

Transformation is personal

Transformation is personal. Always. Think about it. Organisational change is brought about one individual at a time. A change of behaviour or a change of outlook by one individual in an organisation is the cellular basis of achieving transformation. Individual transformation of employees is (at least) as important as any organisational transformation. Without it, the chances of any transformation succeeding are low. Without it, the chances of an organisation continuing to evolve to respond to new changes are almost non-existent.

And yet if we look around at organisations time and time again we find lamentable levels of employee engagement and transformation programs which look good in a deck of slides, but which fail when they face the first hurdle of reality: convincing and motivating people to act.

First, engagement. The research into employee engagement is uniformly depressing. Research by Gallup for its [State of the Global Workplace](#) report concluded: “Worldwide, the percentage of adults who work full time for an employer and are engaged at work — they are highly involved in and enthusiastic about their work and workplace — is just 15 per cent. That low percentage of engaged employees is a barrier to creating high-performing cultures. It implies a stunning amount of wasted potential, given that business units in the top quartile of our global employee engagement database are 17 per cent more productive and 21 per cent more profitable than those in the bottom quartile.” It is worth repeating the key statistic: a mere 15 per cent of people engaged in their work.

With employee engagement at these abysmally low levels, organisations then instigate transformation programs with little consideration of or consultation with employees. It is no secret that people are recognised as the most important source of an organisation’s competitive advantage. And the same goes for transformation; in large change programs, the main hurdle to overcome is the human one. Likewise, the main power to harness in large change programs is the human one. Regardless of which industry, geography or type of transformation, the solution is the same. Yet, paradoxically, we find that people are frequently the most misunderstood asset and least leveraged capability.

It is easy to say how important people are, but it is often difficult to translate the recognition of this importance into implementation. There are subtle skills which need careful development, individually and organisationally. Our own research at the Brightline Initiative suggests that hiring and retaining top-notch talent facilitates a smoother journey for transformation. But, make no mistake, ensuring you have the right people in the right places with the right skills is a big challenge.

Across all the respondents in our research, reported success factors for implementing strategy included “sufficient resources” and “existing talent with the right skillset” as the top two ingredients. While “resources” can refer to many different things—capital, technology, equipment, time—it certainly includes people, teams, and sufficient talent. Across all respondents, 28 per cent noted that their organisation focuses more on developing internal talent; 50 per cent stated they invest in both hiring and developing existing talent, but place a higher priority on the latter; 16 per cent said they focus on both hiring and developing talent, but place more emphasis on recruitment; and just 6 per cent noted they are more heavily focused on attracting external talent.

When examined from the perspective of faster- versus slower-transformation organisations, we see significant differences. Faster-transforming organisations were nearly twice as likely as slower-transforming respondents (34 per cent vs. 19 per cent) to report a greater focus on developing internal talent. This highlights the importance of improving internal learning and development programs, while still continuing to invest in recruitment efforts. Transformation must come from within.

Once the focus is on the organisation’s internal talent, leaders must attempt to get everyone on the same page. The ultimate task is to change key beliefs and behaviours, as changing and nurturing the organisational culture is one of the most difficult and complex things a leader can take on.

Brightline’s people-centred transformation framework helps leaders establish a culture of aspiration, alignment, autonomy, and accountability. In practice it is built on these elements:

Communicate a compelling change narrative: A purposeful, passionate and emotionally resonant case for change provides motivation to re-shape the future.

Act to think differently: Leaders need to re-align their own thinking and behaviour to act as role models of what transformation demands and involves.

Embrace situational humility: No-one knows all the answers to transformation. Discovering the best organisational ways forward requires humility and the willingness to ask difficult questions and admit limitations and frailties.

Focus on the few: A profusion of programmes and initiatives provides a recipe for confusion. There must be a focus on a small number of targeted initiatives.

Motivate discretionary effort: Why do some people go the extra mile to make things happen, to get things done? Passion, autonomy, and pride are all elements. Organisations need to develop rewards and recognition processes which enable these elements to be brought to bear on the organisation's most difficult problems.

Give others agency: How much independence are your people allowed? Research suggests that the ability of people to take independent action is key to transformation success.

Decentralise decision-making: Centralisation creates ponderous decision-making. Decentralising decision-making can set people free.

Catalyse the network: Transformation is slowed by silos, bureaucracy and linear organisation. Maximising internal and external networks is the way forward.

Lead the system: Organisational systems and those who lead them must be geared to making change happen and anticipating when it is required.

Nudge the culture: Massive cultural overhauls are difficult if not impossible. Instead, cultures can be nudged in the right direction to embrace new behaviours and perspectives.

How to begin

Transforming from within must begin with an appreciation of how people naturally perceive and experience change. Employees tend to view transformations in one of three ways – as a threat, as a burden, or as an opportunity. Too often leaders fail to recognise the fear of being replaced or minimised due to transformation, or actually stoke those fears through opaque or limited communication. Faced with these challenges we encourage each employee participating in the transformation, at any level, to focus on their personal strengths and unique contributions to the organisation, and to connect these to the vision of the organisation after transformation – helping them to understand how they can contribute to the transformation effort, and how the transformation will help their progression and growth.

This self-evaluation exercise is typically a three-step process for each participant:

Define your aspiration of where you want to be – create a personal vision statement that defines where you want to be. It is important that this is within the transformation context – and defines what you can contribute to the transformation, and what you want to get out of the transformation process.

Develop an understanding of yourself. There are multiple tools to choose from – organisations have had some success with personality tests such as Myers-Briggs, Enneagrams or GC Index, or tools such as StrengthsFinder.

Develop a Personal Transformation Plan, and share with your transformation team as a method of making, and getting, a public commitment.

A key aspect of leadership of transformation is instituting and responding appropriately to these reflections. At Brightline the primary tool we use for employee transformation is called the SEE Model. SEE stands for Strengths-Evokes-Elates. The three-part SEE model helps people define their calling within the context of transformation. The aim is to find the intersection between:

Your strengths – the areas of work in the business and the transformation where you are or are willing to become good at

The elements of the transformation that evoke personal meaning – the things that give you long-term satisfaction

Actions that make you feel elated – activities and actions that give you immediate joy.

Many organisations find it difficult to involve employees so intimately in forming and leading the transformation. But never forget that change is a human endeavour and, as such, can make delivering strategy a messy and complicated process. People have different interests, motivators and tolerance – which influence behaviours and create potential misalignment and barriers. Their response may not appear rational at first, because change is often processed as a threat. New strategies always require different ways of working, so leaders must recognise the time and effort required to shift individual interests, mindsets and behaviours. Once that is practiced, employees will in return feel engaged and help leaders make the transformation a success.



Notes:

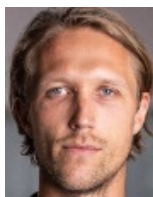
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Ricardo Viana Vargas is a specialist in project management and transformation. Over the past 20 years, he has been responsible for more than 80 major transformation projects globally, with an investment portfolio of over \$20 billion. He is the executive director of Brightline, a PMI Initiative together with leading global organisations dedicated to bridge the gap between ideas and results.



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