

# THE FIVE FUNDAMENTAL TASKS OF A TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADER

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### In this article...

*Consider five tasks that must become an everyday part of a transformational leader's personal paradigm — the way he or she does things.*

### IT IS EASY TO GET CAUGHT UP IN THE DAY-TO-

day management stuff. It is easy to spend your time fighting fires. However, no matter how full your inbox, no matter how many people are standing at your door, no matter how many projects or reports or patients or problems or issues fill your day, you need to be continually thinking about five fundamental tasks.

If you are to become a transformational leader, these five tasks need to become the way you do things, the way you think, the way you approach things. Your personal leadership model.

1. Define reality.
2. Articulate the vision.
3. Create alignment.
4. Become a servant.
5. Say "thank you."

**DEFINE REALITY** — In order to be transformational in your leadership, in order to motivate your people to make the transition and inspire them to hang together while doing so, you must continuously define, discuss and talk about reality — what is happening out there.

Your staff must know and understand the context of your decisions. They must know what is happening. Staff members react negatively to the decisions of their leaders when they do not know and do not understand their context.

How do we define reality? Three thoughts:

1. There is nothing more important for a transformational leader to do than periodic environmental

scans — external and internal. An environmental scan is really nothing more than describing what is out there right now and how it might be changing.

What is happening on the health care scene at the global level? What is happening at the national level? At the state level? At the local level? All of this is the external environment. What is happening in the external environment that may be changing the paradigms we are used to?

What is happening at the level of your own board? What is happening in the executive committee? What is happening in the internal environment that may be changing the old familiar paradigms?

Define current reality so that everyone knows the context of your decision making. Then, as a leader, share with your staff how you see this playing out over the next 12 months. What will be the impact on your own little box? Your own paradigm?

2. Help your staff know and understand your board's strategic response to the reality that you are defining. What is the board doing to respond? What decisions are being made by the board? What are its strategies? How does the board's strategic plan respond to current reality? The actions of the board are another reality that you must continually define for your people. The same holds true for the executive committee. If you do not know the answers to these questions about the board and the executive committee, you need to get better connected.
3. Your staff must know and understand why you are doing what you are doing. Your people need to know the what. They also need to know the why. Effective leaders manage meaning more than information. Your staff must know the why.



Leadership is about alignment.  
Alignment is everything.

In order to be a transformational leader at any level, in order to move from one paradigm to the next, you must define reality continually. Not once, but day after day. Week after week. Month after month.

Think about how and when you can do this. Among the forums that can be used are staff meetings, “reality roundtables” or published updates for all staff. Perhaps the CEO, other senior leaders or outside experts can be invited to address your staff. Just pay attention to what is happening all around you.

In many organizations the leaders do not spend enough time on fundamental task No. 1, and then they wonder why the staff is pushing back and is not interested in moving to the next paradigm. Staff members must know and understand the context of your decision-making.

**ARTICULATE THE VISION** — The transformational leader has to describe where the organization wants to go clearly and continuously. Once again this task, as with all of the fundamental tasks, can relate to the entire organization, your division, your department or your own particular area of responsibility. You must have a vision and be continuously talking about it. You must believe the vision.

Here I am not referring exclusively to your organization’s official vision. Rather, also think about your vision for what you, your staff, your division or your organization can accomplish. Your staff must continuously hear you articulating your vision for your area of responsibility.

How do you do this?

1. You must create your vision.
2. You must sell your vision.
3. You must operationalize your vision.

**Create Your Vision** — What is your vision for your own area of responsibility? It must be compatible with your current and future paradigms. It must be in the context of current reality. It must be consistent with your organization’s official vision.

Can you describe where you want your part of the organization to be in two years? Five years? Ten years? Your vision is not a description of where you are now (that is current reality). Rather, a vision is a description of where you want to be. A description of what you believe is possible, what you believe can be done.

Management expert Warren Bennis once stated, “A vision articulates a view of a realistic, credible, attractive future for the organization; a condition that is better in some important ways than what now exists.”<sup>1</sup>

**Sell Your Vision** — After you have created your vision, you must sell your vision. A vision does not mean anything to employees until they are hooked. Health care consultant and lecturer Les Wallace would say you need to connect the dots. Connect the everyday to your vision.

1. Include your staff in the creation of your vision.
2. Relate current reality to the vision.
3. Be highly visible with your vision.
4. Make the vision a part of everyday conversation.

Your vision statement should be on your walls. Could I walk through your areas and talk with your people and know what your vision is? Your vision statement will tell

me where you are going. It will tell me that you are a transformational leader.

**Operationalize Your Vision** — This means clearly communicating the vision as it relates to each and every organizational effort, problem, opportunity or decision. Everything you do, every decision you make, every problem you address and every opportunity you respond to should be approached with your vision in mind. Will this move us closer to our vision? Your vision should be on the walls of your organization. It should also be in the hearts and minds of your leaders and managers.

One of my larger clinics in Indianapolis was really bogged down. As is often the case, processes were not working well. Staff members were demoralized and tired. They were in a rut and were content to stay there. Nothing much was changing. In spite of my never-ending talk about our vision, the staff at this center did not seem to connect.

Then suddenly one day, the staff seemed to collectively say, "Oh, we get it. Our leaders want us to change. They are describing what they want us to be. We are a long way away. We had better start chasing that vision."

The staff made badges to wear, "Southeast Health Center: Out of the Stone Age." And they went to work. They caught the vision in their minds and hearts. The results were so astounding that the National Association of Community Health Centers published a monograph describing what they accomplished in their clinic.

Why is articulating the vision so important? Because there is power in a vision. The power is there because a vision describes possibility. Health care futurist Lee Kaiser said, "The highest level of leadership is the creation of possibility."<sup>2</sup> Possibility provides power.

Your vision can inspire others to stretch, to look long-range. Your staff performs at one level because they have never thought about the possibility of performing at a higher level.

You have to create your vision. You have to sell your vision. You have to operationalize your vision. And then you must lead using the power of your vision.

**CREATE ALIGNMENT** — We will never get to where we need to go if we all are going in different directions. We will never successfully make the transition to our next paradigm if we all are going in different directions. Creating alignment is a fundamental task of the transformational leader. It is a critical task in making the transition from the paradigm of the past to the paradigm of the future.

Bennis said, "We must align human resources — creating a sense of shared objectives worthy of people's support —

and even dedication. Great organizations inevitably develop around a shared vision."<sup>3</sup>

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## YOUR AIM IS EXPRESSED IN YOUR MISSION, VISION AND VALUES.

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There are three steps to alignment.

1. Set the direction.
2. Chart the course.
3. Talk the walk.

**Set the Direction** — What is the aim or direction of your organization? Your aim is expressed in your mission, vision and values. Your direction is set by your board. It is described in your mission, your vision, and your values. Your rock-solid foundation. As leaders and managers, you must understand, buy into, and constantly remind your people of your direction.

**Chart the Course** — We know our aim. We know our vision. Now as transformational leaders committed to alignment, we have to show our people how to get to that vision. We must chart the course. In order to chart the course, we must organize around specific strategies, specific priorities and specific objectives.

At every level, our people must be constantly reminded of our aim, and they must know the course — our objectives. Our objectives must be aligned if we expect our people to be aligned.

**Talk the Walk** — Alignment is a communications problem, not a design problem. You must be constantly talking with your people. You must help each of your people to understand reality, to share the vision, to internalize your aim and to buy into the course that you have charted. Your goal is for each of your people to be pointed in the same direction. Be alert to which of your people are out of alignment. Be alert to people straying off course. And then, talk the walk. Leadership is about alignment. Alignment is everything.

As John Kotter wrote in the *Harvard Business Review*, "We don't want to organize people. Rather we want to align people."<sup>4</sup>

**BECOME A SERVANT** — There are books written about servant leadership. How can you be a servant and a leader at the same time? How does this make you transformational?

By becoming a servant leader, you are recognizing the tremendous and mostly untapped potential of your people. If you can just help them to achieve their potential, think how your organization will be transformed. If you can just get out of their way and give them the support they need, think of what they might accomplish.

You need to be a supportive leader. You need to be a servant leader.

There are four steps to becoming a servant leader:

1. Provide a supportive environment.
2. Walk the talk (not talk the walk, as above).
3. Empower your people.
4. Nurture bottom-up change.

**Provide a Supportive Environment** — The servant leader is a supportive leader. The question constantly on the servant leader's tongue is, "How can I make things better for you?"

The environment that you create for your people needs to be a supportive environment. Your people need to be confident of your support. Your people need to be confident that they can try new things, take risks, even make mistakes, and you will be supportive.

Effective leaders know that wisdom is the art of knowing what to overlook.

James Kouzes and Barry Posner in their book, *The Leadership Challenge*, wrote, "Leadership is service. Leaders become servant leaders — not self-serving, but other-serving. The relationship of leaders and constituents has been turned upside down. Or rather, it has been righted."<sup>5</sup>

**Walk the Talk** — To create alignment, we talk the walk. To be a servant leader, we walk the talk. What does this mean? We talk about living our values. If you are a servant leader, you actually do live the values.

We talk about embracing change. You very visibly embrace change. We talk about demonstrating respect and compassion. You do that every day and in every way.

We talk about being proactive. You choose positive responses consistently. We talk about needing to change yourself on occasion; you actually do when it is necessary. You walk the talk as a servant leader.

When you walk the talk, you are present on the battlefield. You spend your time outside of your office. Possibly one of the single most dramatic things you could do at your organization to increase the effectiveness of your managers would be to eliminate their offices. You can't sit in your office if you do not have one. To be a servant leader you

need to be out there on the battlefield every day.

Every action needs to visibly demonstrate a true commitment. You must set the example. When was the last time you were out on the front sidewalk picking up the cigarette butts in front of your facility to create a more pleasing entryway for your patients? When was the last time you were in cleaning up the bathroom for your patients? You must believe in your core values so strongly that you would not even think twice about doing this. You set the example. You go first. You walk the talk. You become a servant.

Another way to walk the talk is to "walk in the moccasins." Spend some time doing the job of one of your people. You cannot fully appreciate what they do until you have walked in their moccasins.

I did that in Indianapolis over a period of several years. I performed every single job in my organization at least a half a day. I learned a ton. Your people will love it. Seeing you sitting there scratching your head. They will respect you more. You will respect them more.

**Empower Your Staff** — Empowerment is a difficult, confusing, yet important and powerful concept. As a servant leader committed to providing a supportive environment, you are constantly asking your people, "How can I make things better for you?"

As a servant leader committed to empowering your staff, you are constantly asking your people, "How can I help you make things better?" Not how can I make things better for you, but rather how can I help you make things better?

Being a servant leader means recognizing the potential of your people and creating opportunities for them to participate in transforming your organization — choosing and then moving toward the paradigm of the future. The servant leader creates a culture of empowerment. What happens then?

First, a culture of empowerment provides people with the sense that they are at the center of things. They are involved. They are invested.

Second, a culture of empowerment unleashes the talent of other people. Leadership is not about being talented yourself; it is about freeing the talents of others.

Third, a culture of empowerment liberates the leader in everyone. Kouzes and Posner write: "If everyone is a leader (through empowerment), then everyone is responsible for guiding the organization toward its future." Put everyone in charge of something.

What do you, the servant leader, do? You get out of the way. Your empowered people will move your part of the organization forward. And you are not afraid to let them do this because you have already created alignment. Your empowered staff will move you in the direction you need to go.

**Nurture Bottom-up Change** — Changing from the top down works when things are stable. It is more difficult when you are between paradigms — the unstable transition phase. Here people are resisting change, pushing back.

As a servant leader, encourage your people to make things better. To change whatever needs to be changed. Watch for change occurring at the bottom, nurture it when you see it beginning to happen and go with it whenever it occurs. Don't fret about whether it is a good idea. It probably is. It is likely to be better than what you might have come up with. If it isn't a good idea, that will become clear soon enough.

It has to do with creating alignment, empowering your staff and then getting out of the way. Support the change. Be a servant. Celebrate the triumphs and failures. Your people can "try again in the morning."

Remember this: People don't mind changing. They just mind being changed. If you see people ready to change something, nurture that. Let them do the changing.

**SAY "THANK YOU"** — This fundamental task initially sounds simple and easy to do. On the contrary, it is not simple at all. In fact, it may be the most profound and important of all five tasks. You need to be profuse but genuine in your thank yous. Your thank yous should be continuous and highly visible.

Being thanked on a regular basis is listed as one of the major satisfiers for employees. There are very few things at work that are more gratifying than a genuine "thank you."

Encourage your providers at the end of the day to go find someone who helped them — front desk, medical records, medical assistant or nurse or even the clinic manager — and thank them for helping on that particular day. Make it a daily habit.

Write down on a piece of paper the number of your direct reports. Add to that the approximate number of people with whom you work closely every day, and those you depend on to get your job done. Now you don't have to write this down, but count how many of these people you have thanked in the past week for helping you. For the most part, we are not very good at this.

Make a list of names of your direct reports and those who help you every day. Put a different name on your calendar for every day this month. And on that day, go thank them. It doesn't have to be for any particular task. It could just be, "I want you to know how much I appreciate all of your help."

By the way, have you ever received an unanticipated note

of appreciation from a colleague? I have received a few over the years. What did I do with the note when it arrived? I read it. I read it again. I put it aside for five minutes and read it again. I put it in my tickler file and read it once a month for the next year. I sent a copy to my mother. It really feels good to receive a note of appreciation when you are not expecting it.

Most organizations have formal mechanisms for expressing appreciation. Use them. My most recent position was vice president at AltaMed Health Services in Los Angeles. At AltaMed, we had formal recognition cards. Supervisors or others could formally recognize good performance. A copy went to the employee's personnel file.

We filled out about 250 cards per year. That sounds like a lot, but averaged out to about 1/3 of a card per employee per year. AltaMed employees could anticipate getting formal recognition only once every three years!

Staff appreciation events and other celebrations are good. We should continue. But the personal is best. Don't go home until you have said "thank you" to at least one person.

Think of the five fundamental tasks every day. You need each one to be effective. Build them into your personal leadership philosophy. Make them a part of the way you think and the way you lead.



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