

ARE YOU WILLING TO BE A TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADER?



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In July, after six months of part-time study, I was really pleased to receive my *Postgraduate Certificate in Shared Services* (now *Postgraduate Certificate in Collaborative Transformation*) from the Chair of the LGA, Lord Gary Porter.

In my working career I have been involved in a number of change programmes, both successful and unsuccessful. Through this experience I had already identified leadership as the pivotal element on how the change programme turns out.

However, what my academic research assignment on the *Postgraduate Certificate* revealed is that leaders in the public sector must change from only being a traditional (transactional) style of leader, to having the agility to switch between that style and *transformational leadership* if they are to be successful.

Wide spread collaborative change (e.g. combined authorities, city deals, health and social care transformation, blue-light alignment, maybe even the Welsh Council mergers) is underway across the public sector, driven by unprecedented spending cuts before the end of the decade.

That means you may have to make a major shift in your leadership style to continue to be successful in your work. For example, if you find yourself re-applying for your own job, or a new one, you may have to demonstrate that you possess both transactional and transformational leadership qualities and experience.

What can we learn from the academics?

Reviewing the academic literature on the subject of transformational leadership provides a deep insight into the distinction between the two types of leadership roles.

However, delivering change of this magnitude successfully is very difficult. It will require a

hard look at whether certain services are necessary and how new methods of delivering essential services could be employed.

With every penny counting like never before, and increased public scrutiny, the pressure on leaders to deliver change has become intense.

The concept of collaborative working, for example sharing services, is a major mental shift for organisations, and their departments, traditionally used to operating in a silo. To alter the mind-set of the follower's response to change, will require marrying the organisations' values with the values of the people and transformational leadership is particularly effective during the change process¹.

What is Transformational Leadership?

In order to understand the concept of transformational leadership it is important to be aware of the other leadership styles.

In general there are three types of leadership models²:

- **Tactical leaders** who solve tactical issues by their own expertise
- **Strategic leaders** who work towards the future with a vision, and
- **Transformational** leaders who are the facilitators aiming to transform both the people and the organisation to a new state of mind

Leadership expert James MacGregor Burns is credited for identifying the concept of transformational leadership in 1978.

Burns differentiated transformational leadership from transactional leadership, as a

¹ Herold et al., (2007)

² Ford and Tucker (2014)

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process in which leaders and followers worked together to create a higher level of motivation.

The importance of transformational leadership in a collaborative working environment...

There are numerous case examples revealing evidence that the implementation of organisational change often fails. When the organisational change involves collaborating with third parties, it has been academically evidenced that most collaborations either fail without achieving anything, or make painfully slow progress, and of the successes, many have been painful and hard work³.

One of the key reasons reported as to why change programmes fail is due to employee resistance. The role of the transformational leader is to transform their followers’ attitudes and behaviour to the desired state in order to achieve commitment to the collaborative vision⁴.

The emergence of transformational leadership symbolizes a major move from the traditional transactional models of leadership which increasingly is being discredited according to many writers⁵.

The traditional leadership models are observed by many as becoming ineffective due to their dependency on ‘contractual relationships’⁶. The supposition is that these relationships’ reward and punishment structures are the workers’ motivators and this encourages organisational engagement built upon self-interest and not real emotional attachment with the organisation’s values⁷.

The leader sets the conditions under which expectations should be performed and identifies the reward mechanism and the

³ Vangen and Huxham (2006) & Kotter (2012)
⁴ Burns (1978); Peters and Waterman, (1995); Huxham and Vangen, (2006), cited in Hibbet and Huxham, (2010)
⁵ Cockcroft (2014)
⁶ Bass and Avolio (1993).
⁷ Densten (1999)

subordinate aims to deliver on the expectations⁸.

Rather than the carrot and stick approach, transformational models of leadership are built upon values of “participation, consultation and inclusion”⁹ and aim to break down the cultural barriers that may exist within the organisation.

In this regard, transformational leaders seek to transform the direction of the follower to the desired behaviour, from behaving to the expectation of reward or punishment, to one where they conform because they share and buy into the organisation’s vision¹⁰.

So what about the collaborative working and shared services context?

Leadership authors have written in abundance on the core characteristics possessed by the majority of leaders, examples of these characteristics include: good judgement, communication skills, knowledge, interpersonal skills and confidence (Kotter, 2012).

Starting in 1995, academics and researchers¹¹ have explored the personal characteristics specifically attributable to the transformational leader. The key ones are:

- **emotional coping:** the ability to control personal emotions in the face of failure, disapproval and stressful situations “so as not to allow their feelings to obstruct their interactions with colleagues”
- **behavioural coping:** having persistence, flexibility, adaptability, visionary and entrepreneurial problem solving.
- **abstract orientation:** the individual’s ability to critically assess and evaluate unformulated or vague ideas.

⁸ Engel and Worden (2003)
⁹ Silvestri (2007)
¹⁰ Cockcroft (2014)
¹¹ Dubinsky et al., (1995)

If you are in a leadership role, or aspire to be in one, then carefully analyse your leadership traits and test to see if you have the agility to move between transactional and transformational leadership.

The capability to solve problems is a critical responsibility for leaders providing public services as the need to carefully assess which services are most appropriately shared to achieve cost savings and which would be better provided directly¹².

To transform the organisation's culture, processes and systems the leader will need the ability to cast a clear vision of the desired outcome and create a coherent strategy to bring it to reality. Without a clear vision, the project's objectives will be disjointed and take the organisation away from where it wants to be¹³.

It can be seen from the volume of change management academic literature that the innovative characteristic of transformational leadership is critical to the success of a shared service project. Not just in terms of the innovation delivered specifically by the leader but also by the follower whose innovative behaviour is enhanced through the engagement with the transformational leader.

Mclvor¹⁴ presented a case study of an organisation seeking to transform into a shared service function, and illustrated that due to the absence of transformational skills the organisation sort to create transformational leaders by putting its directors through executive development courses similar to the SSA practitioner programmes.

So how have I been changed?

Now with an understanding of what it takes to fulfil the role of transformational leadership, on reflection I would adjust my approach to collaborative working in two different ways. Firstly I would build stronger bridges between the leaders and departmental staff. It almost feels like, in the early stages, you cannot have too many meetings to get to know staff at a local level, understanding their concerns and

working to address them through the changes to be implemented.

In addition, I would ensure that skilled, knowledgeable and experienced collaborative transformation practitioners, or architects are in place. The evidences is that inexperienced leadership can cost a shared service project considerable time and money as they stumble from one costly path to another.

What recommendations would I make to you?

If you are in a leadership role, or aspire to be in one, then carefully analyse your leadership traits and test to see if you have the agility to move between transactional and transformational leadership.

When you approach your projects, or are stepping into meetings, be clear before hand which style of leadership is required.

If you feel unsure about what transformational leadership truly involves then have a look at the SSA, 3 day, Collaborative Leadership or Collaborative Transformation Programme. Or even step onto the Postgraduate Certificate in Collaborative Transformation at Canterbury Christ Church University, as I did.

I started this article by writing: *“Wide spread collaborative change (e.g. combined authorities, city deals, health and social care transformation, blue-light alignment, maybe even the Welsh Council mergers) is underway across the public sector”*.

The choice that faces all of us working in the public sector is, are we going to attempt to predict our future career in a collaborative world, or are we going to make our future happen by adding transformational leadership to our CV?

What skill set do you feel your next interview panel will be looking for?

¹² Morton (2008)

¹³ Kotter (2012)

¹⁴ Mclvor et al., (2011)