

# What Makes a Leader Transformational?

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 make 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. Understanding why people do what they do and what they value is important for leaders to know in order to nudge additional effort. 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.

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- 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.

**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 drive 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 the leader wants 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 toward 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 toward the ideal goal. Measure what is desired and progress toward 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, they 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.

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 toward 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. **OKS**

*Shawn M. Galloway is the co-author of STEPS to Safety Culture Excellence and president of ProAct Safety. He has helped hundreds of organizations within every major industry internationally achieve and sustain excellence in performance and culture. He is also the host of the acclaimed weekly podcast series Safety Culture Excellence®. He can be reached at 800-395-1347 or info@ProActSafety.com.*



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