous with all the various factors connecting to one another to achieve the desired outcomes.

Figure 2 below, exhibits the interactive and continuous nature of the tenets as they work together to change an inequitable organization to a transforming organization. Thus, there are some similarities to the D.R.I.V.E. model in which the interconnectedness of the values is shown in Figure 1 by using the chasing arrows symbol to highlight the flow of its values. However, the transformative model shows greater interaction between the various tenets as the leader seeks to move from an inequitable to a transforming organization. Moreover, the D.R.I.V.E. model indicates a much more sequential approach in that the principles within this model are presented in a stair-step format as each builds upon the next to get to the desired result.

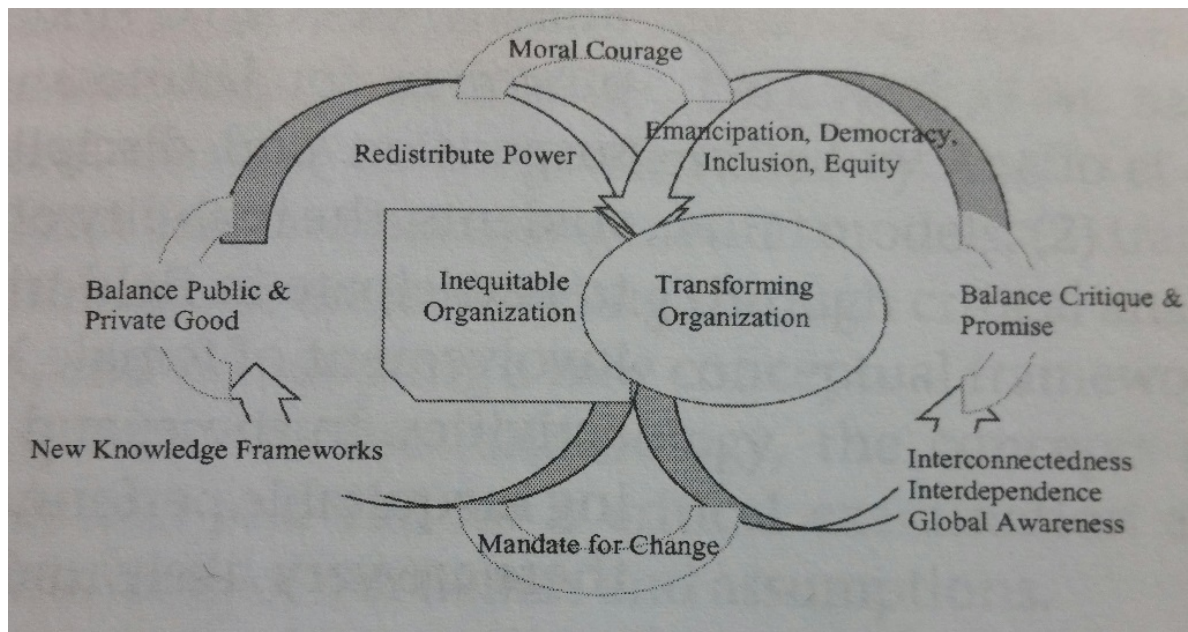


Figure 2. Transformative leadership’s interactive tenets.

As the model indicates, in transformative leadership, each tenet is inextricably interrelated to the others.

Notably, transformative leadership, unlike other leadership theories, helps to provide responses to social challenges in various areas such as education, social services, government, police, firefighting, and nonprofits (Shields, 2016). In this analysis, the comparison and contrast

of D.R.I.V.E. with transformative leadership will focus on the results anticipated by the D.R.I.V.E program and its impact upon the organization's culture.

### **The D.R.I.V.E. Professional Development Program**

In this section, we will demonstrate how the D.R.I.V.E. program was presented using vignettes and comments from participants, followed by some of our authors' insights.

#### **Background**

*Eight months prior to the D.R.I.V.E. session, a series of workshops to establish organizational mission, vision, and values was launched for the management team. The management team is comprised of director-level university personnel with organizational responsibilities to direct programs for the university. These workshop sessions were lively, engaging, and highly productive toward accomplishing the stated objectives. In addition, the sessions were also beneficial in establishing a sense of camaraderie among the group. This was a relatively new phenomenon for the group as this seemed to be missing from previous leadership. There was tempered organizational optimism. Under the former vice-president, the management meetings consisted of presentations so this format that gave everyone an opportunity to get involved was a welcome change that had many attendees feeling optimistic there could be a new direction for the organization. The new vice-president seemed to offer a new brand of leadership than that offered by his predecessor.*



## **D.R.I.V.E. Implementation**

This training was developed to enhance professional development through Advanced Management Skill Building for selected individuals in leadership positions within Finance and Business Operations, a collection of departments within the subject university. Once identified, these leaders were instructed to participate in the pilot training in order to test the effectiveness of the training as a professional development tool. The four focus areas were each presented during their respective individual sessions where materials, discussion, videos, and role play were used to help engage participants in the subject matter. The expected outcomes of the program were to develop stronger, more effective leaders who take away the learning obtained in the sessions to share with their reporting structure within their respective organizations. However, there did not seem to be any specific organizational goals inherent in the program.

To demonstrate how this program might have been enhanced had the designers incorporated the concepts from transformative leadership, in the rest of this paper, comments and excerpts from the D.R.I.V.E. Training will be presented in italics to demonstrate how it proceeded. Interspersed with these data will be some comments related to transformative leadership. This overview will be followed by a more detailed discussion of how the transformative leadership lens might have enhanced the D.R.I.V.E. program.

*A group of approximately 20 participants sat quietly in a training room in reluctant anticipation of the start of a new training called D.R.I.V.E., a mandatory professional development activity for individuals in leadership positions. Many of the people in the classroom knew each other while some only recognized faces from previous meetings. The trainer worked in the front conducting last minute prep work before starting the session. Carol, who is typically quiet but speaks up when she needs to do so, broke the*

*silence by asking if anyone saw the email that disinvited a large majority of this group to the quarterly organizational leadership meeting held by one of the institution's vice-presidents. Typically, this is where leadership received relevant information about their department issues related to the university. Now, it seemed that upwards of 90% of the people in this training session had been eliminated from the regular management meeting.*

*Carol said, with a sarcastic tone, "It was great timing to cut us out of the leadership meeting and then require us to come to a training about developing our teams." People from around the room chimed in expressing similar displeasure about the action. A point that had particular resonance was made by a man from the next table. "How can you talk about leadership and teamwork when we're seeing something different (from our own leaders)?" he asked.*

*There were clearly bitter feelings at being excluded from the meeting. Some in the room stated that this was their only time to regularly interact and network with their peers. This action was seen as further isolating departments. The timing in implementing this decision right before a major training initiative for those affected was also peculiar. After a couple minutes of discussion about the issue, the trainer stepped to the front of the room, gave a big friendly smile, and loudly said, "Ok! This seems like a good time to dive into our first topic. Embracing Diversity and Inclusion." Laughter broke out around the room which eased the building tension.*

Oakes and Rogers (2006), drawing on John Dewey's participatory social inquiry, posit ways to guide reforms by fostering engagement between individuals to find their shared interests. This collective action of engagement is presented as a way to develop transformatively toward

accepted beliefs through active inquiry and dialogue of the group. The connective nature of this setting allows the group to strategize about opportunities and possible approaches to realize the fruition of objectives. Carol and her peers in the training group experienced the benefit of this interaction as their discussion and disappointment intimated during the session. The voice and perspective given to this group through this meeting and its interaction exhibited heteroglossia, dialogue, and carnival as expressed through Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts related to dialogue (Shields, 2009). In other words, space was created for both fun and for multiple perspectives to emerge.

Additionally, Oakes and Rogers (2006) term this interaction as disruptive knowledge as the dialogue challenges and eliminates pre-conceived understandings of accepted beliefs. Disruptive knowledge and carnival hold similarities as each is seen as disrupting to existing ideals, imbalances, and inequities within an organizational structure. The decision to eliminate the opportunity for these leaders to engage was viewed as a step back for the organization. It was a disruption that reverberated through the organization.

*Richard, a relatively new associate director to the university who is participating in the D.R.I.V.E. session, began to share how he had positive engagement with his team. It caused me to reflect upon a conversation that I had with Nate, who is one of the people under Richard's supervision. Nate shared that his department was under siege by its new leadership. He clearly had a look of frustration, as he nervously whispered, looking around to ensure that no one was able to hear his complaints. Every time I saw him he would whisper in fear that one of his supervisors was nearby. Clearly, this has to be an uncomfortable situation. Nate, who works as a custodian, acknowledges that his position is looked down upon and, as a result, he feels the custodial staff have been targeted.*

One of the objectives of the D.R.I.V.E session is change management which is in the subset of the Inspire principle. Change management is sometimes described as the process of continuous renewal of an organization's direction, structure, and capabilities in serving the ever-changing needs of external and internal customers (Todnem, 2005). Todnem presents three models for establishing emergent change, including Kanter et. al. (1992), Kotter (1996), and Luecke (2003). While the models had much overlap there were some distinctions as both Kanter and Luecke called for strong, identifiable leadership. This represents a departure from transformative leadership that calls for an equitable distribution of power (Shields, 2016). Todnem (2005) shares an important position from Kotter (1996) who notes creating a guiding coalition and empowering broad-based action leads toward effective change.

*Nate has been a custodian for 18 years and expresses his feelings that he has been in his position for too long. He had been asked to apply for a supervisor position but has turned it down because he did not want the responsibility. In 2015, Nate became anxious because all of the leaders in his department were released and a new group of people was hired. Richard, the associate director in the D.R.I.V.E. session, was one of these new hires. There was glee amongst Nate's co-workers but he cautioned them to wait before celebrating. The joy became angst as the new group of leaders released nearly three quarters of the supervisors and began to release those thought to be poor-performers among the custodians. The entire department was nervous as this new group of department leaders clearly had a directive to change the department.*

*Nate saw that some of his co-workers had behavior problems or were abusing the system. Many of these individuals were terminated. The issue Nate had was not the firings but with the optics of the situation. Three out of four of the previous leaders, who*

*were terminated were Black, and all were replaced with White individuals. This new group of leaders immediately began terminating a workforce that was approximately 80 percent Black. Nate said he knew there were some problems with the workforce but it just looks bad. “We are getting treated like we’re nothing and nobodies. This is worse than before. I’ve been here 18 years and it fluctuates between bad and worse.”*

*Subsequently, numerous grievances were filed by the union representation on behalf of the employees in an effort to retain their positions.*

As scholars explore the many issues of race, gender, equity, and power related to leadership, there are several examples that challenge individuals to question whether there is an actual desire to achieve real solutions or to simply placate those who exist in marginalization. Nate’s experiences over a period of time have placed him in a situation where he expects the worse because of his position and recognition of how he was viewed. Nate and his peers also recognized that the majority of people being terminated were Black. Shields (2016) posits widespread racial discrimination in American social structures is a reality for the marginalized who are excluded in a democratic society and also argues the importance of a diverse workforce.

### **Analysis & Discussion**

In this discussion, we will highlight some of the areas in which we believe, outcomes of professional development in higher education could be enhanced by using the lens of transformative leadership. Shields’ (2016) approach to transformative leadership draws on ideas from Burns and Foster suggesting that a new, critical, and radically altered perspective to leadership is needed to realize actual social change or to develop more appropriate and more equitable solutions to challenges. Additionally, the characteristics and qualities of an organization's culture are taught by its leadership and eventually adopted by its followers (Bass,

1993). In addition to the organizational principles noted in Figure 1, the D.R.I.V.E. program also placed an emphasis on several identified values of the organization, some of which could align well with transformative leadership tenets.

## **Diversity**

Diversity and Inclusion, key D.R.I.V.E. principles, stressed that all people should understand that their unique experiences, talents and perspectives make the university community a stronger organization and the individuals better people. Stephanie, the D.R.I.V.E. session instructor, provided various perspectives from students, faculty and staff who were from different races, ethnic groups and backgrounds. She also shared several examples related to the institution being an inclusive and welcoming campus for all people regardless of race, ethnicity, creed, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background or place of origin. Significantly, parallels can be drawn from the characteristics of diversity and inclusion to connect with transformative leadership tenets one to five which include equitable change, new mindsets, redistribution of inequitable forms of power and a focus on emancipation, democracy, equity and justice.

The D.R.I.V.E. program's definition of diversity is a collective mix of people's differences and similarities that includes individual characteristics, values, beliefs, experiences, backgrounds, and communities. Inclusion is leveraging diversity by learning from others who are not the same and recognizing the advantage of diverse perspectives. These perspectives are a good beginning but do not go far enough. Oakes and Rogers (2006) note that individuals most affected by inequality must be engaged in meaningful, on-going relationships with leaders to overcome issues related to their marginalization. Dewey gave an excellent example likening this situation to a shoemaker who understands that the man who wears the shoe knows best where it

pinches. Correctly, the D.R.I.V.E. training directed leaders to engage and listen to those individuals and groups who represent diverse characteristics, perspectives, and backgrounds to better understand their issues or challenges in the workplace. An effective understanding that will address these issues and challenges can be gleaned through a transformative leadership perspective as a leader would not only look to understand but also offer a focus toward emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice. Changing attitudes without changing actions benefits no one (Shields, 2016).

### **An Equity Perspective**

As currently structured, D.R.I.V.E. will have difficulty changing those participating leaders who may struggle with Diversity and Inclusion. This may be because, without an explicit focus on equity, the discussion of diversity and inclusion remains superficial. Hence, the first tenet of transformative leadership, a mandate for deep an equitable change, might provide an appropriate focus for the D.R.I.V.E. program. An equity perspective within professional development could yield far-reaching results across the campus community however, this was unlikely given the reality that it was developed to create efficient business outcomes through leadership rather than transformative outcomes through leadership.

Su and Wilkins (2014) posit that a leader has a ripple effect in an organization like a rock thrown into water creates a ripple effect of waves. Similarly, transformative leadership calls for actual social change which will in fact create a ripple effect within an organization.

Transformative leadership cannot be an afterthought but must be at the forefront of a leaders' consciousness (Shields, 2016) to truly have an impact. Given the significant number of impacts and influences that marginalize a sizeable portion of American Society, D.R.I.V.E. missed an opportunity to fully engage key leaders in actual social change.

This analysis suggests that for those who create professional development opportunities for leaders in higher education, using a transformative leadership lens has the potential to have an impact that would ripple across the campus community to effect widespread social transformation. The call for moral courage can deliver tangible results if this call to action is answered. Taking a moral stance has found firm footing in efforts to effect social change. As leaders, exhibiting moral courage holds significant importance as it is paramount to model the tenets of transformative leadership so that these actions cascade throughout one's organization.

### **New Knowledge Frameworks**

Just as an organization's culture is built over time so too is the deconstruction of the knowledge frameworks that uphold toxicity and bias within that culture, according to Shields (2016). It takes time to implement change. Leaders must exercise patience and temperance when looking to advance toward a transformative leadership environment. But transformative leadership posits that beliefs, values, and assumptions must be addressed continually and explicitly. It is not enough to simply talk about diversity as a collection of strengths and different perspectives. One must also explicitly name racism, homophobia, and other discriminatory attitudes wherever they are in evidence.

### **Redistributing Power**

A key tenet of transformative leadership is the need to redistribute inequitable instances of power. During the D.R.I.V.E. program, it became evident from the comments of participants, that they did not perceive power to be used equitable or in an inclusive fashion by their institution. The example given, the mandate for these leaders to participate in D.R.I.V.E., but their concurrent exclusion from decision-making opportunities, was telling. It does not seem



reasonable to expect people to participate in a program aimed at leading change, but at the same time, to exclude them from discussions of what changes should occur and how to implement them. For that reason, introducing the transformative leadership tenet related to a more equitable distribution of power could enhance professional development in higher education.

### **Moral Courage**

Courage was identified as a value during the D.R.I.V.E. program, while Shields (2016) noted moral courage as a transformative leadership tenet. The differences between courage—the ability to do something that is frightening and moral courage—the ability to act for moral reasons expose the true dichotomy between the two approaches. Stephanie Francis, the D.R.I.V.E. instructor, posited that leaders with courage feel comfortable speaking up, sharing opinions, and encouraging others to speak candidly. Leaders should also encourage individuals to speak candidly when their opinions may be viewed as controversial or have the ability to prompt a fierce debate. Carol displayed courage as she spoke freely within a group about a potentially controversial work issue sparking a healthy debate but it was not moral courage. One might also assert that she spoke from a perspective of self-interest and disappointment, but it was not on moral grounds.

Shields (2016) gave an example of moral courage by describing Attorney General Eric Holder's chastising of the American people by calling the nation cowards for maintaining a narrow, self-interest with respect to race relations. This is not frequently the approach in education, where one also finds much introspection and self-interest. Self-interest too often prevents honest critique and acceptance of new ideas. This singular perspective has been to the detriment of equitable education.

In contrast, following a university leader's public discussion of low graduation rates for African American students, a course of action must be established to improve these negative outcomes. Actions positively impacting this outcome could fall under moral courage. Importantly, exercising moral courage also has several residual effects that resonate throughout the transformative leadership tenets as well as related educational scholarship. Exhibiting moral courage for the best interest of an individual or group creates a widespread belief that the leader cares about the respective party's well-being. An action that involves moral courage builds trust that the word and promise of the leader can be relied upon (Hoy, 2012). An exploration of trust within moral courage reveals the enhancement of some of the underlying characteristics of trust, including benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness. Through moral courage, a sub-set of characteristics around trust surface as relevant.

As these characteristics of trust are further analyzed then the connections to other transformative leadership tenets begin to come into context. For example, with trust, a transformative leader can begin to deconstruct inequitable knowledge frameworks of an individual or group and then reconstruct these frameworks in more equitable form (Shields, 2016). While all the noted characteristics of trust have significance in this connection, the transformative leader must also inspire confidence through competent assertion of the trust characteristics. In the vignette presenting Carol, the openness characteristic of trust was absent in the decision-making to exclude part of the director-level leadership from future management meetings. Subtracting trust from the relationship hinders one's ability to have an open-mind that would allow one to deconstruct knowledge frameworks. This single action by senior leadership was viewed as isolating and lacking in openness by the director-level group and impugned the credibility and trust of the decision-makers. In this instance, based upon conversations by

attendees within the D.R.I.V.E. session, the exclusion caused many of the objectives and value driven exercises to appear hollow in sincerity.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

While transformative leadership calls for a radically altered perspective to achieving organizational change, a focus to drive social change appeared absent from the D.R.I.V.E. program as it sought to develop leadership from a change management, rather than a transformative perspective.

To be effective, it is important to incorporate into any professional development program, an awareness of the interconnected nature of the tenets of transformative leadership. Leaders seeking to truly change an organizational climate, cannot simply focus on technical approaches or on single issues. Without a holistic understanding, there will be challenges to achieving the benefits of transformation. This is the dynamic missing from the D.R.I.V.E. workshops.

This small pilot study has found that if leaders of higher education institutions wish to encourage significant change, they may find it useful to embrace a transformative approach and to use transformative leadership theory as a guiding framework for professional development workshops. Social change is challenging and can never be solely accomplished by one individual, however through preparation and understanding, transformative leaders will begin to positively impact actions, norms, policies and belief systems to create positive ripple effects throughout their respective organization.

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