

The Role of Values and Leadership in Organizational Transformation

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Abstract

This is an analytic study of organizational transformational change; the values that must be present and operationalized for organizations to successfully change, and the role leadership has in manifesting that change. Specifically, using De Geus' model of the living and economic companies, and taking input from key theorists such as Senge, Quinn, Bolman and Deal, and others, this study examines and analyzes the values and guiding principles that facilitate an organization's ability to transform, the qualities leadership must manifest, and how leadership must function as catalysts to facilitate and energize successful, positive change.

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Introduction

An organization's culture i.e., its soul, is comprised of the collective values of the individuals that make up the organization. Each individual has their beliefs which translates into their personal values which, expressed collectively, define an organization's culture.¹

Values define an organization's standards and norms of behavior, i.e., the framework within which an organization operates.

In all organizations, there is a palpable energy that permeates throughout.² In living companies, they incorporate higher values. People are purposeful yet friendly; when someone new arrives, they ask if they may be of assistance. Can-do and entrepreneurship are key values, and management is concerned equally about profits, employees, and customers. Change is accomplished typically by participatory or transformational (values-based) means. De Geus writes

The living company exists primarily for its own survival and improvement: to fulfill its potential and to become as great as it can be. It does not exist solely to provide customers with goods, or to return investment to shareholders, any more than you, the reader exist solely for the sake of your job or your career. After all, you, too, are a living entity. You exist to survive and thrive; working at your job is a means to that end. Priorities in managing such a company are very different from the values set forth in most of the modern academic business literature. Such a purpose also contradicts the views held by many managers and shareholders.³

In economic companies, higher values frequently are not incorporated into the culture. People don't smile, and seem rushed or preoccupied. There is often high turnover, low employee satisfaction, and disharmony between management and employees. Values are typically set from the top with little or no interaction or buy-in from employees; management's driving value is financial success. Change is normally accomplished by forcing or telling strategies. De Geus writes

Companies produce goods and services' for which other people are prepared to pay a price by trying to find the optimum combination of the three production factors—labor, capital and land. These three are substitutable. Labor can be replaced by capital, for example. The optimum combination of the production factors is the one at which the

company is producing the goods and services at minimum costs to be sold at maximum price for the maximization of profits.⁴

In living companies, values are clear and operationalized, and are the basis on which decisions are made. They provide stability for employees; contribute insight and direction when facing unpleasant decisions; provide a rudder for steering to higher ethical conduct, respect and dignity for the individual; and increase employee motivation; all of which create a competitive edge. When employees share organizational values, they feel more loyal and committed, and identify more strongly with the organization.⁵⁶

Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, stated

The success of our company lies in the fact that (our) people understand (our) values. They joined the company knowing these were the values, and they have worked to implement them. This is our life. This is how we behave. If someone cheats in our company; they are thrown out the first time. If somebody's boundary or turf-oriented, they get a second chance, but they don't get a third. If they're not open, if they don't share ideas, that's bad behavior. We've translated values into operational behavior.⁷

How Values and Leadership Manifest Change

For an organization to successfully change, they must change the framework within which employees and managers operate, i.e., the culture that defines the

organization, by institutionalizing new values and behaviors. Only then will change become permanent and lasting.

Bolman and Deal studied a number of successful reorganizations and noted common threads and values. These organizations developed new shared strategies and goals; carefully studied the structures and processes and their inter-relatedness; designed a new structure taking into account goals, technology, and environment; and experimented with what did and didn't work, retaining only that which did. One additional quality common to successful reorganizations was effective communication with employees.⁸

Jack Welch and other great leaders use and communicate values to set the tone for change for their organizations. What values make the difference between the winners and losers?

Vision and Mission

Every great quest began with a vision. Emerson said that if you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there. Yogananda wrote that to be successful, one must have a clear and focused vision of their desired outcome.⁹

Vision and mission establish the most basic level of commonality within an organization, and provide a common identity and shared sense of purpose that allows people who previously mistrusted each other to work together. At its simplest level, a

vision is an answer to the question, what do we want to create, and mission, the roadmap for creating that vision.

Both Hardy and Senge are adamant in their need for a shared vision. Hardy states that ‘the only thing that will, ultimately, hold an organization together will be a shared conviction in its purpose and its methods.’¹⁰ Senge states

A shared vision is not an idea. It is, rather, a force in people’s hearts, a force of impressive power. It may be inspired by an idea, but once it goes further—if it is compelling enough to acquire the support of more than one person—then it is no longer an abstraction. It is palpable. People begin to see it as if it exists. Few, if any, forces in human affairs are as powerful as shared vision.¹¹

Today, ‘vision’ is a familiar concept in corporate leadership. Every organization has one. Almost all publish them for the employees and customers. But what are they, truly?

In most organizations, the ‘vision’ is one person’s (or one group’s) vision imposed on the organization. Using Quinn’s vernacular, this is an example of forcing strategy of change; such visions, at best, command compliance—not commitment.¹²

However, most successful companies have a jointly created vision to which people are truly committed as it reflects their own personal vision. This ability to co-create, to have a say in the vision and direction of the company, is critical to actualizing change. Maslow observed that in exceptional teams, the task and the self could no longer

be separated; team members identified with task so strongly that they could no longer define themselves without including the task. Senge states that ultimately, it becomes our company, not their company.¹³ Conger writes, ‘In any shared undertaking, trustees bring varying beliefs, values, and opinions about what is best for a community. In this way decision-making occurs within the context of the whole of the community. Trustees link organization and community, ensuring accountability, responsiveness, and credibility.’¹⁴

What would this do for business ethics were all decisions were made in the context of the whole of the community?

Business should take a chapter from the sport of crew (rowing). Handy writes I got a glimpse of what (shared vision) might mean, once, when I jokingly described a typical business team as being like a rowing crew on a river— ‘eight men going backwards as hard as they could without talking to each other, steered by the one person who couldn’t row.’ I thought it quite witty, but I was put straight by an Olympic oarsman who was in the room. ‘You are quite wrong,’ he said. ‘How do you think we can go backwards so fast without talking, unless we had a total trust in each other’s ability and a shared commitment to a common goal? It is a recipe for an ideal team.’¹⁵

This is the power of shared vision, the power of co-creation. By co-creating for a purpose beyond oneself, organizations move forward into a new paradigm. They replace the command and control of old that are led from the top through forcing and telling

strategies of change. These new organizations become a team with a shared vision for its future, clarity of mission and purpose, and a common set of values that are pervasive throughout the organization. In other words, they have soul.

Trust and Stability

Trust is the single biggest issue that can impact an organization's ability to grow and thrive, or fold and die. It is the bedrock on which organizations must be built. When there is trust, people can communicate their problems and get help. People work together without suspicion. They focus on the task at hand without having to cover their six. They can be creative and innovative, and risk without fear of retribution.

Giovagonoli states 'trust is born of openness, vulnerability, and awareness that we cannot go it alone. No one is self-made.'¹⁶

Yet, organizations do not seem to understand this concept. Over the past 20 years, American companies have eliminated millions of jobs, and breaking the bonds of trust between employers and employees. Most layoffs were to raise corporate profits; however, few realized this goal.

A survey conducted by the American Management Association found that less than half the organizations that downsized in the early nineties subsequently reported higher earnings; few downsizings led to profitable growth, and most came back to haunt in the form of sacrificed knowledge and skills, lower earnings, poor public relations, and strained relations with employees, customers, and suppliers. Stability was found to be

characteristic of 90% of firms that outperformed the average in their industry over a ten-year period.¹⁷

Yet, most organizations feel employees are expendable, and downsize to raise their profitability and stock price.

Newton's laws are applicable to organizations. The predilection toward reorganization, layoffs and downsizing in the eighties and early twenty-first century has reinforced workers' sense of distrust of organizations, and their own vulnerability in the face of economic and political forces over which they have little control. A 1996 poll found that 75% of American workers felt companies had become less loyal to their employees, and 64% felt employees were less loyal to companies.¹⁸

The result: a chasm of distrust between management and employees. Corporations continue to sacrifice jobs for profits, while executives continue to make astronomical compensation packages, e.g. American Airlines' top executives protecting their compensation packages while asking employees to take pay cuts, resulting in employees becoming loyal to only themselves.¹⁹

There is an implicit, unwritten contract between the company and the individual which should create a bond of trust between the two, i.e., the employee works for the greater good of the organization and to help it reach its goals, and in doing so expects to be compensated to fulfill their basic needs of shelter, safety, and sustenance.^{20 21}

In economic companies, this implicit contract ‘is based on the underlying premise that in the end, most people want economic reward—a higher pay-check—before all other goals.’²²

In living companies, the contract is based on the premise that every employee is important which is evident in every personnel decision made by the organization. The employee works for the greater good of the organization, and in turn, the organization will do its best to develop each individual’s potential to the maximum. ‘Without this implicit understanding, there is no guarantee of continuity, and without continuity, there can be no trust between the organization and its employees.’²³

However, even in living companies, this implicit contract does not mean lifelong employment. De Geus writes

The value systems of company and individual may turn out to be inharmonious. Nonetheless, the contract affirms that there is at least a statistical probability of lifetime employment. As an employee, you realize when signing on that there are no guarantees; you might be laid off at any point. But you also know that, statistically, you are likely to be valued for your experience, knowledge, and ability to produce results for the entity as a whole.

When people must be laid off, the implicit contract leads to a very different discussion than simply saying, ‘We’re terribly sorry, but you have half a year to find another job.’ Management may say something

like, ‘Yes, the institution is in dire times and we have to do something about it. One of the things we have to do, having taken some care to reshape our cost structure everywhere, is to eliminate some jobs, including yours. Having said this, we still have an implicit contract with you. Are there other ways to develop your potential that do not stand in the way of developing the potential of the company?’²⁴

Management has violated this gentleman’s agreement.

When the trust between employer and employees is broken, each becomes loyal only to him or herself. This has progressed to the extreme; the current norm is that employees are given little or no notice of a layoff, and in many cases, escorted out of the building with a security guard with no opportunity to clean out their desk of personal items for fear they will take company secrets. This is the level to which organizational trust has deteriorated.

Quinn believes trust may be a more lucrative financial asset than money. He states ‘trust is the means, and profit is the end.’²⁵ When people trust and are encouraged to risk with no retribution for mistakes, performance increases as learning continues.

Senge says that spirituality is about the safety to bring our whole beings to work.²⁶ It is about creating an environment of trust, honesty, loyalty, and stability, where workers trust management and each other, where management works in everyone’s best interests, where employees are free to focus on their work and their customers, knowing that the organization cares more about them than their stock price, where innovation and

creativity abound. It is an environment that is, except for a few organizations such as Starbucks, and Men's Wearhouse, nearly extinct in American business.

Truth, Honesty, and Corporate Profits

We grew up being told by our parents, 'tell the truth.' But in reality, do we tell the truth about ourselves personally and professionally? Are we willing to look truth in the face and learn from it? Do organizations wear rose-colored glasses, when it comes to earnings and Wall Street expectations? When relating to its people?

Senge states that 'an accurate, insightful view of current reality is as important as a clear vision,' and coins the term structural conflict, i.e., the difference between our underlying beliefs and the vision of where we are going.²⁷

We may begin with a disarmingly simple yet profound strategy for dealing with structural conflict: telling the truth. Commitment to the truth often seems to people an inadequate strategy. But, in fact, being committed to the truth is far more powerful than any technique. Rather, it means a relentless willingness to root out the ways we limit or deceive ourselves from seeing what is, and to continually challenge our theories of why things are the way they are. It means continually broadening our awareness just as the great athlete with extraordinary peripheral vision keeps trying to 'see more of the playing field.' It means continually deepening our understanding of the structures underlying current events.

Specifically, people with high levels of personal mastery see more of the structural conflicts underlying their own behavior.²⁸

However, often problems arise because organizations define truth by their own assumptions on how to reach a common understanding of reality. Senge writes

At DEC, truth was determined through argument; if you proposed an idea and your boss disagreed, it was culturally acceptable to risk trying it anyway. If you were wrong, you were put in a kind of penalty box, but you weren't fired or excommunicated. If you were right, you were a hero.

At Ciba-Geigy, by contrast, truth was the province of scientific credibility.

If you were a Ph.D. with patents and papers, your statements were automatically taken to be true.²⁹

There is a deeper question of truth that must be applied to organizations regarding profits and earnings.

Over the last few years we have seen organizations stretch the truth, or outright deceive about corporate earnings, e.g., to meet higher (and often unrealistic) earnings expectations, many corporations now state quarterly earnings both in actual and *pro forma* formats, and some omit or hide losses that would lower earnings, thus giving an inflated picture of their fiscal health to raise their stock price.

One can argue there are many reasons for this: greed, executive compensation tied to stock price; fear of failure; Wall Street's unrealistic expectations.

The reasons do not matter. The very act of misstating earnings is an act of deception, an untruth, and results in breaches of trust both within and without the organization and the greater business community.

We must be very clear about the importance of truth, both personally and organizationally. Values-based organizations make truth the cornerstone of their values, and breaches of truth are intolerable because they are seen as betrayals of the sanctity of the organization. Jack Welsh of GE states that 'If someone cheats in our company; they are thrown out the first time.'³⁰

A note about fear. Fear destroys truth. When people become fearful, they recognize and communicate dangers, not opportunities.³¹ This causes many change activities to falter, stall, and ultimately fail. To overcome this, people must feel secure in their positions and understand the larger picture regarding change.

The Role of the Transformational Leader

Organizational transformation requires a transformational leader, a change agent, to act as the catalyst. Perhaps this is because of our humanness; it is frequently difficult for one to change without outside assistance, because we frequently cannot see what needs to be changed, or lack the will to do it on our own. On an individual level, a psychologist helps individuals or families change their thoughts and actions. In Eastern philosophy, the guru is said to be the perfect mirror by which one clearly sees one's self for transformation. In organizations, executives and consultants act as change agents to

bring about change. In societies, politicians and leaders such as Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi act as change agents, often bringing about wide-scale change in the society. At some point, we all interact with change agents.

There is one universal characteristic of these transformational leaders; they live by higher values. Jesus, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Lincoln, Jack Welch: all were transformational leaders.

By no means are these larger than life people the only examples of transformational leaders. Quinn cites an example of an executive at a large health care organization named Eleanor whose boss ordered large personnel cuts in each of their divisions. She refused to comply, stating that it would cause degradation in customer service and further loss of revenue. When challenged by her boss, she stood firm, and his the request was withdrawn.

When asked why she wasn't fired, she replied,

Because (my boss) knows I am not doing these things for myself. My central concern is for the good of the customer. I will do anything he tells me that is good for the system and its capacity to serve the customer. I will not do anything that is not for the good of the system. If he can show me that there is something that I do not understand, then I will gladly comply. I try to stay very clear about who I am. I am willing to risk my job but I do not feel like I am taking any risk at all.³²

When a leader attempts to bring change to an organization through forcing or telling strategies, they usually are attempting to fix problems from their own perspectives, and ignoring those who may be in better position to see the truth of the matter. They frequently begin by telling people what needs to be done to change, and when it doesn't happen, resort to forcing; ultimately, change fails as people are unable or unwilling to make the shift to the new behaviors that are needed. Instead of choosing transformational (values-based) change, the organization dies a slow death.³³

Complexity theory suggests that there is a better way.

Instead of making small changes, transformational leaders first understand the system deeply and the individuals who are integral parts of the system. They then disrupt the system, helping employees to step outside their normal behaviors to adopt new ones. Thus, transformational change occurs.³⁴

Transformational change frequently introduces tremendous upheaval within an organization; anxiety, denial, work avoidance, and conflict are predictable short-term effects. People inherently dislike large change, and instinctively attempt to regain control of their situations. These situations must be dealt with through authenticity, communication, compassion, and perseverance.

Transformational change fails largely because of management's tendency toward inauthenticity and over-control. However, if managers are authentic in their convictions and sincere in their behavior, it can succeed. Otherwise, there is little trust and tolerance for the reflection necessary for authentic change.³⁵

To overcome this, transformational leaders work with others to develop a vision collaboratively. Peter Senge states that most leaders he has worked with agree, their first task is to develop a vision, mission, and values.³⁶ By leaders recognizing and utilizing the inherent wisdom within the organization, change can grow and manifest. Bridges calls this time the 'new beginning.' It is critical that leadership give clear and concise pictures of the future state of the company, and rally the troops toward the goals while trusting the emergent process. As change progresses, management should gradually get out of the way so that wisdom can come up with the best solutions and implement them.³⁷

Transformational leaders must behave according to the highest principles of moral reasoning and integrity.³⁸ They must create a code of conduct around values and communication, especially trust.³⁹ According to Conger, trust is the foundation of any organization, and creating and maintaining that trust is leadership's responsibility.⁴⁰

The CEO of Matsushita Electric stated

I am the soul of this company. It is through me that our organization's values pass. The statements of the organization's vision, mission, and policies-however numerous, well-crafted, and eloquently articulated—are futile if the leader's actions and behavior are inconsistent with these statements. Actions speak louder than words; what the leader does and values set the ethical tone and create the moral environment of the

organization. The higher purpose established for an organization by its leader becomes the starting point in creating the moral environment.⁴¹

Transformational leaders embrace risking and making mistakes. Not afraid to make errors, or admit when they do, their truthfulness is essential to creating an environment where risk taking is encouraged and learning from mistakes is important. 'For the successful leader, failure is a beginning, the springboard of hope.'⁴²

Real change agents live in their truth, and remain open and vulnerable in the process of change. Quinn tells a story of an intervention he performed some years ago that was not going well. On the third day he began telling the group things that no one would generally make public, and began asking questions. Their answers began to get bolder and bolder; the system started to move toward chaos, and dialogue between participants became more truthful for the first time. He relates

The more vulnerable I became, the more the group reached out to help, to join in making a contribution. We were in a trusting relationship pursuing a shared purpose together. We were building a complex object with blindfolds on. Suddenly we had to bring the truth to the surface. No one was afraid of the truth anymore. The old fears were now inconsequential. We joined each other in a search for a new script. By the time the crowd left the room, a new larger system was in place, and it was beginning to self-organize. My colleagues in the back of the room could feel the new

system forming. It was forming because we had surrendered to the emergent process.⁴³

It was through Quinn's remaining open and vulnerable that his skeptics began to trust him; once he had their trust, he was able to enact real change.

Conflict is part of every organization. Transformational leaders have a high level of comfort with managing dissent and conflict in their organization. These leaders nurture conflict within their organizations, believing that out of the conflict, innovation occurs. Their bases for dealing with conflict and disagreements originate out of a genuine value of the differences between people. They have a profound awareness of their own issues of prejudice, biases, projections, and insecurities; in decision-making and interactions with others, they consciously weigh them in to ensure their decisions are not biased. This introspection, this awareness of their own issues, is part of their own self-mastery.⁴⁴

Transformational leaders have undergone self-transformation and have a transformational influence on their followers. They have a strong tendency for introspection as part of their inner journey of self-mastery, and from that place of self-mastery, develop the vision that represents the future state of the organization. They are primarily motivated by what psychologist Abraham Maslow called self-actualization—the highest level in his hierarchy of needs, and have made the journey through their own demons and have touched that deep place where we are in community with each other, and can help take others to that place.⁴⁵

More frequently than not, people rise to leadership positions because of a tendency toward extroversion and their abilities to accomplish tasks as judged by their superiors. Too often, these individuals ignore what is going on within themselves at the cost of their own internal awareness. McDermott writes

After a while (Mark) decided he simply had to make meditation a priority. He decided to spend twenty minutes each day in quiet. He would sit down and place himself in the presence of God, and then ask God to stay with him while he ‘sat with’ different portions of himself, as though they were persons with whom he could communicate. The effect on his day was palpable. Mark soon found the courage to claim his superiors' attention and ask that a review of responsibilities be initiated, with the goal of reapportioning assignments in a healthier way. The part of himself that needed to please was not dead and gone, but it had yielded for now, at least, to a more forthright and honest self in relation to authority figures.⁴⁶

It is through the integration of their inner and outer worlds that transformational leaders manifest change.

Conclusion

Change is about trust. Trust in the unknown. Trust in the knowledge that the future will be better and brighter. Trust in the abilities of transformational leaders to manifest what they say they will do.

Senge relates a story about creating an atmosphere of trust that goes well beyond normal expectations of a leader and change agent.

I spent most of one wintry Sunday night at a crowded airport in Charlotte, NC. With snowstorms raging across the Atlantic seaboard, there were delays on top of delays. Irritable people wanted to get home from their vacations or reluctantly start their business week.

Finally, our plane to Boston boarded. We sat for thirty more minutes on the plane. Then the captain came out of the cockpit, stood in the aisle in the front, and began talking over the flight attendant's microphone. He introduced himself—Orlando Haynes, pilot for USAir.

Then he said: 'I'm standing so you can see me. I want to talk with you honestly. Tonight the weather is bad all up the coast and the ride will be bumpy. There will be no cabin service as we go. The weather in Boston is bad and I don't even know if we'll be able to land. If we land, I can tell you, it will be original. You need to know what to expect. Now... I have a wife and children and I won't put my life in danger; I want to live to be an old man. I won't land if I'm not confident. You deserve to have all the facts as I know them now. We will be pushing back in five minutes.

Think it over. If you aren't comfortable with the situation as I described it, then you may want to wait until tomorrow to fly up. The storm will have passed and Boston will be ready for you. It's your decision to make.

If you need help getting your things off the plane; our attendants will help.

We want you to make the right choice for you.’ Several people got off, including me. I could wait until the next day. The flight did land safely that night, although in the wee hours.

I didn’t fly with him, but Orlando Haynes had given me, and everyone else on that plane, a rare gift. He had demonstrated that he authentically cared for each of us, including himself and his family. He knew his actions would impact that flight’s profitability and also people’s impressions of his leadership and his company’s, long-term financial consequences. He knew people needed to know how scary the flight would be, and he honored those emotions. He let every person consider the known facts and make the best decision for him-herself.⁴⁷

This is an excellent example of the principles and values for which transformational change and transformational leaders stand. Capt. Haynes stood in his truth, told people what they could expect. He did not place their lives any higher than his own; he related to them on the same level as they were, with families and children. In short, he created an atmosphere of trust and openness with his willingness to tell it like it is.

He is a values-based transformational leader.

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