

What Makes A Leader Transformational?: Know the attributes

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All leaders desire to get more effort from their people, effort resulting more from intrinsic desire and less from extrinsic prompting. Leaders who truly excel are those who transform results, performance and culture. What qualities makes a leader “transformational”? In numerous “Leadership Coaching” and “Transformational Leadership” workshops, the following attributes have been identified as belonging to a transformational leader.



“Always a better way” thinking – Regardless of what industry you are in, there are countless examples of actions that were once viewed as acceptable, that today are viewed as unacceptable. Many leaders who know this realize the limitations of best-practice thinking and maintain more of a positive discontent or better-practice mindset. Rather than simply adopting a best practice and stopping there, they celebrate successes and realize there will always be a better way if, and only if, we keep looking.

Keeps the most important thing the most important thing – It is easy to get caught up in fire-fighting mode and to lose the efficiency goggles required to be proactively effective. Management guru Peter Drucker admonished, “There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all.” Great leaders bring focus to the most important things and keep them front and center, rarely wavering until a better way is discovered, which is then always encouraged and appreciated.

Understands what motivates and influences – What motivates one person can demotivate another. Humans are complex, to say the least. Perceptions, communication, behaviors, and work environments are but a few of the vast influences on individuals. Understanding why people do what they do and what they value is important for leaders to know in order to nudge additional effort. No two people are alike. Leaders who get to know the people they are directly responsible for, create camaraderie and team-spirit, and generally outperform those who manage a group of individuals they haven’t taken the time to know.

What Makes a Leader Transformational

- “Always a better way” thinking
- Keeps the most important thing the most important thing
- Understands what motivates and influences
- Coaches for performance
- Understands strategy and has one
- Focuses on and measures what they want and monitors progress
- It’s personal and focus is on value not activities or numbers

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Coaches for performance – Improved results come from identifying and reinforcing the performance that most directly contributes to it. Evolving the focus from mandatory (what someone has to do that contributes to results) to discretionary (what someone wants to do that contributes to results) requires coaching. A model taught in leadership coaching workshops centers around a three-part approach: Focus, Feedback and Facilitate. You coach performance, not results. Thus, the focus must be on what someone does, their behaviors. The purpose of feedback is to encourage effective future performance, not to change the past. To facilitate is to make it easy for the performer to be successful by minimizing the obstacles and helping overcome the barriers to desired performance. Transformational leaders coach.

Understands strategy and has one – Strategy is a framework of choices a leader makes to determine how to capture and deliver value. Strategy is tradeoffs made in order to win. Regardless of the area of operational improvement focus, you can’t do everything. What will you not do this year? What data drives your decisions? Too many well-intending leaders see a problem and seek a program. Programmatic thinking is not strategic. Initiatives should support data-driven decisions that will prove the intervention adds sustainable value. What measurements will verify this?

Focuses on and measures what they want and monitors progress – Transformational leaders recognize they will never get what they want if they are only measuring what they don’t want. The absence of negative indicators is not the same as success. Visible progress towards a goal is known as one of the most effective motivators at work. Determining what success looks like (what performance would be observed if great results were obtained?) is necessary to ensure measurements are validating progress towards the ideal goal. It is easy to attain temporary improvements in results; sustainability is typically the challenge. Measure what is desired and progress towards it, rather than measuring what is undesired and trying to distance away from it.

It’s personal and focus is on value not activities or numbers – Individuals who clearly take a personal interest in the objective communicate differently than others. Great leaders are passionate about that which they are trying to transform. It is more than a business-necessity; it is an individual goal to these people. Because of this, they want to help others see value in the goals. They leverage what others are interested in or motivated by. These leaders rarely communicate facts and figures, and focus more on stories and pictures to break through to people. They treat people as the customers of their improvement-efforts, rather than targets of change or problems.

When assessing how to help your leaders improve their impact on any area of business performance, consider these elements and assess against how well your leaders: challenge status quo, keep the most important thing front and center, know their people, coach for improved performance, strategically think, measure the right things, track progress towards them, and focus on capturing and delivering real, sustainable value to their customers. Real leaders know it’s not about them; it’s about the great people they lead, and this is what makes them transformational. **LE**

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