Winston Churchill: A Charismatic, Transformational Leader

Joanne Deitsch

UMUC

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Joanne Deitsch, 20 Vine Street, #1543, Lansdale, PA 19446. E-mail: joanne@joannedeitsch.com

**Introduction**

This paper makes the claim that Churchill’s words and actions as shown in the documentary *Winston Churchill: Walking with destiny* (Hier & Trank, 2010) prove him a charismatic, transformational leader. This documentary covers Winston’s life in the days before and during World War II (Hier & Trank, 2010). During the 1930s, Churchill felt growing concerns about Nazi Germany’s growing military armament and tried to convince the English people of this threat (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:10:16-0:12:14). In 1940, Hiltler’s war on Europe brought the threat ever closer to the England (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:13:50-0:14:41). The English people called for the ousting of the current government that sought appeasment with Hilter and the elevation of Winston Churchill to the post of Prime Minister (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:13:50-0:14:41). Parliament bowed to public opinion and on May 10, 1940, Winston Churchill accepted King George VI’s invitation to take the position of Prime Minister and form a new government (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:3:8-0:15:46).

**Leadership Characteristics**

Churchill, an inspriational communicator, wrote memorable speeches that galvanized a country and a world to stand against threats to freedom (Hier & Trank, 2010). Churchill engaged leaders around the globe and fellow citizens of London in dialogue during radio broadcasts and face-to-face meetings (Hier & Trank, 2010). Edwin R. Morrow, noted broadcast journalist, said that Churchill “mobilized the English language and sent it into battle to steady his fellow countrymen and hearten those Europeans upon whom the long dark night of tyranny had descended” (http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/30475.html).

Churchill, an empowering freedom fighter, showed unwavering dedication to the ideal of self-determination (Hier & Trank, 2010). During the battle for France, Winston reminded the country that:

Our task is to not only win the battle -- but to win the war. After this battle in France abates its force, there will come the battle for our Island – for all that Britain is, and all that Britain means. Centuries ago words were written to be a call and a spur to the faithful servants of truth and justice: ‘Arm yourselves, and be ye men of valour, and be in readiness for the conflict; for it is better for us to perish in battle than to look upon the outrage of our nations and our altars’ (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:18:45-0:19:35).

“On June 21st, 1941, Nazi Propaganda Minister, Joseph Goebbels expressed his frustration about Winston Churchill. ‘Were it not for him’, wrote Goebbels in his diary, ‘this war would have ended long ago’” (Hier & Trank, 2010, 1:25:50-1:26:04).

**Analysis**

The study author starts the analysis of Winston Churchill against leadership behaviors Yukl (2012) defined for a charistmatic leader. At a time where 300,000 Bristish and French troops retreated to the sea, Churchill exhorted the nation to pursue “victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival” (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:16:04). This framed a more “appealing vision” of the future for a nation that could see a relentless invader directly threatening England (Yukl, 2012, p. 312). Using the medium of radio, Churchill painted word pictures as a “strong, expressive forms of communication when articulating [his] vision” and “express[ed] optimism and confidence in followers” (Yukl, 2012, p. 312) in an address to the nation after the successful evacuation of the allied troops from Dunkirk:

I have, myself, full confidence that if all do their duty, we shall prove ourselves once more able to defend our Island home. We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:42:10-0:42:50).

Throughout the war, Winston would often put himself at “personal risk” (Yukl, 2012, p. 312). Examples include flying over France during the German invasion, narrowly avoiding a Luftwaffe attack, visiting airfields during the Battle of Britain, and missing a bombardment in at Saint James’s Park where Churchill took daily walks (Hier & Trank, 2010). During the Blitz, Winston took to the rooftops “to view an air raid as it was occurring” to “see how things were going” with Londoners (Hier & Trank, 2010, 1:11:10-1:12:58).

Churchill’s presence among the people kept Londoners moving forward in the face of nightly bombing raids during the Blitz (Hier & Trank, 2010, 1:11:10-1:12:42). Winston inspected the damage, offered words of comfort, listened to personal stories, physically aided in rescue efforts, and wept without shame (Hier & Trank, 2010, 1:11:10-1:15:38). Already a well-known public figure, these acts enhanced Churchill’s “building identification” with the British people (Yukl, 2012, p.312).

Winston’s “high expectations” to resist extended not only to the British people at large. In home life, Churchill “modeled behaviors consistent with the vision” (Yukl, 2012, p. 312). At a family dinner Winston expressed a desire to pregnant daughter-in-law, Pamela, to fight any German who might invade the home even if it meant death (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:56:10-0:57:11). Pamela said, “But, papa, I don’t have a gun. And if I did, I wouldn’t know how to use it” (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:56:10-0:57:11). Churchill replied, “But, my dear, you can go to the kitchen and get a carving knive!” (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:56:10-0:57:11).

In the early days as Prime Minister, Churchill needed to “manag[e] follower impressions of the leader” (Yukl, 2012, p. 312). Winston needed the support of the still popular Neville Chamberlain. Chamberlain’s wife enjoyed living at the Prime Minister’s residence (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:25:24-0:25:53). Churchill invited the Chamberlain’s to continue residing there (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:25:24-0:25:53). When visiting Paris, Winston told Chamberlain to “mind the store” (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:25:24-0:25:53). Hitler’s actions caused Chamberlain to abandon the appeasement policy (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:25:24-0:25:53). Churchill shared that Britain should “fight on until the end” with junior members of the administration (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:26:11-0:27:57). Britain would become a slave state after having to surrender the naval fleet and naval bases as part of an armistace with Germany (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:26:11-0:27:57). Britian still had tremendous reserves and advantages to aid in the cause of resistance (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:26:11-0:27:57). The junior members enthusiatically agreed (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:26:11-0:27:57). Once sharing this experience with the ministers, Neville Chamberlain agreed that Britian should pursue resistance turning Winston’s vision into national policy (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:26:11-0:27:57).

The following story during the Blitz beautifully illustrates what Yukl (2012) describes as “empowering followers” (p. 312):

If the office wasn’t there, there would probably be a rope across with a piece of paper saying the office has moved to so-and-so. And then they’d have to sort of climb over whatever they had to climb over to get to the new office. My mum, for example, she would be working up in the city. And she said you would turn up and sometimes the buildings just weren’t there anymore. ‘How did you carry on?’ She said, ‘Well, you just get on with it’ (Hier & Trank, 2010, 1:10:16-1:10:42).

The student author would next like to explore Winston Churchill in relation to Bass & Riggio’s (2010) transformational leader. Followers seek to identify with and emulate transformational leaders (Bass & Riggio, 2010). The four components of transformational leadership are idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2010).

“Leaders who have a great deal of idealized influence are willing to take risks and are consistent rather than arbitrary. They can be counted on to do the right thing” (Bass & Riggio, 2010, p. 78). Once Parliament supported continuing resistance to Germany, returning the British Expeditionary Force to England took paramount importance. (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:26:56-0:28:18).Churchill’s focus turned to “a rescue that is unprecendented in military history” – the evacuation of Dunkirk (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:28:39). This type of “maritime rescue mission had never before been attempted” (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:31:13). Over 860 ships sailed to the rescue; more than 200 were sunk (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:41:0-0:41:16). 300,000 allied forces made it to English shores (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:41:0-0:41:16). Not all risks taken in war return such a favorable reward. Winston preserved in taking the risk of this rescue and the returning troops ensured that resistance continued.

“Transformational leaders behave in ways that motivate and inspire those around them by providing meaning and challenge to their followers’ work” (Bass & Riggio, 2010, p. 78). During the Blitz, during radio addresses and personal appearances, Winston encouraged Londoners to “keep calm and carry on” (Hier & Trank, 2010, 1:15:51). After Paris fell, Churchill encouraged the British people with these words:

If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free. And if we fail, then the whole world will sink into the abyss of a New Dark Age. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth should last for a thousand years, men will still say ‘This was their finest hour’ (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:52:47-0:52:51).

Reactions after the Dunkirk evacuation provide further evidence of the inspiration the British people felt. Harold Nicolson, a junior member of the cabinet wrote: “How infectious courage is. I am rendered far more stronger in heart and confidence by such bravery” (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:39:49-0:39:58). “Nelly Last, a Lancashire housewife, jotted in her diary ‘I forgot I was a middle-aged woman who woke up tired and often had a back ache. The story made me feel part of something undying and never old’” (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:39:59-0:40:13).

“Transformational leaders stimulate their followers’ efforts to be innovative and creative …new ideas and creative problem solutions are solicited from followers who are included in the process of addressing problems and finding solutions” (Bass & Riggio, 2010, p. 78). Before the war, London families lived together. During the Blitz, parents sent children to the countryside (Hier & Trank, 2010, 1:09:21-1:09:39). Before the war, Londoners never spent the night sleeping on the floors of Underground platforms or in corregated iron shelters. During the Blitz, Londoners did (Hier & Trank, 2010, 1:08:46-1:09:21). Before the war, Londoners could walk the streets to report for work in the morning. During the Blitz, workers scrambled over rubble in search of workplaces (Hier & Trank, 2010, 1:10:16-1:10:42). The extraordinary circumstances during the Blitz brought the intellectual and pragmatic capacities of Londoners to bear on the problem of continued survival.

“Transformational leaders pay special attention to each individual follower’s needs” (Bass & Riggio, 2010, p. 78). Transformational leaders encourage “a two-way exchange in communication … and ‘management by walking around’ workspaces is practiced” (Bass & Riggio, 2010, p. 79). During the Blitz, “one of the key reasons why the British managed to keep going despite the nightly barrage of Luftwaffe bombs was seeing their Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, out among them on a regular basis” (Hier & Trank, 2010, 1:11:19-1:11:31). Churchill “would stand and talk, chatting with survivors, listening to their accountings of what had happened to them” (Hier & Trank, 2010, 1:14:52-1:15:0). A man who dined with the King and met with the world leaders, held up fellow Londoners locked in the same struggle for freedom.

**Conclusion**

Winston Churchill embodies transformational, charismatic leadership. Churchill promised victory over Nazi Germany at a time when victory looked unlikely. Winston promised in the inaugural address as Prime Minister that ‘I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.’ (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:15:09-0:16:19). Churchill “managed follower impressions of the leader,” starting with Parliament, to make a vision of resistance to Nazi Germany a reality (Yukl, 2012, p. 312). His “strong, expressive” speeches that “expressed optimism and confidence” in the British people to be part of the “appealing vision” of victory were part of what helped make that victory a reality (Yukl, 2012, p. 312). During the Blitz, Winston took to the streets of London or the rooftops of White Hall putting himself at “personal risk” (Hier & Trank, 2010, 1:11:10-1:12:58; Yukl, 2012, p. 312). During the Blitz, people identified with the need for this struggle as Churchill walked among them, talking with them about what had happened, helping to aid rescue efforts, and even to cry with them (Hier & Trank, 2010, 1:11:10-1:15:38; Yukl, 2012). In London, on the battlefields, even in the family household, Winston provided a model that empowered the British people to offer their own “blood, toil, tears, and sweat” (Hier & Trank, 2010, 0:15:09-0:16:19; Yukl, 2012). The British people followed Churchill’s transformational leadership, identifying with and emulating him (Bass & Riggio, 2010).

References

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