

Open Secrets in Transformation

A leader's guide for tough times

by Dan Holden

There is much talk today about organizational transformation. Increased competition in the marketplace, volatility, rapid change, endlessly shifting financial targets and a diet of sustained uncertainty keep the best leaders up at night. Transformation would seem like the solution for these conditions with its promise of a significant change in the nature and functioning of a person or an organizational system. There is something unsettling, though, about how we view transformation. We wrap it up in surface level simplicity and overlook how disruptive real, deeper transformation can be. Remember, the great majority — 85% — of change efforts fail to deliver on promised outcomes. This article suggests there are four requirements we commonly know but have forgotten that would increase the likelihood of successful transformation efforts if we embraced and practiced them. Open secrets.

REQUIREMENT 1: KNOW YOURSELF — YOU ARE THE CULTURE.

Many of us hold two assumptions we hope others won't discover about us: First, we are 'all in' for transformation as long as it begins with *someone else, somewhere else*. Secondly, we are prepared to commit only if transformation '*begins tomorrow, not right now*'. With these two assumptions quietly nested in our consciousness it is easy to see why so many change efforts fail. William Stafford, a former US poet laureate wrote in his poem *A Ritual to Read to Each Other*:

*If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the
world
and following the wrong god home we may miss
our star.
...it is important for wake people to be awake...
For the darkness around us is deep.*

It is very easy to get caught up in the viewpoints and opinions of others. The most common dynamic in organizations is the shared assumption that the reason we can't get what we want accomplished is because of '*Them*'. The group called '*Them*' includes administrators, senior leaders, physicians, surgeons, engineers, finance and other necessary targets. Choose your favorite but first consider this: *The entire culture is alive in every interaction we have with Them. We are the carriers of the culture.* Others will do and say what we do and say. Those things we talk about and the way we talk about them become the topics and pattern others follow. When we criticize, blame, condemn and scapegoat others while ridiculing their viewpoints, this ripple will extend through the organization authored by each of us. We look out at a reality we had a strong hand in creating and then deny our role altogether.

The most effective leaders in times of tough change and transformation learn to do three things well. First, they get clear about what matters most. Purpose, vision,

mission are the corner stones that ground these leaders in times of uncertainty and chaos. Secondly, they learn to be especially relentless in looking at current circumstances. They want to know where things stand, no matter how difficult it is to know. In particular, they develop a razor sharp ability to examine *their own contribution to current circumstances*. They learn to include themselves — their hidden insecurities, fears, assumptions and secret strategies — in assessing where things stand. Finally, they learn over time to talk authentically about these two things. They learn to lay aside blaming and accusing others and instead come to own and accept accountability for where things stand. They have come to know that real transformation is about letting go of things and stepping into larger possibilities which cannot be apprehended until we do. This new ripple will also extend through the organization and bring us much closer to the results we desire.

REQUIREMENT 2: START WHERE YOU ARE.

Transformation never seems to happen when it should. We want to have it on our calendars. Tomorrow: Meeting room #1A: Transformation. 3:15-4 pm. It always seems to take place at the worst possible time when we are caught up in the swirl of busy days, impossible demands and very limited resources. Mary Oliver, a Pulitzer Prize winning poet (we're only using the famous poets here) sums this up in her piece titled, *The Journey* —

*One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice...*

*But you didn't stop
You knew what you had to do...*

*Little by little as you left their voices behind
There was a new voice which you slowly recognized
as your own
That kept you company
As you strode deeper and deeper into the world
Determined to do the only thing you could do...*

Determined to save the only life you could save.

The poet suggests that personal transformation, much like the organizational counterpart, happens “...little by little”. It involves “...leaving behind their voices and slowly recognizing a new voice...as your own.” There is something inevitable about this journey; it isn't so much about doing great work or being a better practitioner in our field, or even a better person. All of these may be by-products of this journey. The focus here seems to be *apprehending the person we came into life to be and doing that which we came into life to do*. As we do these things they allow us to move *deeper and deeper into the world* where we belong. We don't need to change the world or even the organization. Instead, we commit to making our area of responsibility reflect what is highest and best in ourselves. This poem speaks to the work of offering the fullness of who we are right where we are. Others will be drawn to our work because of the light and excellence we exude. Let this be enough!

REQUIREMENT 3: STAND FOR SOMETHING GREAT. (IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU!)

We enter organizational life pursuing one of two strategies. The first and most popular option is characterized by *myopic self-interest*. We focus on our promotions, recognition, advancement, status, standing, credibility and the approval and respect of important others. This tends to be a fear-based stance; we are always concerned about remaining in the good graces of other important people and we get skilled in manipulating others so they see us in a favorable light. Approximately 65-70% of leaders fall into this category, according to Bob Anderson and Bill Adams in their best selling book, *Mastering Leadership*. It is not that leaders don't have moments of being interested in other things; but their inward motivation on any given day is more fear-based than *purpose-driven*, the second option.

In the purpose-driven stance, we are overtaken by something much greater than ourselves: patient/customer safety, product quality, access to life saving technologies, creative freedom, forging human connection where there is little or none, and building sustainable wildlife reserves might be examples of this latter strategy. Mary Oliver calls this the determination '*to do the only thing you can do.*' Rainier Rilke, the gifted German poet of the last century, offers a paradoxical viewpoint on the purpose-driven stance. He compares us to people watching an immense storm rolling across the fields and then offers this for us to consider:

*What we choose to fight is so tiny!
What fights with us is so great.
If only we would let ourselves be dominated
as things do by some immense storm,
we would become strong too, and not need names.
When we win it's with small things,
and the triumph itself makes us small.
What is extraordinary and eternal
does not want to be bent by us.*

Will power, strength, tenacity and perseverance are qualities we often admire in leaders. While there is a place for this kind of sustained effort over time, it hardly seems like an optimal one. Too often, out of exhaustion, impatience, anger or despair, we turn away from the larger issues so we can at least win something, without realizing...*winning with small things makes us small*. Perhaps it's time to outgrow the conversations we are in each day; they have become too small for us. The *extraordinary and eternal* call for our attention.

James Stockdale, the highest ranking American prisoner of war during the Vietnam Nam conflict offers a similarly paradoxical observation on how to prevail during extremely difficult times. In his case, this included eight years of torture in the 'Hanoi Hilton', a prisoner of war camp. Much of this time was spent in solitary confinement. He is credited with building a life affirming, mission driven culture while in prison! In his case the *dominating storm* was his mission: Return home alive. He was convinced in the efficacy of this mission, knowing that not only would he prevail but that this challenge would become a defining moment in his life. He did survive and it was. He brought many others with him in large part because he taught them, in the midst of the horrific fire of transformation, that there were three types of prisoners in confinement, but only one type was likely to survive.

Optimists were the first to die! Those who believed they would be out by the holidays. Certainly by Spring. They died of broken hearts. Pessimists often died of despair, overwhelmed by the sheer brutality of their conditions. The type of prisoner most likely to prevail were wired in their consciousness like Stockdale himself — convinced in the importance of their mission and stubbornly insistent on telling the truth about the conditions they were subject to. It was assumed

everyone would confess. The mission required it, if failing to confess meant death. So, plans were made to confess false information! This pattern of leadership behavior during tough times should sound familiar by now. Thankfully, most of us do not have to endure experiences as brutal as Admiral Stockdale did. Our circumstances today, however, require the same mindset: get clear about the great thing —*the immense storm* — which demands our attention and commitment.

REQUIREMENT 4. GRATITUDE IS AN ACCELERANT. USE IT.

Nothing speeds up change more than a stance of gratitude for circumstances and for those people who surround us. While there are endless challenges we face each day, when we find time to be thankful for the life and time we have, even hard things seem to get a bit easier. John Gottman's research on marital partnerships finds its way into team and organizational leadership research today. He suggests a ratio of 5:1 (positive to critical interactions) is optimal for peak performance. The negative deal breakers — the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse —as he calls them are especially destructive. Blaming, Criticizing, Stonewalling and Contempt, when they dominate conversations can make even easy things much harder than they would otherwise be. We make adversaries out of colleagues and then wonder why we struggle. There's a better way.

This requirement does not mean we have to hand out cookies and trinkets to those who are just doing their job. Rather, we learn to operate on the assumption that each person we encounter secretly wants to be seen, heard and respected by us. Few, if any, of us wake up wanting to be mediocre or sub standard. We want to do great things that matter. Each interaction, if marked by these behaviors, could make even tough conversations a little easier. The 5:1 ration of positive to critical is a good gut check; how did I do today? I wonder if Admiral Stockdale, as he was dragged beaten half to death from another interrogation wasn't brought back to life and mission by those who walked alongside him and had the courage to see, hear and respect him as he was. How much more do our colleagues need the same from us?

Assume it's up to you. Start where you are, with those standing in front of you. Stand for something great; practice demonstrating this without words — behave in ways that are undeniably awesome! And, don't miss the brilliance and passion of those around you. Let them know. Imagine how these simple acts can deeply transform you and the culture around you that you are. Now is the time.

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