

PAMPHLET 14

THE LEADER'S JOURNEY

by Tom Heuerman, PH.D.
with Diane Olson, PH.D.

Most executives and consultants who talk about transformation have not undergone a personal transformation themselves; most have never actually engaged in an organizational transformation, even though they talk about it while attempting to make changes. But those few executives and consultants who have personally been through a process of transformation and have made serious attempts at an organizational level, stand apart from all others; they are recognizable in their manner of speaking, their way of relating to issues, their deep respect for the difficulty involved in the process and their unwavering consistency of intent. Anyone who has been through such a process is not very interested in engaging in anything else.

Michael McMaster in *The Intelligence Advantage*

I believe that twentieth century scientific discoveries (from quantum physics, chaos/complexity, ecology, etc.) will spread through the social and philosophical systems of Western industrial society. These learnings will expand our consciousness in explosive ways forming a new ecological worldview that will transform how we relate to nature, one another, and ourselves. An organic worldview will provide leaders with insights that will enable them, if they choose, to lead sustainable organizational transformation that coevolves with a sustainable global economy and a sustainable environment.

Many executives say they are “transforming their organizations” as if they were standing apart from the enterprise and doing something mechanical to it. Those who have led transformational change know they do not “transform the organization.” Instead, transformational leaders create conditions for natural transformation to occur--including their own.

Managers acknowledge that most change and transformation efforts of this decade are failures. Those who have led transformation do not speak in terms of the success or failure of a change event. They speak in terms of a process of growth and development. These disappointments indicate that people are still clinging to the old ways of thinking, even as they make superficial changes, and are the crises that precedes true transformation (or death).

Many executives express anger at “resistant” employees and blame them for their “failure” to change. Transformational leaders never, ever, turn on their followers. They understand that resistance is feedback, and they listen to it. Employees maintain their integrity and identities by resisting change that is poorly conceived, planned, communicated, and led.

Most managers attempt to mechanically “fix” the organizations they lead. Mechanical fixes do not work with living systems, and they never did. They are a waste of time, energy, and money. Mechanical fixes to human systems hurt people unnecessarily, and they always have. Thinking of social systems as machines leads to unsustainable results incongruent with the organization’s goals.

I believe that one day many executives will suffer deep guilt and great sorrow from insights into the damage they have caused other human beings in their well-intentioned but misguided efforts to lead organizational transformation. To transform organizations, leaders need to understand them as living systems, and they need to undergo a quantum transformation (a leap from one state of consciousness to another instead of incremental change within a state).

Personal transformation is difficult. Perhaps it is as difficult as anything a human being will do in life--as a person, leader, or follower. “It is very hard work to make this personal change,” said Richard Knowles, consultant and former leader of transformation at DuPont. “For me it was a painful journey.” This personal development requires the courage of a pioneer, the honesty of a child, the imagination of an artist, and the confidence of the naive.

The first step in our conscious evolution (seeing our potential and moving intentionally toward it) is to see reality as it is and to accept that the old

ways of control, domination, and alienation are bringing forth unacceptable unintended consequences for nature, communities, and individuals. A moment of metanoia--a change of the inner person--is required. We pay attention and accept the call to begin a courageous journey within--resisting the system's efforts to impose its controls on our spirits. We take responsibility for our beliefs, leave our dependency on archaic mental models, and set out to find our own way trusting life's natural process of transformation.

Richard Knowles was tough enough to climb through the ranks at DuPont to become a plant manager in Belle, West Virginia. He has a PH.D. in engineering and was a mechanistic thinker by education, occupation, and upbringing. His entry point to transformation:

I was troubled by the way we led because it seemed to be so harsh and difficult for people. I didn't understand why that had to be. I was just in it, and I was trying to live in that system, but I had no understanding. Once I began to wake up to that, I had to break it because I couldn't reconcile the huge disconnect. I felt like it was going to destroy me either physically or emotionally. The dominant culture is often brutal, and it doesn't have to be that way.

Once he became aware of the cruel impact mechanical ways of management have on people, this tired warrior could not return to the archaic and failing methods. To refuse the call of his insights would perpetuate the unacceptable, and he would join the legions of the walking dead. For Dick refusal was not an option; this courageous man would not live a divided life. He chose to be authentic and began the process of enlightenment and transformation. He set forth on a new and spirited journey to evolve his humanity.

The new adventurer wanders and explores in search of new insights and wisdom. By braving the unknown, the leader is energized and experiences being alive in profound ways. Richard Knowles:

I thought I was going insane, because I didn't have anybody to talk to. The stuff we were doing at Belle was working; the work on myself was very difficult and hard, but seemed to be paying off. I had read Gleick's book on chaos (1987) and said, "damn, there is something here." Until then, my work was intuitive. It was scary as all get out; it was working, but I had no frameworks for it. I didn't have the vocabulary.

I went to the Second Annual Chaos Network Conference in Santa Cruz, California in June 1992. I was so desperate at that point I felt, “well, I am going to go.” I told my boss I was going to an O.D. conference since chaos sounded far out. He apparently never read my expense account either. At least he never said anything because the conference was held at a place called The Dream Inn, and I just thought that was staggering. Here you are going to a chaos conference at the Dream Inn, they’ll think I’m crazy.

It was about a three day meeting and my whole world changed. Everybody there understood what I was doing. They gave me a vocabulary and a framework. I met Meg Wheatley, read her new book Leadership and the New Science, and felt like I was coming home.

The leader’s new growth is difficult and painful. The naive, curious, innocent, and courageous adventurer moves from a world of absolutes into a world of paradox. The limits of traditional thought are reached, and the seeker grows comfortable with ambiguity until new understanding emerges.

The proud achiever realizes that rigid boundaries between people must be torn down. The leader comes to realize that life in organizations is often narrow and superficial, and the individual importance and contribution of executives is often inflated greatly. To build trust, empathy, and understanding the humbled traveler accepts, reflects upon, and grows from feedback given thoughtfully by diverse people. Great insights come from those the emerging person might not have paid any attention to when living the elitist executive role. The trail blazer meets fellow travelers on the journey, and they provide support and encouragement. Mentors and teachers appear mysteriously at the moments they are needed and guide the learner along the way.

The awakened leader understands the impact that mechanistic behaviors have on others. The emerging human being feels the sorrow of knowing that traditional approaches to organizational leadership diminish people--including oneself. The competitive champion is forced to examine competitiveness and to discover the value of cooperation and collaboration.

The lonely traveler understands how unaware leaders often are of the organization's reality and how little truth exists in organizations. As consciousness grows, the leader realizes how little those with power know about people, leadership, and thought itself. The leader begins to see the potential that waits to spring forth from people. A growing person becomes comfortable with feeling scared and inadequate much of the time. Despite the persistence of these hated emotions, confidence grows and courage and authenticity increase. Strong resistance to change and unexpected enemies build the leader's capacity to stand alone.

Despite the shock of seeing reality in a whole new dimension, great excitement emerges for the potential the visionary can see in the evolving picture of the future. Commitment grows and the leader's sense of purpose is strengthened. The leader dies many deaths and emerges as a changed person. A person who now understands the process of becoming; a person who evolves one's core essence intentionally. Knowing the path is uncertain and even dangerous, the experimental leader points out the direction and will never be distracted from living the new vision of truth.

The leader becomes an ecological thinker who experiences life organically by seeing networks, patterns and beliefs, relationships, and processes. An ecological thinker experiences life in terms of interconnected networks and develops the capacity to shift between levels of complexity and between connected systems.

Like a tracker, an ecological thinker practices intermittent attention, a constant refocusing between minute detail and the whole area around it, between the track and the whole pattern of the woods. **The mind that can see the individual track and the pattern of the woods is a new mind.**

The leader knows human nature obstructs a new way of thinking (see the pamphlet "Organizational Mindfulness"). Instead of resisting instinctual ways of reacting, the mindful leader works around them. Thought processes are held up for examination and correction. Coaches and mentors "hold up the mirror" when the leader reverts to old ways of thinking, and the messengers are rewarded for doing so. The ecological thinker is observant: always paying attention for what is unsaid, missing, or unusual by its absence or presence. The mindful thinker always asks, "what just happened, and what can we learn from it?" and "what will the unintended consequences of our actions be?"

The leader finds new meaning and shares learnings with others. Life in the organization becomes participative to gain the wisdom in the system and to utilize the diversity needed for sustainability. The leader does not go to diversity classes. Instead, time is spent with people different from oneself, and the leader learns from the experiences. Alliances with like-minded people are formed, and the leader puts oneself in situations where wisdom can come from others.

The servant-leader suspends ego, commits to something larger than the self, and identifies with life itself. The leader's needs are sacrificed for the greater vision. The objective is the best process and product, not being first or right. The leader asks questions and gathers information before acting but realizes complete knowledge is never possible. Learning is done in real-time. Mistakes are made as new ideas are experimented with and the leader learns to say, "I'm sorry, let's fix it."

The leader understands the importance of authentic feedback for change. A climate of openness exists, decisions are made on merit, and it's okay to be real. Turbulence is encouraged, and leaders in all areas of the organization tinker and experiment. This emergent growth heals and frees people and as restoration occurs people begin to come alive and their restricted potential comes forth. This is how transformation happens, how movements begin, how recovery occurs, how paradigms change, and how people self-transcend. This journey within can be taken by anyone but only those of courage and character will heed the call to be more than they are. Those who want to lead sustainable organizations must.