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Public Safety Manager, Crisis Management Leadership: Comparison to Private-Sector Leadership Theory Applications

Tracy E Rickman^{1*}*Assistant Professor, Public Administration, Tarleton State University, Texas, USA***Corresponding author:** Assistant Professor, Public Administration, Tarleton State University, Texas, USA**Received Date:** May 18, 2026**Published Date:** May 29, 2026**Abstract**

Do leadership theories differ when applied in a public safety leadership setting (public) versus at the C-suite level leader in private industry? This article examines leadership concepts and theories, and traits of public crisis management leaders compared with those in private industry.

Keywords: Leadership; transformational; servant Leadership**Introduction**

In the simplest terms, a leader is a person whom others follow. There are many leadership theories and discussions that explore why others follow. When describing leadership theory, we explore the characteristics, traits, behaviors, and abilities of the individual and how they can adapt, persuade, influence, guide, and lead others to complete a task, goal, or mission [1]. The supervisor and manager can be a leader; however, not all supervisors and managers are, in fact, leaders. Some will argue that several leadership theories can fall into one of three categories. Transactional, Transformational, and Transcendent leadership theories. The private sector uses various leadership theories to train and support employee development. Mid-level managers may seek opportunities to lead, with a focus on project completion and team development, possibly adopting a charismatic leadership style [2]. Public sector leaders also focus on several leadership theories, yet in times of crisis management, they tend to use the event's timeline to correlate with a specific leadership style. Although this can change as the crisis unfolds, the

need to be flexible while ensuring life safety is important. A leader's reputation in both the public and private sectors may affect their ability to lead followers [3].

The 3-T's in Leadership

To glean insight into a particular 3 T's label, it is necessary to differentiate between the leader's styles and characteristics. Each leadership style can then be viewed as a subcategory of the larger theory definition. When a leadership theory cannot be classified as one of the 3-T's, it means it has its own set of parameters, modalities, traits, and "Style" that reflect it differently and set it apart from other theories.

Transcendent Leadership Theory

The transcendent leadership style, reflective of an "Everyone Wins" concept within the organizational structure, will have a limited number of theories that meet the lofty standards and

definitions of a transcendent leader. Some scholars will note the difficulty of obtaining transcendent leadership qualities. The leadership of self and the guiding principles for leading others and the organization will be compared to a transformational leadership style. A transcendent leader, however, strives for more than one way to act or proceed in a daily routine. The transcendent leader builds a core philosophy that incorporates "others". To the transcendent leader, it is much more than individual success, acquiring power, or authority. It's less ego, more humility, and a desire to decentralize and empower others within the organization. This leadership theory fosters collaborative, ownership-inspired, and committed engagement that cultivates a sense of innovative confidence and synergy. The private-sector leader strives to adopt this leadership style, as does the crisis-centered public safety professional. The difference will be seen at the levels of implementation and having the opportunity at the mid-manager level to express this in the public sector.

Transformational Leadership Theory

The leadership theory that most contemporary leaders aspire to obtain is transformational in practice. A transformational leader understands how to change, mold, enhance, and promote organizational change. This leader not only encourages and supports organizational goals but also knows how to engage and motivate others within the agency. Although transformational leaders understand the organization's strategic plan, their focus continually centers on the people who work within it. Beyond the transactional exchange based on the punishment-or-reward philosophy, transformational leaders reinforce the meaning of the organization's goals and mission, recognizing that people are the organization's greatest asset [4].

Servant Leadership

Much focus is given in both the private and public sector leadership styles on servant leadership. Servant leadership is often aligned with transformational leaders. Positivity, the attitude to help and support others, is the cornerstone view of a servant leader. "Taking care of the people who take care of the people" is the premise that servant leaders seek. The servant leader cares about those around them and enhances others' abilities through their kindness, courage, and servant values. Compassionate leadership involves not just understanding but also actively engaging with the suffering of others, according to one definition of compassion. This is noted as "suffering together". This can be seen in contexts of public safety, where leaders physically and emotionally endure the same challenges as their team, thereby building morale and fostering a sense of solidarity [5]. When leaders exhibit compassion, they create an environment of psychological safety in which team members feel valued and understood. This, in turn, promotes teamwork, trust, and a shared commitment to the organization's goals.

Transactional Leadership Theory

Widely viewed in the public sector and the military, this

leadership style includes a reward-and-punishment system. When others are motivated by this type of transaction, leaders can seek the best results because individuals being led understand the premise. "Do well and be rewarded, do poorly and not be rewarded or even punished in some realm of gain/loss event." Outside of the military, other career fields such as police officers, firefighters, EMTs and paramedics, dispatchers, and others in public safety have either experienced transactional leadership or are transactional leaders themselves [4]. Key facets of transactional leadership include the emphasis on organizational structure, individual performance, and group successes or failures tied to outcomes. In situations such as a crisis, a transactional leadership style is warranted and preferred over other leadership styles. The need for structure, the attainment of short-term goals, and a focus on procedures and guidelines are important in crisis management and in this leadership style. The private sector, in many ways, views transactional leadership styles negatively. These concepts and behaviors should not be included, as at times, especially during times of stress, there is a need to focus on the individual as much as they need to meet a goal or mission for the organization. Although positive and negative reinforcement are part of the transactional leader's toolbox as the leader seeks compliance from followers to ensure tasks are done correctly, the private sector strives to focus on transformational leadership theories rather than forced compliance.

Conclusion

Public Safety leaders need the ability to lead in times of crisis and within the daily routine of life. The need to draw on many leadership theories, characteristics, and behaviors enables a public servant to adapt and remain flexible. The first 5 minutes of an emergency may indicate a transactional leader who is giving orders and instructions to additional resources. The 5-hour leader, however, in the same crisis may find that an entirely different leadership style is needed, based on situational awareness and response-specific factors [6]. Private sector leadership emphasizes transformational leadership styles that provide flexibility based on needs, yet the premise remains centered on people and goal attainment. There are similarities between the public and private leadership styles, training, and development. Learning how best to lead in a compassionate, whole-person way, aligned with the overall mission and goal accomplishment, is needed in both sectors.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest exists.

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