

Transformational Leadership:

Some global and individual insights

By Terry Fewtrell

Transformers enthral my seven year old grandson. Watching him play with them it is clear that transformers provide a challenge and require skill. They create excitement in changing something into something else -a case of the process being as important as the outcome. Like the potter and the clay, transformers reinforce a message for our children, that change is constant and it is in their hands.

Much has been written lately about transformers in another setting. The election of Barack Obama as US President has enthralled the world. Obama has been described as 'a transformational figure in US politics', a 'catalytic leader' and the 'world's first 21st century leader'. Suddenly transformational leadership has a world stage, a laboratory in which we are all either pupils, lab assistants or simply interested observers. Obama may be chief executive of the US and a global leader but transformational leadership does not require such an exalted stage. It can be applied in far more modest organisational settings, right down to the individual work unit and team.

So what is transformational leadership and what does it transform? Just like those transformers my grandson enjoys, the process is as important as the outcomes achieved. At its simplest transformational leadership is about impact, change and making a difference. It is often contrasted with transactional leadership which involves the management of tasks, the delivery of services and ultimately the strengthening of structures and cultures. Of course there is a place and a time for both. Good leaders know (or learn) to move between transactional and transformational styles as circumstances require. There is, however, a particular set of attributes that characterise the transformational.

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The Obama phenomenon can help us identify some of those characteristics. We have learned from Obama's rise of his:

- clarity and commitment to core values - beacons that are the primary organising principles for actions and behaviour;
- an ability to articulate a meaningful direction and set of objectives - drawn from wise discernment rather than obsessed self belief;
- an enthusiasm to engage with others - extending to wanting to hear other views, respecting them and learning from them;
- intellectual humility - confidence in one's own capacity to work with complexity and diversity, tempered by the recognition that the best outcomes emerge from genuine consultation and engagement with others;
- a preparedness to look beyond known approaches and solutions - to think outside individual and group preconceptions and address the core issue; and
- a tenacity and perseverance - built on an inner strength and the unleashing of hope and faith in other people.

All of these attributes have been demonstrated in the 'process' of his career to date and in the manner of his campaigning for the office of President. They have marked Obama as a politician with a difference. They are part of his style and they are key determinants of the outcomes that he has achieved. The key outcome to date is of course his election to the presidency. The real test and measure of the man will be seen in his performance in the office.

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While Obama confronts enormous challenges, not least of which is living up to the expectations that have been created, and does so for all the world to see, the same set of key attributes can be applied in running a small business, managing a branch or work unit or leading a major corporation or department.

Organisations and work teams thrive when a leader is engaged and able to take others along with them in a joint endeavour to achieve. Setting the big picture and responding confidently to the context are part of the workplace conversation engaged in by a leader and co-workers. Most of the key attributes identified earlier relate to what is referred to in the ordinary organisational context as 'people issues'. These are by far the most challenging and usually the most time consuming. Too often also they are seen to be things that a leader either has, by natural disposition or style, or doesn't.

In truth they are largely learned behaviours that resonate with much of the latter day emphasis on emotional intelligence. Certainly there would appear to be reasonable correlation between effective transformational impact in the workplace and factors such as:

- the use of empathy to understand co-workers thoughts, feelings and view points;
- managing their own emotions effectively in stressful situations;
- engaging with and feeling empowered within the organisation because they believe they can influence their environment and are self-motivated to do so; and
- self-awareness, where the ability to accurately perceive emotions within oneself is a measure of the ability to assess them in others.

In combination all of these ingredients create a work environment where the individual feels respected and valued, their input and contribution appreciated and the sharing of a common aspiration is delineated by practical, achievable outcomes, within a framework of feedback on performance and improvement. Such a work environment requires of the leader a significant investment in both time and personal energy to listen to others, seek out and understand their real views, explain key objectives and strategies, and drawing them in by building shared knowledge, understanding and respect.

While most of us from time to time will resist change in some situations, it is a latent feature of the human condition to believe that we can improve things. The transformational leader recognises both dispositions. Such a leader has the capacity to finesse the former and empower the latter. As with Barack Obama, it helps also to bring a sense of excitement to the process. But this cannot be manufactured. It flows naturally from confidence built on respect, genuine intellectual humility, clarity of objectives and the thrill of finding new possibilities and approaches.

A similar thrill comes to seven year olds when working their transformers. In a real sense we all have the future in our own hands. The transformational leader is one who gives us the confidence to make the changes that will produce a truly different outcome.

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Yellow Edge is a strategic people consulting company that provides creative solutions for building and sustaining performance at the individual performance at the individual, team and organisational levels.

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