
Sir Arthur ‘Bomber’ Harris: An effective leader in command?

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*Vision is only a dream if it does not have commitment and support*¹

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Introduction

1. Sir Arthur ‘Bomber’ Harris has been described anywhere on the continuum from hero to war criminal.² Dogged by controversy, he lived his postwar years until his death knowing that an estimated 600,000³ German civilians died as a result of his decision to pursue saturation (or area) bombing. Ronald Heifetz, a prominent leadership theorist, advances the hypothesis that evaluation of leadership qualities must inherently contain an imposed set of values⁴ in relation to outcomes of actions. Is it possible to look behind the controversy to establish the leadership credentials of ‘Bomber’ Harris?

2. Harris was appointed Commander-in-Chief on 22 February 1942⁵ after a distinguished career of 26½ years, predominantly as a pilot in the Rhodesian and Royal Air Forces. Within two months of taking up his command, and encouraged by the successful trial of a new navigational aid called ‘Gee’, he had a vision for future bombing attacks on Germany, that would become known as the ‘Thousand Plan’.⁶ The basic tenet of his plan was to concentrate a bomber attack force of approximately 1000 bombers over German industrial cities in the Ruhr Valley on each bombing raid. This plan was conceived primarily to satisfy Air Vice Marshal Bottomley’s directive to Harris’s predecessor, Sir Richard Pierse, that he ‘direct the main effort of the bomber force ... towards dislocating the German transportation system and to destroying the morale of the civil population as a whole’⁷ especially industrial workers.

3. This paper will not examine whether premise or vision was ethical or moral, within the constraints of war. Rather its aim is to evaluate the effectiveness of Harris’s command leadership. It will focus upon his period of command in Bomber Command and the conversion of an organisation which had ‘done nothing ... worth mentioning to injure the enemy’⁸ into one which despatched 2,647 tons of bombs (from 786 heavy bombers) onto Dresden in a single night.⁹ The four leadership characteristics of a contemporary leadership model, the Transformational Leader, will be utilised to assess Harris’s effectiveness.

Transformational leadership

4. In today’s terminology Harris was a ‘change agent’. This is synonymous with what Northouse, in his book *Leadership, Theory and Practice*, classifies as a Transformational Leader. These are people ‘who are recognized as change agents, who can create good role models, who can create and articulate a clear vision for an organization’.¹⁰ Echoing this view, Hughes, Ginnett and Curry say that transformational leaders ‘articulate the problems in the current system and have a compelling vision of what a new society or organization could be’.¹¹ They also postulate that ‘charismatic’ leaders fall under the umbrella of transformational leaders.

5. The characteristics or factors that typify good transformational leaders have been modelled by a number of theorists. This paper will rely on ‘The Four I’s of Transformational Leadership’ articulated by Avolio, Waldman and Yammarino.¹² The factors, Idealised Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Individualised Consideration and Intellectual Stimulation are also endorsed by Northouse.¹³ Although the terms are counter-intuitive, they align closely with the more intuitive characteristics advanced by Hughes, Ginnett and Curphy; Vision, Rhetorical Skills, Personalised Leadership and Image and Trust Building, respectively.¹⁴ Each category will be expanded as Harris’s leadership is examined.

Idealised influence

6. The first category, idealised influence, describes leaders who ‘provide followers with a vision and a sense of mission’.¹⁵ Harris had his vision, the ‘Thousand Plan’, which was largely underwritten by his long-held beliefs in the benefits of night flying and the prominent role that the bomber should play in the war with Germany. Though he estimated that he would need 600 aircraft to achieve his objective, Harris ‘set his heart on 1,000 aircraft.’¹⁶ It was an audacious plan, particularly viewed against the ‘378 aircraft serviceable with crews, and only 69 of these heavy bombers’¹⁷ initially available to him. Harris had a clear vision of how his command could turn the course of the war. It is not intended to address this further, particularly its morality, other than to observe that he immediately sought counsel with Sir Winston Churchill to again confirm his vision remained consistent with the government’s objectives. It is a mark of his leadership qualities that he sought validation before communicating it to the remainder of Bomber Command.

Inspirational motivation

7. Communication of the vision is categorised under the second ‘I’, inspirational motivation. Northouse hypothesises that transformational leaders possess an innate ability to ‘communicate high expectations to followers, inspiring them through motivation to become committed to and [be] a part of the shared vision’.¹⁸ Moreover, they ‘often use symbols and emotional appeals to focus group members’ efforts’.¹⁹ Hughes, Ginnett and Curphy refer to ‘Rhetorical Skills’ possessed by transformational leaders that ‘heighten followers’ emotional levels and inspire them to embrace the vision.’²⁰

8. Here is where Harris excelled in his leadership. Wing Commander W. E. McCrea’s recollection of Harris’s understated, but brilliantly effective, actions as he closed a ten minute briefing with pilots of 57 Squadron is but one example that clearly demonstrates Harris’s brilliance:

He finished by saying, ‘I want you to look at the man on either side of you. In six months’ time only one in three will be left, but if you are the lucky one I promise you this. You will be two ranks higher’.²¹

As he went to leave the briefing Harris received rapturous applause and cheering, a remarkable response given he had just told his audience they had a greater chance of dying than living. McCrea believed it reflected the ‘genuine affection [they had] for the man’.²² The briefing concluded when Harris:

[r]eaching the door ... waved the other members of his party on and turned to face the pilots. ‘Suddenly silence returned to the room. Butch [as Harris was sometimes affectionately called] half opened his mouth but no sound came. Instead he took a short step forward, lifted his arm in a smart salute, turned on his heel and was gone.’²³

There is some very powerful symbolism at work here. His actions convey two messages; the first motivational, the second real respect for these men. Undeniably his men would have appreciated this

and as it is likely that as a result they would have warmed to the task they had been allotted. Moreover, it underscores his real honesty, personal strength and fortitude. All exemplify good 'charismatic' leadership characteristics.

9. On the other hand, there were times when his approach could have been better. When he issued instructions outlining the first trial to fly 1000 bombers on a single attacking raid, Harris wrote 'to each commander detailing the specific actions required from different groups'.²⁴ He also wrote to other Commanders-in-Chief seeking their assistance in providing additional aircraft. He does not appear to have attempted, as the transformational model suggests he should, to 'sell' his vision to his men. He used more of an authoritarian approach. That is, he simply expected his instructions to be followed because of his command status, expecting his commanders to implement the requirements. However, it is possible that Harris consciously decided on this approach because he was faced with a time constraint. The trial was to be conducted within five weeks and had to have optimum night vision conditions.²⁵ Ultimately, it proved effective. Despite Coastal Command reneging on a commitment to provide 250 supporting aircraft 'Harris stubbornly refused to give up his dream and called for a last-minute Herculean effort to raise the extra aircraft and crews from within Bomber Command itself'.²⁶ On the night of 30 May 1942 a bomber force of 1046 aircraft attacked Cologne.²⁷ The success of that raid set the standard for the next three years. The galvanisation of Bomber Command's resolve reflects Harris's confidence in his command structure (discussed in later paragraphs).

10. Harris was clearly a charismatic leader. Results were achieved seemingly through intangible methods. His biographer, Dudley Saward described it as:

The arrival of Harris produced a remarkable and pronounced feeling of confidence that was quite inexplicable. Somehow everyone was convinced that this was the turning point. Almost within minutes of stepping into the Operations Room for the first time, the legend of Harris was born.²⁸

11. The operations room, affectionately called 'the Hole', figured prominently in the reinforcement of Harris's leadership aura. 'It was a drama enacted every morning with unfailing regularity.'²⁹ Harris would arrive promptly at nine, be given a weather briefing and, if conditions permitted, select an appropriate target. His staff were then left to complete the logistical arrangements, which were ratified at a second briefing attended by Harris. The routine had a twofold effect. Firstly, it underlined Harris as the man in Command, the one responsible for making the decisions. Secondly, it demonstrated his absolute confidence in the capacity of his Bomber Command team to accomplish the mission. It was more than an operational briefing; it was a statement of Harris's leadership.

12. There can be little doubt that Harris was adept at inspirational motivation. Even his most ardent critics would have difficulty denying such a proposition. But what of the other characteristics?

Individualised consideration

13. Harris's daily routine carried an impost that impacted upon the effectiveness of his leadership if measured against the third 'I', individualised consideration. Northouse describes individualised consideration as 'teachers who provide a supportive environment in which they listen to the individual needs of the individual'.³⁰ Avolio, Waldman and Yammarino believe individualised consideration is 'best represented in the mentoring role',³¹ and may extend to 'a person who serves as a personal advocate for an employee by "going to bat" for the employee'.³²

14. Although forced by ill health to give up flying in 1942, his vast experience as a pilot, both from the previous war and subsequently, allowed him to relate directly with his men. His experience

as a pilot complemented his leadership in many ways. He respected the judgement of those working around him. His biographer, Henry Probert, recounts an incident related to him by John Searby who was Harris's SASO at the time. After one operation had been authorised, with planning and arrangements well advanced, the duty Group Captain, Denis Barnett, concerned about fog developing on the return flight, cancelled the operation. He had been unable to contact any of the senior officers. His actions were 'unheard of for a mere Group Captain.'³³ When fog never transpired, 'all concerned awaited with trepidation'³⁴ Harris's retribution. On seeking out and being provided with Barnett's reasoning '[t]here was a deathly hush [from those in earshot], then just two words "Quite right".'³⁵ The simplicity of Harris's response 'had backed up Barnett without asking questions knowing that—right or wrong—he had taken action which in [Barnett's] judgement was correct.'³⁶ Harris showed confidence in his staff.

15. He had assembled around him 'a team of senior officers whom he had known personally ... and who had served under him previously during their careers'.³⁷ He was working with people he had successfully mentored in the past. His influence was already stamped on these men. Perhaps this was leadership by stealth. Having engendered his own spirit among his immediate subordinates, that spirit was able to permeate down through the rest of Bomber Command. It was no less effective than mentoring each man himself. Through this approach he was able to command a cohesive unit with a common sense of purpose. Yet there are those that are critical of his disregard for the lives of his aircrew.

16. Critics suggest that Harris was 'callous with regard to his crews; 51 per cent of Bomber Command aircrews were killed in operations'.³⁸ Of the '125,000 aircrew who had served in Bomber Command 55,000 had been killed'.³⁹ This cold statistic belies the underlying truth. Accepted losses were normally 4 per cent of aircraft and crew per mission. During the course of the war Bomber Command recorded only 2.2 per cent losses per mission—389,809 sorties (331,001 under Harris's command) sustaining the loss of 8,655 aircraft.⁴⁰ Night flying over hostile enemy territory was inherently dangerous and was magnified by the monumental volume of repeated bombing raids that were conducted night after night. His aircrews understood that. However, to say he had a callous disregard for their lives is nonsense. He is actually recorded as having said that pilots should ditch planes in preference to risking the lives of themselves and crew by attempting to land in bad weather when parachuting over English soil was an option.⁴¹ This is hardly the mantra of a profligate.

17. Loss of aircrew lives was an issue that sparked a heated dispute between Harris and his superior, Chief of Air Staff, Peter Portal. Portal wanted Harris to continue bombing raids on German oil manufacturing sites, targets that were 'small and usually outlying'.⁴² The raids left his bombers exposed, but Portal felt that losses 'as high as 5–10 per cent could be worthwhile against certain targets'.⁴³ The suggestion rankled with Harris. He wrote to Portal in strong terms concluding the letter with the words 'you may think I feel strongly – indeed I do'.⁴⁴ It was a matter of tension between the two for a period lasting nearly a month. Harris was not one to shirk away from battles with authority.

18. Harris often complained that he was required to provide bombers at short notice to supplement the forces of other commands such as the Coastal Command. He usually did this in writing to his superiors. On one occasion he wrote directly to Sir Winston Churchill, with whom he had a close and mutual respect, complaining that Bomber Command would have been '100% stronger today but for a continual series of ... diversions in the last six months'.⁴⁵ As a leader he had no reticence in pushing for support of his men.

19. Ruthless or not, one thing that comes out in the literature regarding Harris is that despite much of the criticism directed toward him, 'many of those who served under him remain to this day intensely loyal and very protective towards him'.⁴⁶ That endorsement alone is very persuasive.

Intellectual stimulation

20. For the final characteristic, Northouse maintains that transformational leaders should '[stimulate] followers to be creative and innovative' and to 'support followers as they try new approaches and develop innovative ways of dealing with organizational issues.'⁴⁷ Harris was an 'Airman's airman'.⁴⁸ He was a thoughtful man and understood flying requirements. Though restricted with time, he was receptive to innovation and was not averse to seeking opinion from his aircrews. Take, for example, the case of a pilot officer, Allen George, posted to Bomber Command as an instructor after operational experience. He met with Harris, who sought his opinion on an aspect of aircraft equipment. Taking advantage of the opportunity, he raised an unrelated issue associated with unreliable flash equipment on the aircraft's photographic equipment. In response, Harris muttered the words 'fix it' to his staff. Shortly after George 'heard that a better, more reliable photo-flash was being installed'.⁴⁹ This is testimony to Harris's decisiveness. It also reflects Harris's encouragement for his pilots to examine their own circumstances searching for improvements. It was not an isolated case.

21. Earlier Harris, drawing on his own experiences, demanded that suitable clothing and heating be provided to the aircraft gunners to combat freezing conditions.⁵⁰ Commander-in-Chief, Wilfred Lewis, recalling earlier times, indicated that he 'admired [Harris's] attitude, the whole business of trying to do everything for us that would improve our operating capability ... certainly while he was our AOC, and I think ... as long as he was C-in-C Bomber Command'.⁵¹ Harris himself acknowledged that his rigorous daily routine, including the pivotal briefings, restricted his ability to maintain the level of contact he would have liked with his pilots.⁵²

22. Harris's single-mindedness was a two-edged sword in this regard. On the one hand, he would actively pursue initiatives he considered had merit. Sometimes he had to be persuaded to alter his views. He was initially unconvinced by a radical scheme being proposed by aircraft designer, Barnes Wallis. Wallis had been advocating a plan to develop a 'bouncing bomb' to attack German dams. Sceptical of the merits of the plan Harris 'flatly refused to cooperate in the scheme'.⁵³ At the recommendation of his staff, Harris was subsequently persuaded to meet Wallis and after much discussion and incisive questioning, he was swayed into providing support for the project. Once convinced 'Harris acted as he always did, with his full and unqualified support for the project'.⁵⁴ He allowed the conversion of three Lancaster bombers, and so the Dambusters legend was born.⁵⁵

23. On the other hand, Harris could be a fierce opponent if unconvinced. When Group Captain Sidney Bufton manoeuvred around him proposing the formation of an elite aircrew—subsequently known as the Pathfinders—to lead bombing raids and drop bomb markers, Harris remained strongly opposed. Harris believed the initiative would undermine morale. He rejected the notion only to be overruled by his superior, Portal. He took great umbrage at this turn of events, complaining to Portal that 'he ... had been overruled on this issue at the dictation of junior staff officers in the Air Ministry'.⁵⁶ History, of course, reveals the Pathfinders as a central pillar to Bomber Command successes, despite Harris's very limited support.

24. The empirical evidence suggests that Harris was receptive to and encouraged innovative thought from his Bomber Command, but was compromised by time constraints. It was a mindset that he followed during his earlier career and one that he attempted to foster in Bomber Command.

Harris himself also pushed initiatives that he held value in, sometimes at the expense of those he did not favour. He had long pushed for his superiors to put more pressure on the scientists for the development of Gee and other navigational prototypes, such as 'H2S'. He also was heavily involved in monitoring the development of combination bombs—a cocktail of incendiary and fragmentation bombs.

Conclusion

25. In summarising, one thing is certain, Harris's leadership, while largely very effective, will never make a 'text book' case study for Transformational Leadership theorists. There are aspects of the 'Four I's' against which he measures outstandingly. There are others that he measures less favourably against.

26. As an icon, representative of the task facing Bomber Command, Harris, and indeed his vision, provided an inspirational focus. Through its simplicity, his 'Thousand Plan' provided something concrete for his followers to achieve. In terms of the four I's, Harris's leadership, therefore, proved very effective against the characteristics of inspirational motivation and idealised influence. His leadership was not as strong against the remaining two, individualised consideration and intellectual stimulation, largely because he remained isolated from contact with the majority of his men. That notwithstanding, Harris utilised his command structure and his senior leadership team to achieve good results through his de facto influence.

27. Perhaps the most compelling measure of his leadership is the high regard most of his men felt for him.⁵⁷ Much of Harris's leadership had an intangible and, therefore, immeasurable quality. On balance, Harris has to be considered a very effective leader.

Endnotes

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30. P. Northouse, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
31. B. Avolio et al., *op. cit.*, p. 13.
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