

Personal Transformation: A Model for Leading into a New Future

By Joelle K. Jay, Ph.D.



In a business world characterized by transformation, leaders are having trouble keeping up. Wave after wave of change keeps hitting them, making it harder and harder to surface and catch their breath.

As an executive coach, I have become alarmed at the degree to which capable, committed leaders who want to lead change, who believe in transformation are asking themselves impossible questions:

“Why is change so hard now?” they ask. “Why does it seem we just can’t break through?”

There’s a reason. Leadership assumes that leaders have a vision, the motivation to achieve it, and the process for getting there.

In times of transformation, many of those elements are missing; after all, transformation has the connotation of being wholly new, requiring the creativity of blue-sky thinking combined with the courage and determination to blaze a new trail. That is a different set of skills than leadership has required before.

In this era, leaders need to think differently, behave differently, and be different in order to succeed.

In short, they need to move from leadership to personal transformation.

A Definition of Personal Transformation

Let's start with a definition of transformational leadership:

Transformational leadership encourages people to achieve their full potential and create positive change through inspiration and motivation.

Personal transformation, therefore, is the ability to for leaders to tap into their own potential and create positive change, inspiration, and motivation for themselves.

That kind of leadership is essential in times that are not just about change but transformation – or what Lan Guan, Chief AI Officer at Accenture, calls re-invention.

In your life or leadership, you've probably gone through lots of modular reinventions. They are incremental and require adjustments on your part. But you may have only gone through two or three architectural reinventions – those really pivotal shifts that are highly disruptive. If we want to succeed with transformation, we have to become comfortable with that kind of change.

It's helpful for leaders to recognize the distinction so they can understand that what's being asked of them in times of transformation will be different than they've faced before. But it doesn't necessarily give them what they need, especially in those moments when they are gripped by the enormity of the task and desperately clutching for an answer to the driving question: How?

How does one lead the way to a vision when that vision is new, changing, or no longer clear?

How does one grow through change when it's not obvious what's needed to succeed in a new reality?

Questions like these can't be found by looking outside ourselves. We have to look within. In the words of Eric Severson, former Chief People Officer at Neiman Marcus, and now a consultant and executive coach, "Transformation is an inside job."

A Model of Personal Transformation

To succeed in times of transformation, leaders need a new model – a way to understand the process of transformation they can use to move out of overwhelm and toward a sense of curiosity, openness and trust.

Seven Steps to Personal Transformation

In the last year, I have interviewed over 50 leaders on the topic of personal transformation. My intention was to understand whether a model could guide leaders through transformative experiences in a more productive way. What follows is a synopsis of the model, along with the insights of leaders who have led transformations of their own.

1. Get support.

In transformation moments, there may be exhilaration, but there may also be fear. Getting support is a way to move forward.

Support can come in the form of a mentor, a manager, an expert, a coach, or even a supportive group of peers. Wendy Bergh, Chief Marketing Officer at Rakuten, has a mastermind group that has been supporting each other for 22 years with their mutual support, guidance, ideas and advice. "Shared experiences, shared trust, a personal connection, a safe and confidential space for vulnerability...it's incredibly valuable," she says. "Everyone should build that kind of network."

Getting support early in a transformation gets leaders ideas, information, and initiative from the start.

2. Record successes.

A go-to strategy for change is to track progress. An effective strategy for transformation is to record and reflect on successes.

Carrie Blair, former Chief HR Officer at Discover, advocates using success stories as a way of learning.

“It’s extracting the learning from where you are on the journey...It’s being centered [and asking], what are the examples of things [that worked], and what was the outcome?”

Doing so reinforces the strategies that are most successful, creating momentum.

3, Tackle challenges.

Transformation is disruptive and challenges leaders in new ways. Planning ahead for challenges makes them less daunting.

The key, according to eBay’s Chief Growth Officer, Julie Loeger, is to acknowledge challenges when they arise with honesty and courage.

“When we don’t see the results we want, we have to ask the tough questions:

- What’s needs to change?
- What do we need to do to support the change?
- Do we have the courage to take big swings?

When you focus on eliminating the blockers, things can start to flow again, and then you see the wins!”

Just knowing challenges are inevitable and choosing in advance how to handle them makes it possible to lead the way through.

4. Employ emergency strategies.

Every now and then, in the midst of transformation, panic can strike as the realization sets in that everything is changing. The remedy is to have emergency strategies ready.

For Cheryl Guerin, EVP of Global Brand Strategy and Innovation at Mastercard, one of the strategies that gives her courage to embrace transformation is space. “You need time, space, and focus...to pause and think.” When she does that, she says, “The thinking flows. The breakthrough moments happen. You can see the path to your vision.”

Anxiety is part of the adjustment of transformation, Simply knowing that gives leaders the opportunity to plan for emergencies and move through the discomfort to the progress on the other side.

5. Reach restoration.

Restoration is when everything is right again. It may be new, it will definitely be different, but it's working.

I once heard a leader describe her transformation this way: "It was like the entire vision I had for the rest of my life was taken away. I couldn't see the future anymore; I'd try to get the vision, but it was only black." The key to succeeding with transformations is to move past that stage even if it's impossible to see the road ahead, until the ability to see a vision is restored.

When I shared that story with Melanie Rosenwasser, Chief People Officer at Dropbox, she had this insight.

You need to allow yourself to experience the feelings. It may seem like the vision was removed and now there's nothing but a black canvas, but by processing [the emotions], that black canvas becomes a blank canvas. Then you get to paint the new path.

That process can be one of creativity, where you get to design what's next. Rosenwasser says, "You now have control over what to do next. It's incredibly empowering."

Restoration is a phase where the energy picks up, because a new vision is becoming clear. Reassuring and exciting, this is the time leaders trust that the process will lead to a positive result.

6. Preserve progress.

At the end of a transformation, it's important to sustain the success.

One strategy leaders use to stay true to themselves in a transformation is to capture their beliefs, values, guiding principles, and decisions in a document they can refer to as a guide for making big decisions while staying aligned to what's most important to them.

Maintenance and prevention are key to long term success, because this is the stage that requires learning to live and thrive in a new reality.

All of the steps and stages of personal transformation we've discussed so far benefit from a through-line that's important all along the way:

7. An environment of self-compassion.

Leaders who master personal transformation cultivate a sense of confidence in themselves and a commitment to their own well-being, because it strengthens their ability to succeed through the change.

In the words of Ida Liu, CEO of HSBC Private Bank, “We have to make sure we’re creating enough space for ourselves. We’ve got to take the time for self-care.”

Self-compassion is a secret of success among those who embrace transformation. They find transformation easier, because they are safe in the knowledge that they are creating a new and better future.

The Breakthrough: What it’s Like to Live and Lead Transformed

As leaders learn and lead through the stages of personal transformation, they strengthen their ability to lead their organizations. How leaders lead through transformation is critically important, because transformation is no longer a choice, but succeeding through transformation is.



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