

The Meaning of Transformational Leadership Coaching



Structures of which we are unaware hold us prisoner.

—Peter Senge (*The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, 1990, p. 94)

Although Flywheel draws on many different theories, all of them cogent to organizational and leadership change, transformation theory is fundamental to the Flywheel approach. This chapter provides readers with a foundational understanding of transformation theory as it applies to leadership coaching. The story of Carrie and Sarah provides us with an example.

A STORY OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Carrie and Sarah, two regional superintendents from a large urban school district in the south (the names have been changed, but the story is true) participate together in leadership coaching and use it to focus on their most passionate work: developing principal leadership capacity throughout the district.

As you might expect, Carrie and Sarah are troubled when school leadership teams do not click; when the principals, team leaders, deans, and others either cannot or will not leverage their leadership skills to create powerful and collaborative teams capable of leading students' learning. When dysfunctional teams exist then everyone, including Carrie and Sarah, must divert their energy away from the priorities of meaningful work.

Inspired by their new superintendent's commitment to building leadership capacity, and fueled by a deep and unwavering devotion to the schools they supervise, Carrie and Sarah made it their shared project to examine the current approach to leadership selection and development in the district. They were determined to devote their leadership coaching sessions on taking action to move this project forward.

Over time, Carrie and Sarah's coaching conversations shifted from initially focusing on interventions when leadership teams fail, such as moving individuals to different schools, which often created a cascade of logistical personnel problems in the organization, to eventually focusing on engendering a craving for leadership team success right from the start, for each new, novice, and aspiring administrator. As their leadership coach, I recall the change in their language that signaled this paradigm shift. Instead of talking about *leadership growth plans* (which describe interventions *after* relationships and effectiveness have soured), Carrie and Sarah began describing what they ultimately decided to call *leadership success plans* (plans for success right from the start, beginning with recruitment and the interview process).

Transformation Theory

Put forth by Jack Mezirow in 1978, transformation theory identifies the processes by which adults come to question their assumptions and those of others, and arrive at new perspectives. In other words, transformation theory is about change—dramatic change that shapes people and organizations and makes them visibly different to themselves and others (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Adult learning specialists Merriam and Caffarella (1999) tell us that transformation theory involves a change in perspective that “. . . is personally emancipating in that one is freed from previously held beliefs, attitudes, values, and feelings that have constricted and distorted one's life” (p. 320). More than being set free from these binding ideas, transformation theory also holds that the person finally understands *how* they were held hostage by previous beliefs, which allows them to consciously choose differently in new situations. Carrie and Sarah's story beautifully illustrates the experience of transformation.

Catalyzed by feeling ill at ease with the current approach for responding to dysfunctional school leadership teams, Carrie and Sarah's experience is transformational in that they ultimately challenged and freed themselves of assumptions that limited their options. This is seen in their paradigm shift *from* remediation and intervention *to* prevention and empowerment. Unburdened by beliefs that previously stymied them, Carrie and Sarah gained a new perspective, which generated a whole new set of possible actions. These actions are likely to create profound improvement, not just in

the ways that leadership teams function once they are in place, but systemically from the recruitment and interview process, to professional development for leaders, to the long-term administrative supervision and evaluation process.

The journey ahead of them will no doubt have its ups and downs (meaningful change never comes easily), but Carrie and Sarah feel a renewed sense of energy toward their aspirational goal of sustaining strong and effective leadership teams in every school.

With Carrie and Sarah's story serving as an example, we can more clearly understand what it means to be a transformational leader and what it means to provide transformational leadership coaching.

Transformation Seen Through Carrie and Sarah's Story

Returning to the story of Carrie and Sarah, we can analyze the assumptions underlying transformation theory as constructed by Mezirow (2000, p. 22), who acknowledges the process does not always follow the phases exactly, but does seem to include some variation of the following:

- **A disorienting dilemma: An awakening, change, loss, or challenge**

In Carrie and Sarah's story, the disorienting dilemma was the unrest and edginess they felt about the processes in place for responding to dysfunctional leadership teams and the subsequent havoc they produced in the system.

- **Self-examination sometimes accompanied by feelings of self-recrimination, anger, fear, or guilt**

In one coaching session, Carrie and Sarah sorted through the complex emotions that came with the territory of supervision, including their frustration and disappointment when their interventions did not work. They knew there had to be a better way.

- **A critical assessment of the assumptions underlying one's beliefs and perspectives up until this point**

Carrie and Sarah made a huge leap in their thinking when they broke through the assumptions that dictated that the only way to create functional leadership teams was if they had full control over forming the teams in the first place, or if they took action once they were aware of problems. Once they released those assumptions, and replaced them with the perspective that leadership success begins with the recruitment and interview process, and that everyone has room for improvement, they saw new possibilities, including a set of strategies for building leadership capacity in others.

- **Recognition that other leaders also experience discontent and processes of transformation**

Carrie and Sarah accepted the challenges inherent in complex systems. They realize that other leaders grapple with similar issues, and believe that they too will handle whatever comes up.

- **Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions**

When Carrie and Sarah realized they wanted to establish leadership success plans with each new administrator hired, they set up meetings with each new administrator and the superintendent, during which time they connected the leadership success plan to the administrator evaluation protocol.

- **Planning a new course of action consistent with the new paradigm**

During this phase, Carrie and Sarah lingered over the pros and cons of leadership growth plans versus leadership success plans.

- **Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan, provisional trying of new roles and building competence, and self-confidence in new roles and relationships**

Before Carrie and Sarah held meetings with each new administrator and the superintendent, they scheduled a work session with each other to comb through the current administrator evaluation instrument in order to locate ambiguous language and clarify each point with examples from the district. Because of this process, Carrie and Sarah became facile with relating the two-dimensional leadership expectations on the evaluation instrument to the three-dimensional expectations of leaders on the job.

- **Reintegration into one's life and work on the basis of conditions congruent with the new perspective**

Carrie and Sarah began to think that the Leadership Success Plan was a good idea and helpful tool for all of the principals they supervised, not just the new and novice principals. They planned opportunities to communicate to site leadership teams that lifelong learning is part and parcel of leadership excellence, and that the supervision and evaluation process is meant to expand their capacity for leadership. This plan brings them back full circle to serving one of the most strategic goals of their organization: building leadership capacity in all. However, now they approach this work with a transformed perspective that feels empowering and energizing.

As you reflect on the story of Carrie and Sarah through the eyes of a leadership coach, you begin to discern the fundamental beliefs underpinning transformational change. Before you continue reading, use the space

provided below to write your predictions about the assumptions underlying transformation theory as it applies to leadership coaching. Then, read the next section and see how your predictions compare.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP COACHING

Transformational leadership coaching is an organizational strategy for leadership development that is based on the qualities of transformation theory and transformational leadership, and employs processes and tools designed to help leaders remove obstructive assumptions and beliefs that limit their greatness. Once free of these limitations, and empowered by their new vision and story, these leaders catalyze leadership in the people around them and create needed change throughout their organizations in order to produce remarkable results.

The tools and processes you find in this book facilitate transformational leadership development, and display a bias for bold action that leads to profound results

Leadership coaches who approach their work through this lens embrace these beliefs and translate them into practice.

BELIEFS EMBRACED BY TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP COACHES

- Leaders come to coaching with wisdom and experience about their work.
- A person's frame of reference (how they understand the world) is composed of assumptions that selectively shape and restrict expectations.
- People transform their frame of reference through critical reflection of assumptions.
- Transformative learning emancipates people from unquestioning acceptance of what they've come to know.
- Learners need to be at the center of contextual learning—not receivers of information and expert advice.
- Experience combined with reflective discourse creates learning.

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADER

I do not mean to suggest that transformational leadership coaching is the only way to create leaders who are capable of transformational change. However, leadership coaching grounded in the precepts of transformational change is designed explicitly to promote transformational leadership.

Agents of Change

Transformational leaders are what Michael Fullan calls “change agents” (Fullan, 1993). Change agents are individuals who have a strong moral purpose and have the ability to skillfully engage in the process of change. Change agents, regardless of their formal position, create new realities within their organization and inspire others to follow. Consider these three examples of change agent leadership:

- Two teachers propose to team teach literacy and inquiry with a looped third and fourth grade class learning math, science, and social studies.
- A principal who is passionate about creating powerful, effective, and joyful Professional Learning Communities in each grade level asks the 6th grade team to work with her to pilot a progress monitoring approach that empowers students to track their own learning and growth.
- A superintendent in a rural school district works with a broad-based community group to develop a vision of an “anytime, anywhere” high school that is able to evolve with emerging and morphing handheld technologies.

The individuals in these three examples hold positions from classroom teacher to superintendent. But, because all of them stepped forward to take the helm of projects that serve their organizations, compel passion and leadership in others, and create new opportunities for stakeholders, each of them exhibits characteristics of transformational leadership.

Transformational leaders seek to make meaningful change that makes a difference over the long haul. These leaders are undaunted by aspirational goals—goals that fix the problems that bedevil the profession, and that create breakthroughs that lead to extraordinary and sustainable results. Unsatisfied with superficial change or change that merely contains a crisis, transformational leaders are as passionate about *how* they achieve remarkable outcomes as they are about the outcomes themselves. They do not agree that the ends justify the means, if the means to those ends diminish people, exclude vulnerable groups of stakeholders, rely on coercion, squelch innovation, or create cumbersome policies and structures that de-energize people (Denning & Dunham, 2010). Transformational leaders exhibit these competencies:

- Employ a coaching leadership style in order to empower and develop leadership in others.
- Articulate a compelling vision that challenges the status quo and inspires others to action.
- Structure meaningful work to create multiple leadership opportunities for others.
- Accomplish change through collaboration and built-up social capital.
- Take a systemic view of change.
- Look for solutions that consider the needs of all, especially those who are most vulnerable.
- Make daily actions consistent with the vision.
- Seek to break through pervasive problems, not just contain a crisis, or manage the status quo.
- Invite experimentation and exploration from others that create radical breakthroughs in paradigms, perspectives, and behavior.
- Tackle aspirational goals, resonate optimism when others think the situation is hopeless, and be resilient in the face of setbacks and disruptions.

FROM TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP TO TRANSFORMED ORGANIZATIONS

Transformational change leaders not only influence their colleagues to join them in creating needed change, but also skillfully shepherd the *process* of change around initiatives, thus increasing the learning capacity of the organization. In turn, learning organizations possess the unique ability to sustain and nurture change initiatives and the leaders at their helm.

MIT lecturer and author Peter Senge (1990) is a thought leader on the subject of learning organizations. He describes learning organizations as places “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (p. 3). In the preface of his 2005 book, *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society*, Senge and his co-authors eloquently refer to the interrelationship between parts and the whole, an idea that applies to the synergy between change leaders and the process of change. They write: “It’s common to say that trees come from seeds. But, how could a tiny seed create a huge tree? Seeds do not contain the resources needed to grow a tree. These must come from the medium or environment within which the tree grows” (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2005, p. 2).

Organizations with a deep capacity for change take a resilient stance in response to the messiness of change. They create hospitable conditions for innovate change work to succeed. To the extent that an organization views

itself as a learning organization, change work either succeeds or fails. Fullan (2001a) concurs. He writes, “Working through the complexities of change until we get shared meaning and commitment is the only way to get substantial improvement” (p. 272).

WHAT IF YOUR LEADERSHIP COACHING INITIATIVE PLAYED A BIGGER GAME?

Transformational leadership coaching seeks to create long-term, systemic, and sustainable change—the kind of change that develops leaders, teams, and cultures. It asks leaders and coaches to play a bigger game, way beyond managing the status quo. This may sound like a tall order, but why squander resources and energy on leadership coaching that lacks a long-term and systemic impact? Why not wire your coaching strategy for transformational change?

Figure 1.1 is a bulleted list that focuses on the process of transformational leadership coaching. Use the ideas in Figure 1.1 to prompt conversations about leadership coaching in your organization.

Figure 1.1 Wired for Transformational Change

Our leadership coaching program is wired for transformational change because

- It is founded on the belief that leaders come to coaching with wisdom and experience about their work.
- It begins with the passions of coachees and the sense of purpose that comes from being a member of the organization.
- It views events that occur during the change process as opportunities to learn.
- It helps coachees mobilize the process of change surrounding the initiatives they launch.
- It supports coachees in building social capital and in building leadership capacity in others.
- It brings a systemic view to the conversation, helping coachees develop awareness of the whole and create conditions for change.
- It helps coachees deepen their leadership skills as a simultaneous by-product of performing meaningful work.
- It employs processes that awaken coachees to what is possible, and to what has been holding them back.

When leadership coaching is grounded in ideas that arise from what we know about transformational change, it promises to support leaders who seek to go beyond managing the status quo, to create organizations where more people leverage their energy for meaningful change.