

The Knockout Effect: Unleashing Transformational Leadership in The Ring of Advocacy

Helen Olomu Ishola-Esan, PhD

President, Baptist Theological Seminary, Eku, Nigeria

+2348035247551;

helenisholaesan@gmail.com

DOI: 10.56201/ijssmr.vol.11no2.2025.pg.281.290

Abstract

Like a skilled boxer in the ring, transformational leadership delivers decisive, impactful actions that inspire, empower, and mobilise individuals toward systemic change. The "knockout effect" metaphor highlights the leader's ability to confront deep-rooted issues, break barriers, and foster lasting transformation. This leadership style, characterised by a compelling vision, trust-building, and motivation, is pivotal in advocacy. Transformational leaders navigate complex social, political, and cultural landscapes with resilience, courage, and adaptability, balancing strength with strategy to address societal challenges. By promoting empathy, collaboration, and innovation, transformational leaders empower the teams to tackle obstacles head-on, turning resistance into opportunities for reform. Their unwavering commitment to equity and justice delivers a "knockout effect," driving progress and shaping positive change. This concept underscores the intersection of transformational leadership and advocacy, showcasing how leaders can unleash the potential to effect meaningful and lasting societal transformation. The article explores the knockout effect in leadership, the foundations of transformational leadership, and its application in advocacy. It delves into developing leadership skills, sustaining leadership efforts amid adversity, and leveraging vision, authenticity, and adaptability to challenge existing systems. By combining strategic planning with values-driven action, transformational leaders inspire others to join in creating lasting societal impacts. This exploration emphasises the transformative potential of leadership in advocacy, highlighting its crucial role in addressing contemporary challenges and advocating for sustainable change.

Keywords: Knockout Effect, Transformational Leadership, and Ring of Advocacy

Introduction

In the dynamic leadership arena, transformational leadership emerges as a powerful force, akin to a skilled boxer in the ring, prepared to advocate for change and confront systemic challenges. The Knockout Effect metaphor encapsulates delivering impactful and decisive actions that inspire, empower, and mobilise others toward a shared vision. Transformational leadership in advocacy requires courage, vision, and resilience to address pressing issues, break down barriers, and create lasting change. Leaders in this realm must engage with followers, and champion causes that demand attention and action, much like a boxer strategising and fighting precisely (Mayberry, 2024).

Transformational leadership is branded by its ability to inspire others through a compelling vision, foster trust, and cultivate an atmosphere where individuals are motivated to contribute to meaningful goals. This leadership style resonates profoundly in advocacy, where leaders must navigate complex social, political, and cultural landscapes to drive systemic reform. These leaders must balance strength with strategy like a boxer, adapting to the arena's unique challenges and opportunities. Transformational leaders empower the teams to tackle challenges head-on and champion causes that matter through empathy, innovation, and collaboration (Broome, 2025).

The ring of advocacy is challenges, entrenched systems, resistance to change, and competing priorities that often represent formidable opponents. However, transformational leaders rise above these obstacles by leveraging authenticity, vision, and ability to connect with diverse stakeholders and deliver a "knockout effect" through a relentless commitment to equity, justice, and progress (Foster et al., 2024). This study explores the intersection of transformational leadership and advocacy, providing insights into how leaders can unleash the potential to effect meaningful and lasting change in the communities and beyond. It discusses the concept of the knockout effect in leadership, the Foundation of Transformational Leadership, Landing the Knockout Punch in Advocacy, the Intersection of Transformational Leadership and Advocacy, Developing the Skills and Strategies of Transformational Leadership and Sustaining Transformational Leadership in the Face of Adversity,

Concept of knockout effect in leadership

The "knockout effect" in leadership refers to the profound and transformative impact that leaders create through decisive, impactful actions that inspire, mobilise, and drive meaningful change. Like a boxer delivering a well-timed and decisive blow, Ogirri (2024) cites Burns (1978) that leaders with a knockout effect can identify critical moments, strategise effectively, and act precisely to overcome challenges and break through barriers. This concept highlights the role of visionary and transformational leadership in addressing systemic issues, fostering collaboration, and inspiring collective efforts toward shared goals (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Leaders who achieve a knockout effect combine emotional intelligence, strategic thinking, and authenticity to empower their teams, create lasting solutions, and leave a legacy of progress and innovation (Goleman et al., 2015).

Foundation of Transformational Leadership

The trait that underpins effective transformational leadership, particularly when navigating adversity, is resilience. Transformational leaders inspire others to transcend their self-interest for the collective good, driving change and growth within organisations or communities. In this context, resilience refers to a leader's capacity to persevere through challenges, maintain their vision, and inspire others despite obstacles (Ledesma, 2014). The importance of resilience in transformational leadership cannot be overstated, as it allows leaders to remain focused on their long-term objectives, adapt to evolving circumstances, and maintain morale within their teams, even in the face of setbacks. Studies show that leaders who exhibit resilience demonstrate emotional strength and foster a culture of persistence and adaptability among their followers, which is crucial for achieving sustained change (Northouse, 2018; Goleman, 2021).

Several strategies can be employed to build resilience in leadership, particularly during moments of crisis or uncertainty. One key approach is fostering emotional intelligence (EI), which

encompasses self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills. Leaders with high EI can better navigate stressful situations, process emotions, and inspire those around them (Goleman, 2021). Another strategy is cultivating a growth mindset, where leaders view challenges as opportunities for learning and growth, reinforcing their resilience in the face of failure, as well as establishing a strong support network through mentorship, peer support, or organisational alliances that provide leaders with the emotional and practical resources needed to stay grounded and focused on their goals. In the work of Bass & Bass (2009), transformational leaders who exhibit resilience tend to create environments that encourage innovation and motivate followers to embrace change.

Several case studies highlight leaders with remarkable resilience in their advocacy work. Nelson Mandela's leadership in the struggle against apartheid is a prime example of how resilience can fuel transformational leadership. Despite spending 27 years in prison, Mandela's unwavering commitment to justice and reconciliation played a crucial role in dismantling apartheid and uniting a divided South Africa (Rahman, 2022). Similarly, Malala Yousafzai's advocacy for girls' education in Pakistan, despite surviving an assassination attempt by the Taliban, demonstrates resilience as a foundation for transformational leadership. Her courage and persistence in adversity have inspired global movements for education and gender equality (Yousafzai, Rasheed & Bhutta, 2013). These leaders' resilience empowered them to overcome personal and professional challenges and inspired others to continue fighting for change, making them powerful examples of transformational leadership rooted in resilience.

Landing the Knockout Punch in Advocacy

One of the most powerful, memorable and impactful tools in landing the knockout punch in advocacy is the power of storytelling. Storytelling is a prevailing tool in advocacy and transformational leadership as it transcends traditional methods of communication, connecting deeply with audiences on an emotional level. Storytelling can humanise issues, bring complex concepts to life, and mobilise people toward action (Duarte, 2010). Storytelling in advocacy is about sharing information, fostering empathy, and creating a shared sense of urgency. Telling stories highlight injustices, human suffering, or the triumph of the human spirit, which could evoke emotions that compel individuals and groups to engage in transformative action. Heath (2011) noted that stories are far more memorable and impactful than dry statistics or impersonal data, making them an ideal tool for inspiring social change.

Techniques for crafting compelling stories that could inspire action are grounded in authenticity, clarity, and emotional resonance. A well-crafted advocacy story should be rooted in real experiences, as these create connections that resonate with audiences (Hayes, 2024). For example, leaders can use personal narratives of struggle and perseverance to illustrate broader societal issues. Successful storytelling requires a clear call to action, guiding listeners to understand what they can do to address the problem at hand. The storytelling process should build a sense of urgency and hope, enabling people to see themselves as agents of change. According to researchers like McLean (2024), advocacy stories that demonstrate vulnerability, challenge the status quo, and emphasise collective responsibility tend to be more persuasive and motivational. Moreover, integrating visual elements, such as photos or videos, into storytelling can amplify the emotional impact and increase the likelihood of mobilising action.

Numerous successful storytelling campaigns have driven significant social change, illustrating the efficacy of storytelling in advocacy. One of the most well-known examples is the #MeToo movement, which gained widespread traction through personal stories shared on social media by women who had experienced sexual harassment and assault. This storytelling campaign humanised an issue primarily ignored or swept under the rug and sparked a global conversation about sexual misconduct, power dynamics, and accountability (Maier, 2023). Another powerful example is the "I AM a Man" campaign during the Civil Rights Movement, where the simple, poignant statement, paired with images of African American men standing up for their rights, became a rallying call for equality and justice. More recently, climate activists like Greta Thunberg have utilised personal stories and compelling narratives about the planet's future to mobilise millions worldwide. As Zhanda, Dzvimbo, and Chitongo (2021) emphasised, storytelling helped convey the insistence of the climate crisis in a way that was relatable and accessible, further highlighting the role of advocacy in fostering large-scale societal shifts. These campaigns showcase how storytelling is not just a method of communication but a potent tool for driving social change, advocating for justice, and empowering communities to take collective action.

Intersection of Transformational Leadership and Advocacy

The relationship between transformational leadership and advocacy lies in the shared goal of creating meaningful and lasting social change. Transformational leadership, by definition, focuses on motivating and inspiring others to reach their fullest potential and achieve goals that transcend self-interests for the collective good. Advocacy, on the other hand, is the act of publicly supporting a cause or policy change. Transformational leadership utilises influence to advocate for change, inspire action, and empower others to engage in the collective struggle for justice and equality. According to Mudd-Fegett and Mudd (2024), transformational leadership involves idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration, deeply aligned with effective advocacy. Transformational leaders often challenge the status quo and work to alter societal structures, which informs the advocacy for marginalised or oppressed groups.

One of the primary strategies to influence transformational leadership principles in advocacy work is to focus on creating a shared vision that aligns both the leader's and the followers' values with the cause (Daniel & Jonathan, 2024). By outlining the cause emotionally resonating, transformational leaders can motivate others to take action and rally behind the vision for change. Another critical strategy that fosters intellectual stimulation is encouraging followers to question conventional thinking and consider innovative solutions to persistent problems. Transformational leaders act as change agents, raising awareness about critical social issues, stimulating dialogue, and promoting active involvement. Encouraging followers to think critically and engage in dialogue helps build an informed and energised community of advocates (Ghasabeh, 2021). Finally, transformational leadership in advocacy requires strong communication skills, including the ability to inspire hope, foster a sense of collective responsibility, and address challenges head-on in a way that unites people toward a common goal.

Several leaders have successfully combined transformational leadership with advocacy to drive significant change. One such example is Nelson Mandela, who not only led South Africa out

of apartheid but also advocated tirelessly for reconciliation and social justice. His leadership was characterised by a visionary, inclusive approach that sought to unite a divided nation. Mandela's ability to inspire hope, confront deep-rooted societal issues, and challenge oppressive systems exemplified the power of transformational leadership in advocacy (Chemonges, 2023). Similarly, Malala Yousafzai's advocacy for girls' education worldwide demonstrates how transformational leadership can inspire change at a global level. Despite facing extreme adversity, Malala remained steadfast in her commitment to her cause, transforming her personal experience into a platform for advocating for the rights of marginalised girls to receive an education (Chanana, 2024). Both leaders exemplify how transformational leadership and advocacy can challenge societal norms and bring systemic change by inspiring others to act. These case studies highlight the intersection of transformational leadership and advocacy as a dynamic force for promoting social change, building inclusive movements, and fighting for justice.

Developing the Skills and Strategies of Transformational Leadership

Developing skills and strategies for transformational leadership is central to fostering effective advocates who can inspire change, which is the essence of training for the Big Fight. The key skills for transformational leadership in advocacy include vision creation, emotional intelligence, communication, strategic thinking, and the ability to motivate and empower others. As Bakker et al. (2023) emphasised, transformational leaders are skilled at inspiring and motivating followers through a compelling vision and providing individual attention. In advocacy, leaders must articulate a shared vision that encourages collective action and build emotional connections with the followers to engage them in the cause. Additionally, effective transformational leaders are adept communicators, capable of tailoring messages to diverse audiences, addressing conflicts, and facilitating open dialogues. Furthermore, strategic thinking is crucial for identifying opportunities for change, navigating challenges, and making decisions that align with long-term goals. These skills are essential in advocacy, where leaders must unite various stakeholders and craft strategies to influence public opinion and policy change (Orphan, Laderman & Gildersleeve, 2021).

Training methods and approaches for developing these skills in aspiring transformational leaders include experiential learning, mentorship, and immersive leadership programs. According to Northouse (2025), leadership development is enhanced through hands-on experiences and by learning from real-world challenges. Leadership programs that employ case studies, simulations, and role-playing exercises help individuals develop decision-making abilities, emotional intelligence, and strategic vision. Furthermore, mentorship plays a pivotal role in cultivating transformational leadership, as experienced leaders can provide guidance, feedback, and support to emerging leaders, enabling them to refine their skills. One successful approach to leadership development is using action learning, where participants address actual problems in their communities or organisations, thereby gaining practical experience in leading change (Tan, van Dun & Wilderom, 2024). In this context, transformational leaders can be trained to harness their personal experiences, build their communication skills, and develop resilience to lead effectively during crises.

Several successful training programs have contributed to developing transformational leaders, particularly in social change and advocacy. For example, the "Leadership Development

Program" by the Rockwood Leadership Institute focuses on cultivating transformational leadership in non-profit and advocacy sectors. It combines intensive training with ongoing support and coaching, emphasising developing skills such as effective communication, community building, and strategic thinking (Bornman & Louw, 2023). Another example is the "Leadership for Social Change" program by the Center for Creative Leadership, which provides leaders with the tools to inspire and engage others in advocacy efforts. These programs focus on leadership techniques, ethical foundations, and personal growth necessary for transformational leadership. These programs have produced influential leaders who continue to drive social change in racial justice, environmental protection, and economic empowerment (Esposito, Ricci & Sancino, 2021). These training methods demonstrate that building transformational leadership requires both practical experience and ongoing support, equipping leaders with the skills and strategies necessary to make a lasting impact in advocacy.

Sustaining Transformational Leadership in the Face of Adversity

In the face of adversity, sustaining transformational leadership requires a strategic approach that ensures leaders can continue to inspire and motivate others even during challenging times. One of the key strategies for sustaining transformational leadership is building resilience, which enables leaders to adapt to setbacks and persist in their mission. According to Avolio and Bass (2004), resilient and transformational leaders can bounce back from failures, maintain commitment to the vision, and inspire others to do the same. To sustain the leadership, transformational leaders must foster a supportive network of colleagues, mentors, and followers who share their goals and provide emotional and professional support. Additionally, leaders should continuously self-reflect to stay grounded and refocus their efforts as needed. This process involves reassessing their values and motivations and adjusting their leadership strategies to remain effective in the long term (Henry & Jonathan, 2024).

Techniques for managing burnout and maintaining energy and motivation are critical for leaders facing long-term challenges. One key approach is prioritising self-care, including taking time for physical and emotional well-being. As Klug, Felfe, and Krick (2022) suggest, transformational leaders must model self-care and set boundaries to prevent burnout. Another strategy involves delegating responsibilities and empowering followers to take ownership of projects and decisions, thus reducing the burden on the leader and fostering a culture of shared leadership. Leaders should also practice mindfulness and stress management techniques to maintain focus and avoid fatigue. Building a resilient organisational culture that values work-life balance, teamwork, and support for one another is essential to managing adversity (Deep, 2023). Leaders who consistently take time to recharge and remain emotionally balanced are more likely to maintain their motivation and effectiveness over time, even in the face of challenges.

Case studies of leaders who have successfully sustained transformational leadership efforts despite setbacks highlight the importance of perseverance and adaptability. Martin Luther King Jr., a conspicuous figure in the Civil Rights Movement, persevered in the face of immense challenges, such as personal threats, institutional resistance, and the relentless pressures associated with the struggle for justice and equality. King's resilience was rooted in his deep commitment to nonviolence, belief in the power of collective action, and ability to inspire others through his speeches and personal example (Chandrahaas & Narasimhan, 2023). Another example is Malala

Yousafzai, who, after surviving an assassination attempt by the Taliban, continued her advocacy for girls' education with even greater determination. Yousafzai's resilience and commitment to her cause have made her an international symbol of courage and transformative leadership. These case studies demonstrate that leaders who maintain a strong sense of purpose and draw on personal strength, community support, and a network of allies can sustain their transformational leadership efforts, even when faced with extreme adversity (Everly & Athey, 2022). Transformational leaders who exemplify perseverance, adaptive strategies, and a deep connection to their cause can overcome setbacks and continue to drive meaningful change in the long run.

Conclusion

Transformational leadership, epitomised by the metaphor of a skilled boxer in the ring, is crucial for advocacy and systemic change. Leaders who embrace this style can inspire, empower, and mobilise their teams while navigating the complex terrain of social, political, and cultural challenges. Just as a boxer strategies and adapts in the ring, transformational leaders must demonstrate resilience, courage, and vision to tackle pressing issues and foster lasting change. Their ability to engage diverse stakeholders, balance strength with strategy, and remain committed to equity and justice enables them to deliver the "knockout effect" in advocacy, ensuring that the causes they champion gain the momentum needed for systemic transformation.

This study explored the intersection of transformational leadership and advocacy, providing insights into how leaders can unleash the potential to effect meaningful and lasting change in their communities and beyond. It discussed the concept of the knockout effect in leadership, the Foundation of Transformational Leadership, Landing the Knockout Punch in Advocacy, Intersection of Transformational Leadership and Advocacy, Developing the Skills and Strategies of Transformational Leadership, and Sustaining Transformational Leadership in the Face of Adversity. In advocacy, transformational leaders must overcome obstacles such as resistance to change, entrenched systems, and competing priorities. However, by leveraging their authenticity, vision, and ability to inspire trust, these leaders successfully navigate and dismantle these barriers, driving progress and creating lasting societal impact. Through empathy, collaboration, and innovation, they transform challenges into opportunities for reform. Transformational leaders are poised to significantly contribute to societal change by aligning their leadership with values-driven action and strategic thinking. Ultimately, the intersection of transformational leadership and advocacy reveals a robust framework for initiating and sustaining optimistic change, fostering a more equitable and just future for all.

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