

**“Searching for African American  
Transformational Leaders”**

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### **Abstract**

African-Americans have made significant gains in economic welfare since the birth of the civil rights laws in the decade of the sixties. The new challenges of the day continue to call for transformational leaders of all races and ethnic groups. Transformational leaders use the leadership style that best suits the situation they face. They build on the strength of others, strengths that sometimes are dormant. They are visionaries who enable people to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of others. They are leaders who change reality by building on the human need for meaning.

This paper examines some African American transformational leaders of the day and their contributions to the society as a whole. The paper also discusses: (a) how these men and women overcame the “glass ceiling” as they climbed the corporate or public service ladder, (b) the common traits they possess, and (c) whether these traits can be taught.

## **SEARCHING FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERS**

### **Introduction**

The first African American to be appointed president of an Ivy League University was asked to name the one person who inspired her to pursue excellence. She wasted no time in stating that it was her kindergarten teacher, Ms. Ida Mae Henderson. Dr. Ruth Simmons, the newly appointed president of Brown University remembers hearing Ms. Henderson say that she could do anything she set her heart out to accomplish. Ms. Henderson was a transformational leader. The fact that she taught poor African American children in a poor neighborhood did not quench her dream. In kindergarten she dared to tell little Ruth Simmons that she could be a president of a college. Transformational leaders impart vision and encourage the heart.

Transformational leaders give “birth” to other transformational leaders. Dr. Simmons caught the vision from Ms. Henderson and became a transformational leader herself. She believes that we can motivate people from all backgrounds to reach for the sky. One of her goals is to open the gates to elite education for everyone who is smart enough to reach for that goal. As president of Smith College she started a program in engineering, the first ever at a women’s college. Dr. Simmons is a transformational leader.

Transformational leaders build today what will be needed tomorrow.

General Colin Powell is a household name around the world. He is the first African American to become Secretary of State of the United States of America. General Powell

is known to motivate followers to do more than originally expected. His military accomplishments were remarkable. When he retired from the military service, he spearheaded the mobilization of volunteers to help school children with reading and homework problems. He brings credibility and integrity wherever he goes. Morale is very high at the state department where he is currently the chief, by virtue of his position as the Secretary of State.

This paper discusses these leaders whose lives are consistent with transformational leadership qualities. Our search for African American transformational leaders has led us to the lives of these three distinguished people, with humble beginnings. First we start with a brief literature review on transformational leadership and then we go to brief reviews of the lives of Dr. Simmons, Ms. Henderson and General Powell.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Yukl (1989) says that transformational leadership is the process of influencing major changes in the attitudes and assumptions of the organization's mission or objectives. Transformational leaders are change agents. They influence the mission and objectives to make way for a brighter future for the organization. Bass (1990) states that transformational leadership commonly involves the actions of leader's influence on followers. People in these organizations follow the leader because they so desire. They are motivated to do more than is originally expected because of their feelings of trust, admiration, loyalty, and respect for the leader. They want to go the extra mile because of the deep sense of satisfaction they derive doing so. The leader motivates the subordinates

by making them more aware of the importance of values of task outcomes, and by helping subordinates think beyond their own self-interest to the work team and organization, and by activating higher order needs such as creative expression and self-actualization. Transformational leaders have charisma, but this is not the only factor needed to bring about change. They sometimes go down to the trenches with their followers as they also perform the roles of coach, trainer and mentor. (Shani & Lou, 2000)

Transformational leaders do not hesitate to challenge the process by searching for opportunities, experimenting and taking risks. They do not merely call for changes to be made. They take the lead initiating and proposing changes. They get their hands dirty and that is one reason they are much respected by their followers.

Transformational leaders inspire a shared vision by envisioning the future and enlisting others. They do not mind going it alone as they carve out the vision for the entire organization. Then they rally others to buy and support this vision as if it belonged to each of the organization's members personally. These leaders enable others to act by fostering collaboration and strengthening other team members. They model the way by setting example and planning small wins. They encourage the heart by recognizing contributions and celebrating accomplishments. (James Kouzes and Barry Posner, 1990)

Transformational leaders employ the style that best suits the situation they face. They do not necessarily apply the effective method that worked yesterday to today's problems.

They do not approach every situation in the same way. When something does not work the first time, they do not get a bigger hammer and hit it again. Transformational leaders restudy the situation and look for a better approach. They realize that style is not as important as results.(Lewis, 1996)

Transformational leaders are generally not selfish. They inspire others to excel and they give everybody individual consideration. These leaders stimulate people to think in new ways. Their impact in the organizations they work is almost revolutionary. They transform the people and organizations with which they work. (Lewis, 1996)

### **Assessing Individuals for Transformational Leadership Qualities**

The following characteristics developed by Lewis (1996) can help identify transformational leaders. On a scale of one to five, where one is below average and five is the highest positive score, individuals can be evaluated on how well they score on each characteristic. General Powel and Dr. Simmons scored on top of the charts, using these characteristics:

1. Strategic thinker
2. Ability to empower others
3. Initiative
4. Strategy formulation and implementation
5. Positive mental attitude
6. Visionary
7. Encouraging human potential
8. Willingness to change

9. Ability to handle conflict
10. Effective communicator
11. Skilled Motivator
- 12 Ability to inspire trust
13. Ability to gain commitment

### **Transformational Leadership Style**

Here we discuss some of these transformational leadership characteristics listed by Lewis (1996)

1. Transformational leaders build on the strengths of others, strengths that may have lain dormant.
2. Transformational leaders raise levels of awareness about the issues of consequence and ways of reaching organizational goals for their colleagues, subordinates, followers, clients, or constituents.
3. Transformational leaders enable people to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of others.
4. Transformational leaders change reality by building on the human need for meaning. They focus on values, morals and ethics. They are proactive and encourage human potential.
5. Their goal is to transform people and organizations—change minds and hearts; enlarge vision, insight and understanding, clarify purposes, make behavior congruent with beliefs, principles, or values; and bring about changes that are permanent, self-perpetuating, and momentum building.

6. Transformational leaders bind people together around a common identity—goals and values.
7. Transformational leaders build for tomorrow what will be needed by the organization at that time. (Lewis, 1996)

### **Power & Influence**

Lewis (1996) summarizes the many ways transformational leaders use power and influence, as follows:

Transformational leaders use their power to empower others.

Transformational leaders provide members with the knowledge, skills, information, resources and support to accomplish goals. (Lewis, 1996) They use their power and influence to assist others and thus raise the productivity of the organization.

### **Transformational Leadership: Key Characteristics**

Friedman (2000) appears to agree with most of the same leadership characteristics identified by Lewis (1996) as demonstrated by the following key characteristics:

#### **Vision**

Transformational leaders must look beyond the present to develop a vision for the future. The leader must subscribe fully to the vision and be able to sell it to followers.

Dr. Martin Luther King shared his vision on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on

August 28, 1963 when he delivered his “I have a dream’ speech. He looked into the future and saw blacks and whites enjoying healthy relationships.

### **Charisma and Inspiration.**

Transformational leaders must have the ability to influence others with their inspirational qualities.

### **Intellectual Stimulation and Creativity**

Since transformational leaders are agents of change, they must have the knowledge base to help motivate people to come up with innovative solutions and new ideas. They take risks after careful analysis.

### **Individual Consideration/Interactivity**

Transformational leaders attempt to know each person’s talents, and assign them responsibilities accordingly. They respect everybody.

### **Honesty and Integrity.**

Honesty and integrity are essential elements for sustained effectiveness. People who don’t trust their leader do not follow them effectively.

### **Confidence and Optimism.**

A transformational leader must not shoot the messenger. He must project confidence and

optimism because people follow better if they are convinced that their leader believes in the vision set forth before them.

### **Dr. Ruth J. Simmons – Transformational Leader**

Ruth J. Simmons is a transformational leader. She officially assumed the presidency of Brown University on July 1, 2001. She becomes the first African American to head an Ivy League school in America, and the 18<sup>th</sup> president of Brown University.

The search that led to the November 9 election of the 18<sup>th</sup> president of Brown was exhaustive. The selection committee identified some 100 candidates for the president's post and reviewed their credentials before narrowing the field to 26 people to interview.

Dr. Simmons was the president of Smith College from 1995 to 2000. In her tenure there she revitalized every aspect of that institution. She launched new building projects, established new avenues of intellectual pursuit, increased campus diversity, and improved the teaching environment for the faculty. She also led an extraordinarily successful capital campaign. She is indeed a visionary. She has continuously demonstrated academic leadership, impeccable character and unquestionable integrity. Her leadership skills earned her the love and admiration of the faculty, students and staff at Smith College. Brown University believes they have found a star in Dr. Ruth J. Simmons.

(Adapted from Brown University Chancellor's Stephen Robert, introduction of Dr. Simmon's on November 9, 2000)

Dr. Ruth J. Simmons grew up in the South of the United States of America, in very limited economic circumstances. She and her family lived in the Fifth Ward, a very impoverished area of Houston, just in the shadow of the downtown skyscrapers. Her parents made a modest living in that area. They did not have very much. They went to segregated schools where they had wonderful teachers. Simmons is the 12<sup>th</sup> child born to sharecroppers in the small East Texas town of Grapeland. She moved with her family to Houston when she was of school age. There her father found employment as a factory worker and her mother worked as a maid. Simmons attended public school.

With strong family and community support, Simmons continued her education, earning her bachelor's degree summa cum laude at Dillard University in New Orleans and her master's and doctorate in Romance languages and literature at Harvard University. Her effort to understand how her own society could embrace racial cruelty and legally enforce segregation led her to a lifelong interest in humanities.

### **On Taking Risks**

Jeniene Phillips of the New England Cable News asked Dr. Simmons to state what risks she was going to take as the new president of Brown University.

She confessed that she does not do a lot of bold things. But when it comes to education, she believes we have to apply the same vigorous assessment that is commonly found in journalism or in movie industries. She stated that she did not subscribe to the notion that the programs we build should endure 200 years just because they were created. She disagrees with the notion that we ought to always be the same, no matter what. She believes that it is the task of the university to respond to the needs of society while maintaining the distinction of being the center of knowledge.

She started a program in engineering at Smith College, the first ever at a women's college. Dr. Simmons believes that universities ought to be constantly alive to the possibility of doing something new and of doing something better. (November 9, 2000, News Conference)

### **Dr. Ruth Simmons's Early Mentor**

In a news conference on November 9, 2000, Linda Burg of the Providential Journal asked Dr. Simmons to tell of one person who really made a difference to her as a child.

Dr. Simmons was quick to name her kindergarten teacher, Ida Mae Henderson. At the time she went to kindergarten her parents were sharecroppers and they were living on a poor farm some distance from her school. Dr. Simmons recalled the first day she went to school. It was a magic moment. She had books to read and she actually had pencil and paper. She remembered the teacher vividly. Her teacher had a wonderful voice and called her students "babies". She held the students lovingly close, and inspired all of them to do more than they thought they could do. She was a transformational leader in a

kindergarten classroom. Ms. Ida Mae Henderson looked beyond the kindergarten classroom with limited amenities, and painted a future for the woman who was to become the first African American president of an Ivy League University. Dr. Simmons recalls her kindergarten teacher saying, “Ruth, you certainly have the ability to become a college president”. Never in her instructions to the students did she tell them what they could not do. Dr. Simmons credits her remarkable achievement, in large part, to Ida Mae who inspired and passed on to her spirit that she could do anything. She had not always been sure if society would permit her to do what was in her heart, but she had always known and believed that she could do anything. What an amazing inspiration, passed on to a young African American girl in kindergarten.

### **Advocating Need-Blind Admission**

Dr. Simmons believed that a student with ability, irrespective of economic means has to be able to come to Brown. She considers this to be a moral imperative. She is very interested in finding ways for students who come from the least favorable circumstances to be able to come to Brown. She would not want elite higher education to become the province of the rich. Any child in America who is smart enough and who works hard enough should be able to go to the best college in the country. She wants to motivate young people to reach to the sky. This is transformational leadership at its best. It is visionary when one takes serious steps to bring elite education to the province of bright students from poor families. Transformational leaders like Dr. Simmons leave no stone unturned in their bid to “make” other transformational leaders.

## **Role Model**

Dr. Ruth Simmons has no doubt she can inspire young boys and girls the same way in which she was inspired growing up in Fifth Ward, in Houston, Texas. She visits high schools and grade schools in the inner city spreading her message of hope and vision. She believes that a student can be smart, nice and ambitious and still fall by the wayside. She urges parents not to let their children be “tracked”, or be limited to a narrow curriculum. She passionately believes that a student who was born in deprived economic circumstances should pursue liberal arts education. A child who grew up not going to museums, theaters, and restaurants can easily catch up by studying art, music and different civilizations. She is very passionate in all she does and believes.

## **General Colin L. Powell**

General Powell was born on April 5, 1937 in Harlem, New York. His father, Luther Powell emigrated from Jamaica in his early twenties, seventeen years before Powell was born. His mother also emigrated from Jamaica. “By 1930, 200,000 of New York City’s 327,000 blacks lived in Harlem, and they were all crowded together in an area that had housed only a quarter of that number 15 years earlier. When the Great Depression began to ravage the nation in the 1930’s, Harlem was especially hard hit. Long lines of unemployed people in search of food and clothing stretched in front of the local churches and charity organizations.” (Brown, 1992) This was the environment in which young Colin Powell came into the world.

Colin Powell's family later moved to another neighborhood in New York where every body was a member of a minority group. There was no dominant ethnic group in this neighborhood. Powell was, thus, protected from the indignities of racism in his youth. He just was not a serious student at school and he brought home average grades to the dismay of his parents. His tenacious immigrant parents did not lower their expectations or standards for the young Powell.

The Pentagon lifted the army's desegregation law the same year Colin Powell enrolled in City College's ROTC program. Powell would take full advantage of this opportunity. Military life suited Powell. He fell in love with the physical activity and the discipline that the ROTC programs offered. He had finally found a passion in life.

Powell graduated in 1958 at the top of his ROTC class. He did not, however, have very great expectations for his future. It was in the military Powell experienced the painful sting of racism. From his barracks in a city in the South Powell had gone to a fast food restaurant to purchase a burger. He was ordered to go to the back window and get his meal. Instead of letting this experience destroy him, Powell took courage and pressed on toward his goal. His first action, however, when President Johnson signed the civil rights bill was to rush to the same fast food restaurant and picked up his meal from the front counter. Powell has enjoyed that freedom ever since. He believes that no obstacle is big enough to stop any one from rising to their fullest potential. He is a transformational leader to the core and he believes he can encourage and help others to excel.

The highest rank any African American had attained in Powell days as a young military officer was brigadier or one star general. His superiors told him that the highest rank he could attain, if he did every thing right, in twenty years was lieutenant colonel. That was good enough for Powell. Here is a man who concentrates on the things he can change and leaves the things he cannot change in the hands of people who make those decisions. This philosophy worked well for Powell and will work for anyone else. This transformational leader has something to teach anyone aspiring to become a leader.

In December 1987 Powell became President Reagan's national security advisor. In August 1989, Powell became the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). He would direct American troops in driving away Saddam Hussein from Kuwait. He became a hero. In January 2001, Powell became the first African American to be appointed United States Secretary of State. In this position he has earned high praises as a person with vision. The atmosphere at the state department has changed dramatically since Powell became the Secretary. His leadership style is inspirational.

**The following are Colin Powell's guiding rules for inspirational leadership:**

1. It isn't as bad as you think. It will look better in the morning.
2. Get mad, then get over it.
3. Avoid having your ego so close to your position that when your position falls your ego goes with it.
4. It can be done.

5. Be careful what you choose. You may get it.
6. Don't let adverse facts stand in the way of a good decision.
7. You can't make someone else's choices. You should not let someone else make yours.
8. Check small things.
9. Share credit.
10. Remain calm. Be kind.
11. Have a vision. Be demanding.
12. Don't take counsel of your fears or naysayers.
13. Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier.

(Powell, Persico, 1995)

## **Conclusion**

Dr. Simmons, Ms. Henderson and General Powell represent some of the finest African American Transformational leaders. They represent people who succeeded in the face of difficult circumstances. The little kindergarten student dared to believe her teacher who told her she could do anything. Her kindergarten teacher dared to take a risk and fill the brain of her young pupil with dreams. Then there was an average student from New York who kept on going to school even though his heart was not in school. These all became transformational leaders of gigantic proportions. Ruth Simmons is now at the helm of leadership at Ivy League Brown University; Ms. Henderson would forever be known as the teacher who inspired Ruth Simmons and her classmates; General Powell could become President of the world's most powerful nation if he decides to seek the position.

What traits can we draw out of their lives? The first one is that transformational leaders can be “made”. Dr. Simmons’ parents and her kindergarten teacher played a huge role in the making of Ruth Simmons. Ruth’s parents proved that being poor does not excuse one from parental involvement in school. The same was true for Powell. He kept trying at the insistence of his parents until he found a passion in life. Simply stated, teacher and parental involvement is crucial in “growing” a transformational leader. Ms. Henderson, Ruth Simmons’ kindergarten teacher teaches us that it is never too early to impart a vision to a child. We have to start very early letting the young ones know that obstacles can be overcome. Ms. Henderson would not allow her poor kindergarten students concentrate on what society said they could not do. She taught them to concentrate on the book, paper and pencil before them. It worked and it will work all the time. The young military officer did not bow to the anguish he felt when he was ordered to go to the back window and pick up the food he paid for. He proved there was no excuse good enough to stop the vehicle of success. He was right and today, as the Secretary of State of the United States of America, he stands as one of the most influential leaders in the world. Transformational leadership transcends racial barriers, or any other barrier.

Dr. Simmons and General Powell seem to derive a lot of pleasure at helping raise other leaders like themselves. Ruth Simmons is currently trying to make it easier for any smart student to be able to obtain an elite college education. She believes that Ivy league education should not be a province for the rich people only. General Powell spent years recruiting volunteers to help the less privileged school children with their homework. Transformational leaders are passionate at helping develop and groom other

transformational leaders. These three leaders believe that the principles of transformational leadership can be taught and they seem to be doing their utmost best to grow future transformational leaders.

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