



Leadership: moving up the transformation agenda

Leadership is a hot topic. There is a lot to be said and done about it, not least of which in the context of organizational transformation. Yet more often than not, concepts like leadership and culture are last on the list of transformation priorities. In this provocative white paper, Beverly Fuller argues the case for leadership being moved up the transformation agenda. Through a powerful and thought-provoking narrative, she shows how leadership can be defined, measured, and made tangible, so that leaders can be truly triggered to make behavioral change that will bring real business results in transformation contexts.

By: Beverly Fuller

Introduction

In our work as transformation consultants, the topic of leadership comes up a lot, and for good reason. For a transformation to succeed, it needs strong leadership behind it. From a strategic perspective, you need leadership that sets and communicates the vision for change, and from a day-to-day operations perspective, leadership that sets the tone for interaction and execution. One of my favorite utterances to my clients and colleagues is that transformation is, ultimately, about people. And thus, if you want people to understand why the need for change, build desire to change, and then shift the way people both think and go about their work, sometimes rather radically so, you need good leadership. It sounds simple, but it's a tall ask.

It's very VUCA out there

Let's add some context. The VUCA world we live in is only getting more VUCA by the day. Organizations are buried in a mire of global challenges and regulations, with ecological, political, socio-economic, cross-cultural and resource constraints (the list goes on) coming at them from every angle. Balancing short-term profitability with long-term common good becomes a delicate balance and a dilemma for many. The challenge for leadership has never been greater. Bob Anderson, Co-Founder of Leadership Circle, captured me with these words, "Our old ways of thinking and leading are not capable of encompassing the level of interdependence and complexity we face. They simply are not up to the challenges of global change. In fact, they are barely up to the challenges of organizational change."ⁱ

Leaders are not up to the challenges of global change, let alone organizational change.

An axe to grind

And hence I have a bit of an axe to grind, because when we embark on transformation efforts at our clients, I am frequently surprised and disappointed by the fact that leadership appears last on the transformation agenda - if it even makes the list. Sometimes the word culture will be thrown in there too. "We need a culture that will support the change". Do we even know what we mean when we say this, or are we just saying this because it seems the fashion? And if elements like leadership and culture do make it onto the transformation agenda, the approach is generally quite wishy-washy. No wonder there is often little traction or real change, and the budget set aside for this construct is minimal or withheld in favour of higher priorities that are more structural and process-oriented in terms of organizational change. But this is fundamentally where organizations are going wrong.

It's fuzzy

I am just going to come straight out and say it: people are uncomfortable with “fuzzy” constructs like leadership and culture. Most of the time, leadership (let's park culture for the moment because that's a discussion of its own) is so intangible and elusive. The profusion of leadership theories, models, and styles over the years, along with varying psychological tools purporting to be the answer to evaluating effective or ineffective leadership have, in my view, caused more confusion than clarity. Enter the Universal Model of Leadership™ from Leadership Circle, which cleverly integrates all that preceded it, into a model that is both practical and clear. It magnifies why leaders behave in the manner that they do, and which behaviors both restrict and enable effective transformative leadership. Because when leaders transform, so do organizations.

But let's focus on those forward-thinking clients who are willing to invest in leadership as part of their transformation efforts. The question they most often ask us is, “What type of leadership do we actually need to make this work?” Now there is no easy answer because there is no one-size-fits-all solution. It is not like an Agile organizational design element where we can say with confidence that structuring small and multi-disciplinary teams out of individuals with T-shaped profiles, and working in a cadence of approximately two-week sprints has been thoroughly well-proven to deliver incremental value early and often.

Finding a definition

To continue the argument, we need to look at the definition of leadership. The word “leadership” can mean different things depending on who you ask, but in its purest form, is leadership not about influencing or leading others toward a shared goal? Famed management consultant Peter Drucker once described leadership as being about followership. To me, both these attempts are lacklustre. Have you noticed that people who appear leader-like or conform to cultural norms about leadership are often credited with being good leaders? But whether someone is charismatic, assertive, extraverted, or high ranking, has little to do with their leadership abilities. I've been a dedicated and loyal follower of Hogan assessments for the last 15+ years, from both a talent acquisition and leadership development perspective. Hogan applies a definition informed by the socio-analytic theory of psychology which says that “leadership is the ability to build and maintain a team that performs well relative to its competition. In other words, effective leaders can organize people to outperform other teams.”ⁱⁱ This is on the right track, and to some it is the answer.

I'm going to take a stab at it in five words: *leadership is about enabling others*. Bear with me here, as I will come back to this concept of enablement.

Measuring leadership

To make leadership tangible, we need to measure it in some way. When we measure leadership, we look at it as a broad competency area with subsets of more specific skills, behaviors, attributes and traits underlying it. This is simplistically shown in Diagram 1.

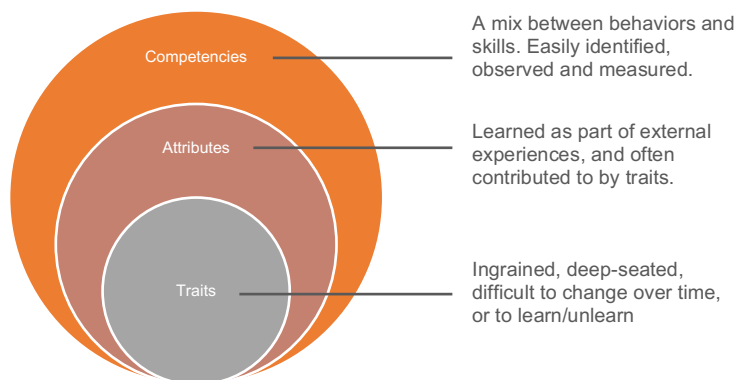


Diagram 1: The relationship between traits, attributes and competencies

In terms of the competence aspect, we make leadership tangible and measurable by focusing on actual behaviors. Sometimes, we will refer to styles, tendencies, or competencies, but ultimately we are talking about behavior. It is the understanding and distilling of that behavior which is where the real skill comes in for behavioral analysts like psychologists. Trait theorists of personality have shown that behaviors are the offshoot of traits - the deep-seated, ingrained tendencies that make us behave and respond in the way that we do to situations - essentially our personality characteristics - and they are difficult to change. Hence we often need to drill down to trait level to both measure and understand the source of the behavior. There are many powerful, valid and reliable psychological tools to measure behaviour at a trait level (usually through self-analysis or self-report questionnaires), and Hogan is certainly way out in front from my experience.

You want *me* to change?

If you thought that traits were difficult to change, changing behaviour is also difficult. There are two main reasons for this: people become set in their ways (often the case with older individuals who have been accustomed to a specific approach to leading or a more traditional organizational model and structure) or people simply are not willing to critically and accurately self-analyze or get feedback from others as to how they are being perceived. It takes a true leader to be willing to look in the mirror and to be vulnerable, and to allow his or her leadership be scrutinized. That's uncomfortable. But it's the only way to ignite behavioral change.

Create "reputational awareness"

Starting a leadership development program without knowing what you need to change is like the blind leading the blind. So, as I have said, the best way to trigger behavioral change is by making people aware of their behavior. This awareness creation process can be painful but catalytical. According to Hogan, personality has two components, namely identity and reputation:

- Identity is our personality from an inside view, formed by the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and the image we want to project to the world

- Reputation is our personality from an outside view, formed by others' observations of how we behave

Reputation, rather than identity, is how people evaluate each other. Subsequent career success depends on people reconciling their identities with their reputations. Career problems can arise when people's identities depart significantly from their reputations, caused by over- or underestimation of their abilities. Objective personality data helps people understand their reputations, offering a realistic view of how others perceive them and empowering them to adapt their behavior. These inside and outside perspectives, and the reputational focus placed on this approach, marked an exciting move in leadership theory and assessment.ⁱⁱⁱ Hogan was the driver of this.

Recently I was privileged to become accredited in the Leadership Circle Profile™ (LCP). A comprehensive 360° assessment, the LCP is the first tool on the market to connect a well-researched battery of competencies with the underlying and motivating habits of thought. It reveals the relationship between patterns of action and internal assumptions that drive behavior. LCP goes to the source of behavior to get greater leverage on change. It also adopts an identity and reputational stance, by having both leader him- or herself complete the evaluation, as well as a carefully selected group of peers. So not only do you see the gap between how you see yourself versus how others perceive you, but you understand why you behave the way that you do and how that is received by others. And if the way you lead is received in a way that is restricting, as opposed to enabling, the research that Leadership Circle has done shows that it is the enablers amongst us that are getting the better business results, and even more so in transformative contexts. And this is why I argue that leadership is about enabling others.

The insights from the LCP and the (for many, life-altering) coaching debrief that follows form the critical starting point for a dialogue in context as to where the individual can potentially shift their energy for more effective leadership to be realized. The snapshot in time is exactly that and must be stressed as the views of the evaluator group (which also can be sliced and diced to see the different perspectives of peers versus bosses, for example) and nothing more. Over and above the deeply confidential and personal individual journey that the LCP creates for the leader, one can also apply algorithms and data analytics to examine trends across the leadership cohort, and there is a "Manager Edition" of the LCP, so one can customize development programs accordingly. The power of these insights at both a personal and organizational level cannot be under-estimated.

The argument for leadership is clear

And so there is no disputing the fact that we live in a world where things are constantly changing, fluid, and dynamic. At Highberg, we dive deep into this world, specializing in organizational transformation in all its shapes and sizes and from many different angles. Our client experience has repeatedly demonstrated that leadership has a critical role to play in every and any transformation initiative. Leaders must support the transition to a new operating model or way of working, and at the same time help to drive and enable a culture that truly supports and embeds the transformation, to really sustain the change. This means surfacing the mindset and behaviors of the leadership cohort. Let's get this part right and the rest will follow.

BlinkLane is a member of the Highberg Group. We are specialists in behavioral analysis, leadership, coaching, and culture change in organizational transformations. Contact us for more information on how to build true transformative leadership capability.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Beverly Fuller is a Senior Consultant at BlinkLane Consulting. She is an Organizational Psychologist, Executive Coach, holds a MBA, various Agile accreditations (SAFe® Program Consultant, Scrum Master, Agile Coach, Agile HR Practitioner) and is accredited in a wide range of psychological and behavioral analysis tools, including the Hogan Assessment Suite and the Leadership Circle Profile™. She wakes up every day to ensure that the people side of organizational transformation is top of the agenda.

Sources

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