



Leaders think but not in isolation

It ain't what you do, it's the way that you think it!

Compiled by Kerr Inkson

When I joined the company, Kurt was the boss. And what a boss! Larger than life, big tortoise-shell glasses, that shock of black hair. Kurt managed by walking around, clearly the man in charge. He was into everything, yet he made it clear

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that he wanted all of us managers to be the real leaders. And he had these slogans! These words! “Transform”, “transformational”. “I don't want you just to change things”, he would say, “I want you to transform them.” He knew how to do it, too. There's a recipe for transformational leadership, all the different bits and pieces of behaviour that transform others, and Kurt knew them – he'd read all the books. But when my kids took me to see those new Transformer movies – you know, those giant robots made up of a zillion tiny mechanical parts – I couldn't help having a quiet laugh.

For another of Kurt's mantras he adapted the old pop song, “it's not what you do, it's the way that you do it” to “it's both what you do and the way that you do it” He'd pop it into the conversation umpteen times a day, even hum it in the office

so we never forgot. So do- do- do-ing was our thing. We had 360 degree appraisal, leadership style questionnaires, training in transformational leadership. Kurt knew the skill-set we needed, hammered in this behavior and that behavior for transforming our teams. “Practice what you preach”, he would say, but we were really trying to practice what he preached.

Sorry, but it never quite worked for me. I'm a quieter type, more of a thinker you might say, and I didn't really feel I could be the kind of leader that grabbed everyone's attention the way Kurt wanted. Also, Kurt's world seemed a lot clearer to him than mine seemed to me: strategic planning was supposed to give us direction to our transformation, but the real world we lived in seemed much murkier and more changeable, so I'd constantly find myself wanting to ask questions about it rather than plunging ahead.

Things didn't quite work out for Kurt. Too little transformation in too many departments, too many transformations in what turned out to be the wrong direction. Often, we seemed to be blind-sided by external change. Results flat-lined, then fell. The Board put the hard word on Kurt, and he resigned a few days later. I think he blamed us rather than himself – he thought we just weren't transformational enough. Maybe he was right, he was certainly right about me.

Anyway, Mary came, Kurt's replacement, slim and soft-spoken and much shyer than Kurt but still friendly. The atmosphere changed dramatically – or rather non-dramatically, because Mary certainly lacked Kurt's drama. Unlike Kurt, she didn't have answers, she just had questions. At first we thought that was because she was new and



learning the ropes, but eventually we realized that that was her way of being. Some people worried that she was indecisive.

One day, at a meeting, someone, maybe a little frustrated at the loss of clear direction that Kurt had always had, asked a question about transformation. Mary paused for a few moments, and then started talking. It wasn't a prepared speech, it was hesitant, she was making it up as she went. But there was something very earnest and heartfelt about it. It was compelling, so I grabbed a pad and wrote some notes as she spoke. Here's the gist.

"Yes, I believe in transformation, but it's not something any of us can make happen by an act of will or a strategic plan, or a shouty piece of charisma. The world has changed so much. Everything we do now we do together, so our jobs aren't individual, they're relational. Also, the goals have got fuzzier. What we have to do now is use all the energy, intelligence, intuition, skill, and teamwork we can muster, and almost grope our way toward good decisions. We need to question our own assumptions, think about things in new ways, and then perhaps move on and create provisional rather than absolute stability. And leadership won't any longer be something that we each do to others, it's something we all do together.

"And it's not about our skill-set but about our mind-set. Are we willing to ask hard questions about our own assumptions? Can we develop new frames of reference, see things in new way as the world changes around us? I'm afraid I don't see you as transformational leaders. Transformational leadership, save in a few exceptional cases, is for the past. I see you as partners, drivers of change, and innovation collaborators."

That's the way it's been ever since. The transformational leadership consultants were replaced with an Institute that worked with us not on us, that encouraged conversation rather than direction, that got us developing and sharing new frames and joint approaches to problems and opportunities. We not only built our own development, we increased the company's knowledge about how to get things done, adapt to change and lead from within.

I love my sessions with Mary. And, even more, the sessions I and my team have with Mary. It's not "What have you transformed?" or "What's your goal for this year?" but "tell me how you see things? How has that changed recently? How have you developed? How can we use what you've learned?" And, most of all, "don't tell me what you've done. Tell me what you're thinking."

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Not skill-set, mind-set. That's the key.

I remember Kurt with mixed feelings. I liked his singing. So, round the office, I hum my own little tune:

"It ain't what you do, it's the way that you think it! ... That's what gets results!"

This article is based on the following published journal article
Carroll, B., Levy, L. & Richmond, D. (2008)
Leadership in practice: Challenging the competency paradigm *Leadership* 4(4):363-379