Slater Podgorny

Leadership in the Movement for Irish Independence

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Theobald Wolfe Tone: Ireland’s Leader

The Irish Independence movement was plagued by numerous setbacks and multiple extinguished uprisings but nonetheless the rebellion persisted as leader after leader emerged from ordinary professions to risk their lives in the name of Irish Independence. Leaders of the rebellion were not your typical political leaders. The leaders in the Irish Independence movement had origins as writers, teachers, poets, and artists among other things. These leaders were able to reach the people in ways that others could not because they were very much a part of the mass population and they understood the needs and desires of the citizens. Some of the most prominent leadership theories can be seen in the career of Theobald Wolfe Tone and his pursuit of Irish Independence.

Theobald Wolfe Tone was born in Dublin to a modest, middle class, protestant family (Bartlett, 2019). He was well educated throughout his life and graduated from Trinity College while receiving multiple awards (Bartlett, 2019). After finishing at Trinity, Tone pursued a legal career in which he quickly lost interest and encouraged him to pursue a career in politics and pamphleteering (Bartlett, 2019). Tone’s effectiveness as a pamphleteer is a primary reason why he was able to impact so many people across Ireland. In 1791 he published “An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland” which would quickly become the nation’s most popular pamphlet as over 16,000 copies were printed within a year of the pamphlet being originally published (Bartlett, 2019). Tone’s presentation of this passage established his role in the independence movement and began to lay out his approach as a transformational and authentic leader.

Transformational leadership is the idea that “leaders and followers make each other advance to a higher level of morality and motivation” (Burns, 2004). This theory is focused on creating change and has four key components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation (Burns, 2004). In a similar sense, Bill George outlines five dimensions of authentic leadership. Those dimensions are: “purpose and passion, values and behavior, relationships and connectedness, self-discipline and consistency, and heart and compassion” (George, 2003). The idea behind authentic leadership is that if a person is able to embody these five characteristics, they will be an authentic leader and “their followers will respond positively and the organization would benefit” (George, 2003). Throughout his career Wolfe Tone went to extreme measures to meet each of these criteria and as a result, he left an indelible mark on Irish History.

Authors Bass and Riggio describe inspirational motivation or “the degree to which a leader articulates an appealing vision that inspires and motivates others to perform beyond expectations” as a key tenant in transformational leadership and Wolfe Tone used his writing as a method to inspire the people of Ireland (Bass & Riggio, 2006). His pamphlets emphasized the importance of independence and encouraged Irish people to stop catering to British demands. In Doctor Marian Lyons’ lecture, she discussed the parallels between the American fight for independence and the Irish independence movement and discussed the fact that much of the influential language used in America was reused by the Irish in order to inspire the masses (Dr. M. Lyons, Personal Communication, December 5, 2019). Phrases like “life, liberty, and property” can be found in independence documents from both nations and Wolfe Tone took advantage of this rhetoric in order to enhance his impact. By adopting this strategy and being able to reach the smaller portions of the Irish population, Wolfe Tone was able to convey an appealing vision of an Independent Ireland that many people clung onto. Wolfe Tone’s effectiveness as a leader can be attributed to his effectiveness as a writer and his ability to inspire the people of Ireland.

This part of Tone’s life can be associated with the purpose and passion aspect of being an authentic leader. Despite being well educated and bound for a career in law, Tone realized that he was not passionate about law and instead pursued his passion of pamphleteering or writing. While pursuing this passion, Tone discovered his purpose as an influencer which led to his significance as a leader. Tone would also later satisfy another area of passion when he became a member of the French Military and was able to act in a leadership capacity in that sense as well (Bartlett, 2019). Tone traded his financial stability for passion in order to commit himself to the independence movement and that is very symbolic of an authentic leader.

Bass and Riggio also describe the importance of Individualized Consideration in transformational leadership and they describe the idea as “the extent to which a leader attends to each follower’s needs and is a mentor, coach, or guide to the follower” (Bass & Riggio, 2006). This is where Wolfe Tone really set himself apart as a leader. Despite belonging to a Protestant family and having no personal need to protest the oppression of the Catholic population in Ireland, Wolfe Tone was an activist that adamantly supported a united Ireland. In “An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland,” “he proceeded to point out forcefully to his readers that not only were Catholics capable of liberty but that there could be no liberty for anyone in Ireland until ‘Irishmen of all denominations’ united against the ‘boobies and blockheads’ that governed them, and sought parliamentary reform” (Bartlett, 2019). As a Protestant that openly supported the Catholics of Ireland, Wolfe Tone embraced a nearly unheard of ideal as he worked to attend to the needs of Catholics.  He would then go on to occupy the role of mentor or guide as he upheld positions such as an agent for the Catholic Committee (Bartlett, 2019). Stepping into a leadership role with the Catholic Committee allowed him to become a guide for many people as they pursued the idea of a united Ireland.

By standing up for the rights of Catholics, Tone was displaying the heart and compassion piece of being an authentic leader. Dr Marian Lyons discussed the idea that Tone’s sympathy for Catholics was rooted in the fact that his mother was a Catholic that converted to Protestant (Dr. M. Lyons, Personal Communication, December 5, 2019). The fact that Tone was influenced by such a minute detail and allowed it to inform his decisions further shows how the strength of his heart and compassion. As an advocate for Irish Catholics, Tone was also displaying his recognition of the needs of others and his willingness to help them which is an essential part of being an authentic leader.

Wolfe Tone’s desire to unify Catholics and Protestants in Ireland was a new idea and his thought process is consistent with another aspect of transformational leadership which is Intellectual Stimulation or willingness to challenge the status quo (Bass & Riggio, 2006). This characteristic is very evident in Tone’s actions throughout his career as he was at the forefront of the early independence movement and did what he could to stand out but the trait is especially apparent in his support for Irish Catholics and his recognition of the necessity for a united country in order to achieve independence. While working with the United Irishmen, Tone recognized that many Presbyterian and protestant members “harboured a mental reservation concerning whether or not Irish Catholics were in fact capable of liberty” (Bartlett, 2019). Instead of giving into the beliefs of his peers, Tone maintained his support for Irish Catholics which eventually led to his role with the Catholic Committee. Tone’s idea generation and free thinking process were paramount in his effect as a transformational leader and helped garner support from citizens of all religious denominations.

As Tone challenged popular ideals he was also exercising the self-discipline and consistency facet associated with authentic leadership. Given that Catholics were severely underrepresented and mistreated, Tone could have easily given into his peers and dropped his support for Catholics but he did not. His support for Catholics persisted even after writing “A Case for Catholics in Ireland” and he was sure to be a constant beacon of religious unity in Ireland. Tone did not shy away from supporting Catholics regardless of which independence organization he was working with and his consistent voice established his role as an authentic leader not only within Catholic communities but also within Ireland as a whole.

The fourth and final aspect of transformational leadership that Bass and Riggio highlight is the idea of idealized influence which describes the necessity for leaders to be role models and uphold high moral standards (Bass & Riggio, 2006). This is where Tone flourished as a leader because this factor encompasses his commitment to the cause and displays the risks he took in order to model the way. Wolfe Tone began modeling the way when he dedicated himself to uniting the people of Ireland despite their religious preferences but his outstanding character became evident after he was essentially exiled to America in 1795 due to his role in a treason case against William Jackson, an Irishman and secret agent in the service of the French government (Bartlett, 2019). At this time there was already a significant Irish population in America and Wolfe Tone could have easily disappeared into this population and left Ireland to its own issues but instead he made decisions reminiscent of an incredible role model. He used his trip to America as a diversion to ensure that the British government was no longer focused on his actions and then made his way to France to convince the French government to support the Irish Independence movement (Bartlett, 2019). This decision would seal his fate should he be discovered by the British but would also cement his legacy as a relentless leader in the movement for independence.

By making the trip to France and putting his life on the line for the sake of Ireland, Tone was displaying two key characteristics of transformational leadership. Primarily, he was displaying the level of dedication necessary in order to achieve independence. In the nearly two years that Tone spent in France he would meet with multiple French officials and would endure failed attempts at mobilizing a French army (Bartlett, 2019). He would also persist through the deaths of two of his most reliable connections in the French military (Bartlett, 2019). Despite the many setbacks, Tone was relentless in his pursuit of French support and would eventually see multiple ships sent to Ireland. That did not mark the end of his tribulations however. On December 16th, 1796 a French fleet accompanied by Tone set sail for Ireland but they were faced with extreme weather and were quickly rendered ineffective as they returned to France without stepping foot in Ireland (Bartlett, 2019). This event provided a significant challenge to Tone’s leadership and his reaction to the challenge further displayed his remarkable character to his Irish followers. I

In response to another failed attempt at rebellion Tone did not give in and quickly began planning another French excursion to Ireland. In late 1798, Tone and a group of 3,000 French soldiers disembarked with their eyes set on Northern Ireland but they were intercepted by an English Navy Vessel and lost after a taxing battle at sea (Bartlett, 2019). This would prove to be Tone’s final stand as he was imprisoned and sentenced to death before taking his own life prior to be executed. This sequence of Tone’s life could be interpreted as a failure given that he never succeeded in landing French forces in Ireland and the 1798 rebellion failed but his willingness to put his own life on the line and dedicate himself to Irish independence paved the way for future leaders and cemented his legacy as a timeless symbol for Irish Independence.

The second key aspect associated with Tone’s excursion to France is that it displayed his willingness to take risks, a trait essential to intellectual stimulation and transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006). By leaving his family and safety behind in order to go to France, Tone was displaying his tendency to take risks. He was well aware of the consequences that would follow should he be caught by English forces but nonetheless he carried on. Considering that he was taking the ultimate risk and putting his life on the line, Tone’s actions resemble those of a remarkable transformational leader.

Tone’s late life and efforts in France are a prime example of authentic leadership and especially the factors of values and behaviors and relationships and connectedness. Tone clearly valued Irish independence and would take any action necessary to support that value. An essential characteristic of an authentic leader is a person that understands his or her values and does not compromise on them (Northouse, 2016). Despite the threat of death and detour to America, Tone stuck to his values and took action to ensure that he was acting in the best interest of his moral compass, a mark of a truly authentic leader.

In a similar sense, Tone was able to do what he did because of his relationships and connections. In the United States Tone met with Hamilton Rowan and Pierre Adet who helped him plan his voyage to France and travel disguised as American Artisan James Smith (Bartlett, 2019).  Without the aid of his relationships Tone’s trip to France would have been a lot more dangerous and may not have been possible. The military aid he acquired for Ireland also would not have been possible without his relationships with French military leaders such as Lazare Hoche and Napoleon Bonaparte (Bartlett, 2019). As an authentic leader Tone was able to establish these incredible connections that allowed for him to accomplish his goals and fight for the people of Ireland.

When discussing Tone’s impact as a leader, all that really needs to be known is that the republican party still has an annual event at his gravesite although he died nearly 225 years ago. Tone’s life and reputation is an excellent example of what it means to be an authentic leader and the actions he took while Ireland was facing adversity display his mastery of transformational leadership. Ireland’s rich history is filled with remarkable leaders but Theobald Wolfe Tone’s career is especially notable. The work he did and the risks he took provided a foundation for future leaders in Ireland and the culture he promoted was paramount in achieving Irish Independence.

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