

## **Transformational Leadership – Lessons from Great Photography**

### ***Introduction:***

*How we experience reality is determined by the lenses through which we see the world.*

Transformational leadership, like great photography, is about creating new realities for people and organisations and the lenses through which we see the world is the transformational tool for leaders and photographers alike.

What is transformational leadership and how is it different from transactional leadership?

Simply put, transformational leadership is about *making a difference*. In many of the programmes I run I often ask leaders the question:

*“Assume it is 2 years from now and you are moving on to a new role. What is different about the role you have just left from when you started in that role? What is the legacy that you have left and will be remembered for?”*

Most established organisations have institutionalised good leadership practices. They have performance management systems, career and succession systems and managers are required to conduct regular performance and career discussions with their staff. Many leading companies have company wide leadership competencies with defined leadership behaviours attached to them. Career progression in managerial career paths are largely determined by the extent to which future managers conform to the required behaviours.

In the same way that the average good photographer now has the digital tools to take technically good photographs, the transactional leader in good organisations is technically proficient at leadership as defined by that organisation.

This is best practice and there is nothing wrong with it. It builds a sound culture and ensures organisational sustainability.

Transformational leaders in such organisations do these things well. However, it is not these things that make a difference and for which such leaders are remembered. What makes a difference and what they are remembered for are those few things that transformational leaders do that change the organisation or those over whom they have influence.

### ***Transformational Leaders Adopt a Cause:***

Great photographers are not remembered for the hundreds or thousands of photos they have taken and even published. They are remembered for the 2 or 3 photos that made a difference to photography or their subject. They have pushed the boundaries resulting in the creation of something special to which other photographers aspire. They do this not only with the use of advanced technology. It is a combination of technology, the subject, the emotion that the subject elicits, the “moment”, the composition and many other factors which combine to make a great photograph.

Transformational leaders are remembered for those few things they do that has an extraordinary impact on society, an organisation or individuals.

They are also remembered for the cause that they represent.

Representing a cause is very closely aligned with what leaders stand for and their personal brand.

Transformational leaders at any level in an organisation or society can take on a cause and become activists for that cause.

Considering well known transformational business leaders, most people would be able to describe what Richard Branson, Jack Welsh and even local leaders such as Raymond Ackerman stand for and what they are remembered for. Not only is it what they stand for (their cause) that they are remembered but even more specific things they have done. Richard Branson for his adventure activities and new, counter intuitive business models; Jack Welsh for his approach to performance and succession; Raymond Ackerman for defying the major oil companies and fighting for the housewife. These leaders do the normal leadership stuff well; but it is the specific, high impact things that they do that transforms organisations and conventional thinking and creates the memory and the legacy.

Great photographers are technically sound at taking all kinds of high quality pictures. However, they are known for pushing the limits in their areas of speciality such as journalism, portraiture, landscapes, abstract etc. And it is those few photographs that really make an impact for which they are remembered.

It is not necessary to be an Executive to be a transformational leader. A front line supervisor can be transformational. What is necessary for a transformational leader to leave his or her mark is to identify with an issue or cause that is of relevance to the organisation at the time and then become the champion and face of it throughout the organisation. Such a cause may be new products, packaging, technology or other operational business need. Or it could be at a more strategic level such as governance, transformation, talent management, new branding etc. Critical to a successful cause must be its relevance to the organisation at that point in time. It should be at the edge of the radar screen but with potential to be drawn to the centre in the medium term.

Obviously, once the cause is no longer new and is part of the operations, the next high impact cause needs to be adopted.

By representing a high impact cause the transformational leader will have an impact on the organisation and the people involved and will be perceived as the driver of relevant change.

### ***Seeing the Big Picture; Examining the Detail:***

In the same way that photographers alternate between a wide angle lens and a telephoto or even macro lens, transformational leaders need to see the world through both sets of lenses.

Most leaders have little difficulty examining the detail. What often gets missed is the big picture. Yet it is the ability to see the big picture that enables a transformational leader to identify those things that are important.

The global financial crisis had multiple causes and multiple guilty parties. Consumers of loans, banks, credit agencies, government regulators and even business schools were all complicit in the final melt down of the system. However, each part of the system saw only that which was of relevance to it; no-one connected the dots and was able to see the collective effect of the behaviour of each player in the system.

In a complex world, the ability to see the bigger system is a key skill. Hence the rise of systems thinking as an essential skill for leaders in a modern economy.

In an organisation, transactional leaders focus, quite rightly, on continuous improvement. They make incremental changes that continuously improve the efficiency and effectiveness of “the way things are done”.

Transformational leaders also focus their macro or zoom lens on the details of improving efficiencies. However, in addition, they have the capacity to look through the wide angle lens and understand the context in which the detail takes place. In so doing, they are able to identify the current and future shifts in the context of the organisation and make those few, essential and impactful decisions that enable the organisation to take advantage of opportunities or avoid threats.

This principle, again, applies to all levels in an organisation. Before problems occur in respect of safety, productivity, sales, employee relations and all the other issues that operational managers are responsible for, the signals that things are not right are generally evident long before they reach crisis mode. Leaders need to be attuned to the weak signals and act on them before they become a crisis.

### ***Cognitive Agility:***

Cognitive agility refers to the ability to see ordinary things and events from a different perspective.

Great photographers have the ability to take an ordinary scene, look at it from a different angle and produce a new and innovative result. It is largely the art of photography and it is the basis for creativity on which the artist relies.

Survey after survey demonstrates the importance of innovation in a modern economy. Innovation can only occur if people are able to look at the ordinary and find the extraordinary.

Transformational leaders have the ability to see the world through a different set of lenses and hence find innovative solutions to problems for which traditional solutions no longer work.

Such abilities can no longer be confined to the creative disciplines such as marketing and advertising. Every leader, from production and engineering staff to accountants, has to be able to look at problems from multiple perspectives.

One of the greatest obstacles to creative problem solving in many organisations is the unwillingness to accept non traditional perspectives and solutions to problems and hence organisations develop an orthodoxy which sets the boundaries to what is acceptable and what would be beyond consideration. Transformational leaders create an environment where these orthodoxies and assumptions are deliberately challenged so that multiple perspectives on a problem can be

encouraged. Hence, diversity enhances the organisation to see the same thing from a variety of angles.

The photographer who wishes to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary has a number of tools to help him or her. He or she can change the perspective, the distance, the depth of field, the lighting and many other factors to achieve extraordinary results. Similarly a transformational leader has many opportunities to look at things differently, but central to both is the ability to see the same thing through a variety of mental lenses.

### ***Seizing the Moment:***

Many great photographers get the great picture by setting themselves up at a place where the light is right and where the action is likely to happen, such as a water hole or street scene. Then they wait and when the moment arrives they are ready and the great picture is in the bag.

Transformational leaders have a clear understanding of their strategy and they prepare for the moment when they can take advantage of an opportunity when it arrives. This may be the launch of a new product or a takeover or any other action that will contribute to the achievement of their strategy.

In both cases it requires preparation, clear goals and patience as well as the ability to recognise and act on an opportunity when it comes along.

In a different approach great photographers rely on rapid response to an unexpected unfolding event. This requires fast reflexes to take advantage in the event of an unexpected photographic opportunity.

Transformational leaders, similarly, need to be constantly vigilant and recognise and act upon opportunities (or problems) that present themselves.

In both cases the skill is the agility and preparedness for rapid response. In many organisations the processes to take advantage of opportunities is so slow that smaller, nimbler organisations have a great advantage in a fast changing environment.

### ***Focus:***

Other than some art forms, no photograph, no matter how extraordinary, has any value if it is out of focus. What great photographers spend considerable time on is deciding where the focus in a picture will be.

The point of focus is achieved through a variety of mechanisms such as the focal length of the lens, the aperture and distance of the subject. In some cases it is a very narrow depth of field that defines a great portrait where the model is focused but the background is blurred. In other cases, such as a landscape, everything in the picture from front to back is in focus.

Transformational leaders need to take decisions about what will be in focus and what will be on the periphery. In too many organisations time and energy is spent on "noise" ie activities that consume great energy but add little value, such as unnecessary meetings and reports. Transformational

leaders know that they and the organisation need to focus on the 20% of things that will deliver 80% of the results. It is those few things that will deliver the results for which they will be remembered.

Similarly, they recognise that many of the “softer”, leadership related issues need to be constantly in focus if the hard results are to be achieved and hence both the results and values and behaviours of people are brought into focus.

### ***Orchestrating the Final Picture:***

As indicated earlier, a great picture is a combination of a number of factors – technical excellence; lighting; subject matter; the context of the event; the composition; the focus and the emotional impact amongst others. All of these combine to create the chemistry that results in a great photograph.

Transformational leaders recognise that impact in one aspect of the greater picture is of little value if all or any of the other elements of a transformational situation is substandard or missing. It is the orchestration of all the players, the music, the script and the technology that results in great organisational performance. It is the ability to configure the individual parts of the orchestra that enables it to increase its repertoire and have the agility to respond to the needs of a variety of audiences in a variety of situations.

### ***Conclusion:***

Transformational leadership is not for the faint hearted. It is an uncomfortable place and it demands courage to move into uncharted territory. It is often a place where, in the words of Rudyard Kipling, you need “to keep you head while all around you are losing theirs...”

Great photographs do not arise by good luck. They result from, in addition to technical ability, a journey into new and, often unknown terrain. They require innovation and, above all, the passion and energy of the photographer to push the boundaries in terms of time and space.

In organisational transformation the amount of personal leadership energy that is required to bring about change is always underestimated. Transformational leaders have to provide the energy for the organisation to transform.

Hence, the final ingredient in both great photography and transformational leadership is the energy, passion and commitment of the photographer or leader. Great photographs are not a purely rational product; they elicit emotional (and sometimes spiritual) responses and transport the viewer to a new, and often uncomfortable place which they would not have visited but for exposure to the photograph. They provide new lenses through which to see their world and, if successful, result in a richer and more complete approach to life around them.

Transformational leadership results in a similar journey. It is frequently not comfortable; it is not purely rational and when successfully experienced it results in new world views which enhances the ability of individuals and organisations to take advantage of opportunities and deal with the problems they encounter in a complex, rapidly changing world.