

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

No matter where your title appears on the org chart, transformational change is usually difficult and often disruptive. But if organizational change is to take root, corresponding change of the organization's leaders must also take place. As leaders, we must orchestrate and embody such change efforts.

# The Missing Ingredient in Organizational Change

BY DANIEL HOLDEN



Few of us schedule time on our business calendars for personal transformation. Even if we go to a development seminar, there is no guarantee we will have a time of significant insight or even helpful learning. Real transformation cannot be scheduled like a business lunch. This would not matter much were it not for this: Organizational culture change is impossible to sustain without corresponding personal transformation of



individual leaders up and down the chain of command.

Organizational change is a dual journey: The strategic initiative must go hand-in-hand with deep and lasting personal change in leaders. Whether you are trying to find a new way to fight a counter insurgency war or attempting to create a more inclusive and innovative culture in a manufacturing plant, the learning culture you create hinges on the individual mindset of leaders.

We know that real transformation often comes in disruptive ways, which we quite naturally resist. Paul is an operations director in a manufacturing plant. He is a tough, no-nonsense man who commands as much fear as respect from co-workers. Any kind of personal development work is, to Paul, just psychobabble and a waste of time. He is active in his town athletics program as a coach and serves on the board of elders in his church. In short, he is a responsible member of the community and his leadership team at work. One night, he is arrested for driving under the influence. He takes a swing at the arresting officer and shouts profanities at him. Additional police are called to the scene. The story deteriorates from here.

Paul is terrified at the side of himself that has been revealed. Full of shame beyond anything he has imagined possible to endure, he plunges into Alcoholics Anonymous and begins to confront the side of himself that he had held as a dark secret for many years. He tells his story and witnesses others doing the same. Even after the court issues a lenient decision, Paul continues his journey into himself. At dinner one night several months later, he makes a startling acknowledgement: “All these years I never saw myself as strong. I was trying to prove something to myself over and over again. Then, I ran up against something I couldn’t bully or intimidate. For the first time in my life I can begin to feel the possibility that I can actually *be* strong — in a real but different way than I imagined. A better way.”

We don’t orchestrate times like these. Over the ensuing months, Paul’s

leadership begins to change. His contact with his own vulnerability has left him less willing to attack others or defend himself. A new kind of authenticity begins to show in his behavior that leads to new, unexpected opportunities in senior leadership. At this level, transformation is disruptive and painful. Does it have to be this way? Are there early warning signs that could guide us forward with less irritation and disruption? And for leaders, can we orchestrate our change efforts so they allow for corresponding personal transformation to occur?

I suggest we can and must.

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### **Tough times ahead**

My years as an executive coach (and 50-plus years in my own skin) have taught me that we each go through three or four times in our lives when we get caught up in tough times with little idea of how we will get through them. None of our old strategies work. The skills and experience we’ve relied on suddenly become obsolete. Nothing we know how to do provides us the relief we seek as circumstances continue to spiral out of control. Financial crises can be like this. Emotional and physical health challenges, intractable personal dilemmas like Paul’s, and professional setbacks can escalate into very difficult challenges. This is not simply a bad day at the office. It is more like a dark night of the soul in which even the slightest flicker of light would warrant dancing in the streets. Yet even a flicker of light fails to come. These times can make or break us, and they usually do.

Most of us have two options when we’re up against difficult challenges. The first option is to forge ahead, stay tough, and attempt to force action through the power of our own will. This is a powerful and attractive response to the fear we might feel. Obstinance becomes an ally as we attempt to push the river and drive through our dilemma to a positive resolution. We have all used this strategy at some point in our lives and have stories to tell about hanging tough and making



things happen. The second option also has merit: We resign ourselves to the hard reality that there is nothing more we can do; instead, move on to others things. There is wisdom in knowing when to stop forcing something that simply is not going to happen. (Think Kenny Rogers' "The Gambler.")

There are times, however, when no amount of force will make a difference and when we cannot quit and move on. Paul could not reverse or ignore what happened. We know people in our lives that have been tested by adversity and have come out of it stronger, not weakened in any way. These battle-tested warriors, desperate for a way through an impossible gauntlet, often describe a third option — the Great Exchange.

### The Great Exchange

My friend Michael ventured into the Great Exchange. He is a physician who built a thriving sports medicine practice and who, by any standard, was at the top of his discipline until the day his first child was born. Everything immediately changed, as if ignited by some time internal clock. He felt haunted by troubling questions of whether he was

living the life he was meant to live or was instead learning to be successful with someone else's life. He was full of fear, rage, and impatience directed at himself. His medical practice began feeling too small to contain him, but he did not know of a larger venue where he might work, let alone what he would do once he found it. His wife did not know what to do with him; he seemed to be coming unglued.

Many months of crying out to the heavens followed. His family felt the weight of Michael's anguish. Through a strange set of circumstances and curious coincidences that unfolded over this period, Michael sold his practice and moved his family to a new region of the country where he founded and now hosts a syndicated radio talk show aimed at men who are navigating the same waters he's been through. He no longer sees 100 patients a week but regularly talks to 85,000 people each week, most of whom are men. "I was right," he told me recently. "I felt like I had suddenly outgrown my practice, but I had no way of knowing what to expect. This is beyond my wildest imagination of what could happen."

Rainer Maria Rilke, one of the great

poets of the 20th century, spent his life writing about the challenges of living fully. Rilke knew we are sometimes required to stand in that place where the terror of our impossible challenge breaks through to real contact with the deeper water of our own life.

Neither Paul nor Michael consciously orchestrated the circumstances reported above, yet they both speak of deeper regions of awareness in them that seem to know what needs to happen even when they don't consciously understand. It is not a pleasant spot; yet it is decidedly practical. Here is the first part of what Rilke says about his impossible circumstance:

*It is possible I am pushing through solid  
rock  
In flint like layers as the ore lies alone.  
I'm such a long way I can see no way  
through  
And no space  
Everything is close to my face  
And everything close to my face is stone.  
I do not have much knowledge yet in grief  
So this massive darkness makes me feel  
small.  
(From Book of Hours, 1905. Cited in  
Selected Poems, Robert Bly, trans.  
Harper Collins, 1981)*

If we stop here we see a situation all of us have or will experience. This is not a place where either of the two options discussed above will work. We work hard to avoid these moments altogether. If this fails, we immediately flee, rather than stand, as Rilke does, and allow this experience to move into him. Who wants to feel small at the hands of this massive darkness? Yet Rilke knew we don't come into real power and genuine strength unless we stand while our lives are coming apart and find out what we're made of. It is only during these times that we discover a secret we can find no place else. We find in this crucible that our greatest fear — separation — is an illusion.

What follows is Rilke's description of an exchange:

*You be the master, make yourself fierce  
and break in.*

*Then my great grief cry will happen to you  
And your great transforming will happen  
to me.*

If you're in a hole 100 feet deep, put down the shovel! You can't dig yourself out; you need something or someone to break in. There are instances when pushing through a tough time or moving on to alternative goals is not possible. Sometimes the fear, anger, outrage or other strong passion reveals an invitation to drop into a deeper conversation with yourself, on the other side of which is a Great Exchange. There are several lessons we can learn about transformation and the leader's role in both recognizing these invitations and helping others say yes to them.

## Leader lessons

### **Lesson 1: Transformation seems to take place when we are at our wits' end with a dilemma or challenge.**

We must learn to acknowledge that we don't know what to do. This is a closely guarded secret known only to all of us. I have worked with leaders in corporate America for 30 years. Are they ever at their wits' end? If we're living and leading in innovative ways, we don't know what we're doing much of the time. If we know what we're doing most of the time, chances are we're playing too small and missing opportunities for greater contributions that abound. Leaders, the message here is clear: Ask for a lot from those you lead, not just more of the same. Let your own dissatisfaction and yearning for real achievement be your guide.

**Lesson 2: Transformation is essentially an exchange.** We let go of something and receive something greater in return. The Great Exchange takes place where we relinquish what Rilke calls our "grief cry" and receive the "great transforming" available only through contact with the unknown. For some, this is a spiritual experience. For others, it is synchronicity, intuition, or coincidence. It is neither gallant nor

grand but instead cloaked in desperation or exasperation. The grief cry may be our anguish, fear, and uncertainty about our predicament. It may be our rage, powerlessness, and despair. It may be a heightened sense of urgency. We experience grief when we lose something important to us. If we want to move through our own solid rock experiences in a different way, we must be willing to let go of those things we would otherwise hold onto. If we persist in holding on, we stay stuck.

Some of the most necessary grief cries include realizing the need to let go of the assumption that:

- Other people and circumstances cause our discomfort.
- Others' approval makes us happy and safe.
- Being perfect will bring us peace.
- Having more control makes us more productive.
- Remaining aloof and distant keeps us above it all and safe.
- Having the next promotion makes us better and more worthwhile.
- Our next achievement means we're more valuable.
- The continual need we feel to prove our worth to someone will simply end one day.

There is nothing, literally nothing, factually true about any of these limiting assumptions. Yet we each act as if several of them are true. Strategic change often evokes these limiting assumptions. Transformation often involves the inward shift of letting go of one or more of these notions.

Barry is a marketing executive with an electrical distribution company. His performance had languished for some time before his CEO asked one of the Board of Directors (who was herself a marketing consultant) to work more closely with Barry. Over a period of almost one year, Barry resisted all efforts to involve this board member in his department's work. He didn't talk about his concerns with anyone, but his performance continued to deteriorate. Finally, the CEO ordered Barry to involve the board member at the risk of

losing his position. Barry met his "everything close to my face is stone" moment.

To his great surprise, Barry discovered the board member greeted him with wisdom, creative power, and no judgment. Her methods of introducing change were clear and compelling; Barry and his team felt defenseless against her persuasive arguments. He was introduced to new ways of conceiving his marketing work and began stepping up to greater accountability as his confidence grew. Leaders can nurture transformative times by refusing to compromise on the new learning and behavioral skills that real vision requires.

Real organizational change requires us to do things we have never done before. Transformation, when it occurs, invites us into the deeper waters of our own life and leadership to explore aspects of us we have never explored before. We each see this exchange in different ways. For Michael, this time was deeply spiritual. His journey was one of profound surrender to the ragged yearnings of his soul, some of which nearly drove him crazy before he could get his arms around them. Paul didn't see his experience as necessarily spiritual but instead as a demand from his real self to get serious about his life. Barry was a pragmatist; he was dragged kicking and screaming into his transformative experience.

Things either matter to us or they don't. When our essential self-interest is aligned with strategic change, we will move, and not until then. Leaders benefit by asking directly about how people make meaning out of tough circumstances and looking for ways to link personal interests with larger strategic direction.

**Lesson 3: Transformation requires the courage to live unresolved for an unknown period of time.** An old way of doing business or doing our lives has ended. We can force a fix sometimes, but we're simply wiggling out of our discomfort; better to acknowledge the discomfort and commit ourselves to remaining alert, attentive, and ready to move. Leaders who make a difference

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## Leadership and assertiveness

Organizational leaders who come across as low or high in assertiveness tend to be seen as less effective, according to a study. The research suggests that being seen as under- or over-assertive may be the most common weakness among aspiring leaders.

In a series of studies, Daniel Ames, Ph.D., a professor at Columbia Business School, and Francis Flynn, Ph.D., a professor at Stanford Graduate School of Business, asked workers for their views of colleagues' leadership strengths and weaknesses. The most common strengths reported included conventional leadership traits such as intelligence, self-discipline, and charisma. But the most common weaknesses reported revealed a surprising picture that was not just the reverse of strengths. Across several samples of leaders and potential leaders, Ames and Flynn found that assertiveness was by far the most frequently mentioned problem, sometimes more than charisma, intelligence, and self-discipline combined.

One reason for this finding is that unlike charisma, which is usually problematic only when it's lacking, potential leaders got assertiveness "wrong" in both directions. And in one of the studies examined, Ames and Flynn's research team coded nearly 1,000 comments given by co-workers about colleagues' leadership behavior. The most common leadership adjective in the weakness comments was "assertive," twice as common as the runners-up such as "focused," "able," and "sure." Overall, more than half of the descriptions of weaknesses made clear references to assertiveness. Of these comments, 48 percent suggested too much assertiveness and the remainder described too little.

"Assertiveness dominated reports of leadership weaknesses, though it wasn't nearly as common in colleagues' comments about strengths. When leaders get assertiveness wrong, it's glaring and obvious, but when they get it right, it seems to disappear," said Ames. "We say it's like salt in a sauce: When there's too much or too little, it's hard to notice anything else, but when it's just right, you notice the other flavors. No one compliments a sauce for being perfectly salted, and it's just as unusual for a leader's perfect touch with assertiveness to attract much notice."

learn how to sit with unresolved tension — creative tension — on their teams and nurture it if it serves the strategic change they are after. The skill here is mindfulness: We pay close attention to our conversations and circumstances because our next steps are embedded in the practical details of our life now. The best leaders I know live by a simple motto, whether spoken or unspoken: The best way to resolve what's unfinished is to finish it successfully.

**Lesson 4: Transformation often portends a new level of dialogue with oneself and others.** In Paul's case, the newfound dialogue with subordinates and peers was unheard of and still

**The best leaders I know live by a simple motto, whether spoken or unspoken: The best way to resolve what's unfinished is to finish it successfully.** leaves some feeling unsure; Paul is not like the man they previously knew and were intimidated by. Both he and Michael can be intimidating. They seek and tell the truth in ways that most organizational cultures claim to value but actively inhibit. Michael's capacity to reach others, especially other men, has far surpassed what was available to him in his eight-minute examinations with patients. The dilemma for many of us is that we would rather compete with peers over nothing at all than engage in substantive dialogue about what we could create together. There is a vast area of synergy that goes unrecognized and untapped in many of our siloed organizations. Note to leaders: Pay attention to recurring obstacles between people, departments, and stakeholder groups. Might this be the front edge of transformation showing itself as significant disruption?

**Lesson 5: Transformation has a simplicity that is unmistakable.** The good news is that this stance of surrender is deceptively simple. The bad news is that this simplicity is the kind T.S. Elliott wrote about that costs us "not less than everything." Over an extended period of time, we learn that there is a very different way of entering and navigating tough transitions. Regrettably, our culture is awash with stories of the superficial and easy. Nothing is further from the truth.

The more conservative business read-

ers and pop psychology experts roll their eyes at Michael's story and dismiss him as irrelevant to the real business they are in — not Bill Gates or Jack Welch — obviously not cut out for the real world of tough choices and consequences. Into their tiny, well-wrapped boxes in which all truth must neatly fit, there simply isn't room for being at your wits' end and still being a leader. Be serious. Regardless of whether the issue is big or small, transformative surrender requires an active stance of confronting three core areas that most of us hold closely and are very reluctant to release: control, time, and separation.

Most of us want more control than we let on, believing, as we do, that control is the gateway to greater achievement, peace, and enjoyment. If we had a choice between losing control and gaining success or having more control but losing something important, most of us would choose greater control. When we're frightened, we clutch even more tightly. Under stress, we go with what is known, not with what is unknown. We relinquish to the unknown only when we're exhausted from holding on. Gradually, with each successive episode, we learn that something important shifts when we let go. We come to recognize there are times when we cannot trust our eyes, ears, and even our own mind, all of which shout *You're crazy!* at the thought of surrender. Initially, this is neither a pretty nor happy process.

Much of the fear and concern we feel is rooted in our assumptions about time. We need something to happen in a certain time period or else some imagined negative consequence will be triggered. When misfortune strikes, we compare where we are to where we used to be. This comparison can bring regret, anger, and shame with it. We don't see people as they are now but as they were the last time we worked with them. When something threatens us, we imagine a future of escalating catastrophes and replay these future images in our mind as if real. Simply put, we tend to leave the moment we're in and move to our fears of the future or

memories of the past. Transformation requires a more disciplined ability to root ourselves in the day we are in. We are served by remembering that everything we see in the future is our imagination; it is neither real nor fixed.

The toughest part can be acknowledging, day-by-day, minute-by-minute that what we know about our circumstances is imperfect, incomplete. When we believe what we know is all there is to know about our circumstances, we create our own trouble. Transformation, again, requires the courage to live unresolved, trusting. All assumptions must be tested. This is not for the faint of heart.

The belief that we are each separate beings, alone and individual, is so core to our experience that it seems ludicrous to question. Our human bodies — and what happens to them through accidents, conflict, disease, and age — are all the proof we need that we are separate from one another in profound ways. More disturbingly, we appear to be separate from the sacred. In crisis, this deeply rooted assumption of separation is a flame that burns in our minds. We attack others before they can attack us, seldom realizing that our attack (verbal, emotional, or physical) actually creates our own vulnerability. After all, if I can successfully attack you, it also means I must defend myself against others who are surely after me. The assumption of separation causes the fear we feel; if we knew with certainty we were intimately joined with the larger whole, our fear would disappear.

Real transformation can teach us we are not here alone. There is a deeper knowing within us that can spark new, innovative ideas and ways of living, leading, and working. The scientific method, with its imperative to test our operating assumptions, is built around this theme. Transformation reveals our true place — connection — and invites us to face our times of transition with a different mindset about how things really can work. Sometimes there's a happy ending, sometimes not. But something always shifts.

## Don't wait

This article suggests a need for personal transformation in leaders who are involved in organizational change. Life surprises us with its own demands for change, but we need not wait for disaster to strike. Transformation requires four action steps from us. Each requires stillness and mindful attention to the moment we're in. No drifting ahead to tomorrow or lagging behind. When confronted with challenging circumstances conduct the following experiment:

**When we believe what we know is all there is to know about our circumstances, we create our own trouble.**

- Release the circumstances that trouble, concern, or terrify you. These include the external circumstances and the internal feelings that can overwhelm us.
- Allow circumstances to change. This may take time or no time at all. Internal feelings are often the first to shift. The great exchange is a way to secure serenity and peace of mind even when things are falling apart. And it is much more.
- Recognize the shift in circumstances that has occurred. This step requires us to remain vigilant. We stay engaged without demanding that things turn out how we imagine they should turn out on the schedule we've allowed. Our deeper levels of awareness work on their own schedule in ways not understood by us.
- Acknowledge the assistance we've invited. Long before we see the change we're ready to see, gratitude changes both our mindset and the external circumstances faster and more completely than anything else we do.

The world demands leaders at all levels who know how to work in partnership with all of who they are, not just the rational and objective. It seems clear that the complexity, threat, and uncertainty surrounding us all demands a new kind of response that goes beyond what we alone are capable of creating. Experiment with the concepts in this article and collect your own evidence. Your own proof is all you will need. ❖