Select Learning Organizations?

Linda Ellington, Palm Beach Atlantic University, USA

ABSTRACT

Transformation is how adults make meaning from and interpret experiences. Transformation know-how is an important attribute to demonstrate while leading. This paper examines the transformational ability of leaders. It is generally perceived that since leaders have similar leadership skills, the perception of how they transform their organizations into learning organizations would be uniform. Expectations directly influence meaning and how the perspective changes to accommodate the new experience. This could be attributed to factors like a leader’s educational background, experience in a complex organization, or exposure to successful change efforts. This study attributes specific leadership experiences and perceptions toward the ability to transform an organization. Critical success factors are sound awareness of transformation, the courage to engage in a disoriented dilemma, to accept the knowledge that a perspective requires new understandings of those who lead at all levels within the organization, and the ability to articulate the strategic direction and gain the motivation and engagement from all stakeholders. Four leadership skills are found in the literature that acknowledges transformational leaders have similar skills and perceptions on transforming a traditional organization into a learning organization: a) sense of urgency, b) envision a new vision, c) catalyst for a cultural shift, and d) strategic thinking.

Keywords: Disorienting Dilemma, Learning Organizations, Strategic Thinking, Transformation, Transformational Leaders

INTRODUCTION

To gain a pragmatic understanding of the practice of transformational leadership in an adult world, this study provides a link to transformational learning that involves a new way of knowing, or what Mezirow calls a new frame of reference which can be discomforting. According to Sill, Harward, and Cooper (2009), a disorienting dilemma is the first step in transformation and that transformation in any learning organization occurs at all levels. Literature suggests that there is an important connection between transformational learning and developing leadership. For example, Bellass investigated how transformational learning experiences affect leadership capacity and found a significant positive relationship between the two (Madsen, 2010). According to Mezirow, transformation leads to alliances with others of like mind to work toward effecting necessary changes in organizations and systems, each of which requires a different mode of praxis (as cited in Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 135). There are few periods in history that deserve the label of transforming eras and there are even fewer transformational leaders. Kanter (1983) describes a transformational era as a time that experiences significant change that warrants a major shift that is more extensive and more far-reaching in its implications that

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ever confronted before. This review of literature tells us that a transformational leader is one who defines what the future should look like, one who aligns people with that vision, and one who inspires to make it happen despite the obstacles (Kanter, 1983; Kotter, 1996).

This type of leader is one who understands that the transformational process involves crystallization of new action possibilities (new policies, new behaviors, new patterns, new methodologies, new products, new market ideas) based on re-conceptualized patterns in the organization (Kanter, 1983; Kotter, 1996). Transformational style of leadership behavior is constantly being studied in order to improve ideas and thoughts intertwining with situational, organizational and behavioral based theories. The problem is that most leaders have no history or legacy to guide them through the transformation process (Kotter, 1996). This paucity generates a disorienting dilemma that causes leaders to not act in change efforts within their organization; thus, no learning occurs. Therefore, this particular case study is a commitment to fill a void in the understanding of the execution of a transformation by “walking in the shoes” of two transformational leaders who epitomize such leadership.

The point of view of two transformational leaders examined for this study is that they openly communicated about the big dangers and the big opportunities involved in the transformation, and willingly acknowledged they had the responsibility to ensure people did not panic but rather willingly and enthusiastically become engaged in the process. The need to be creative in thought, disruptive, future-focused and experimental in nature is seen to be at odds with traditional notions of thinking; thus, a disorienting discomfort occurs.

Liedtka (1998) explains that strategic thinking is the ability to think in terms of a holistic view, focus on intent, think in time, and the ability to be intelligently opportunistic. That was exactly what the subjects in this study did – they integrated strategic thinking ability into their intentional purpose of moving their organization through the transformational process.

Though these two leaders come from different backgrounds, different industries, and different leadership credentials, this study identified four competencies exhibited by both leaders: a) created a sense of urgency, b) envisioned a new vision, c) were the catalyst for a culture shift, and d) used strategic thinking throughout the process.

Objectives

This case study has three objectives. First to validate that literature and experience of transformational leaders are in agreement; second, if possible, to segment the leadership skills based on their education, experience, risk taking, and courage towards transformational leadership and third, to profile those leaders.

METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE OF STUDY

A case study was conducted by scanning the various literatures on transformational leaders through various scholarly journals and books. This literature review helped to identify various transformational skills experienced in the transformation process.

The study was divided into two sections. The first section explored the in-depth understanding among transformational leaders in various industries. Understanding is defined as solid knowledge about the topic of study. The second section examined two specific leaders in two very different industries. These two leaders and their respective organizations were on the cusp of being eliminated as a viable entity in their industry due to competition and lack of leaders who had the transformational skills and awareness of how to go through a disorienting dilemma and then come out of that discomfort stronger and on a growth strategy.

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1998) a qualitative case study develops a focus. The data collection and research activities narrow to particular sites, materials, topics, questions, and themes (p. 54). They further articulate, “From broad exploratory beginning they move
What is CTE?: Practitioners Struggle to Define Their Field in the United States
*International Journal of Adult Vocational Education and Technology* (pp. 16-30).
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