



TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN AN ERA OF COMPLEXITY

Dr Amanda Harris explains how transformational learning and the crucial role of leaders can better guide today's learning and development strategies.

BM's 2010 study of 1500 CEOs of organisations worldwide revealed that the greatest challenge facing leaders today is working in an increasingly volatile and uncertain world. Frank Kern, senior vice president at IBM, noted that the findings of the study reflect the reality that: "the biggest challenge facing enterprises from here on will be the accelerating complexity and the velocity of a world that is operating as a massively interconnected system." (IBM)

A paradigm shift in our understanding and practice of leadership is needed if we are to cope with the current challenges. Interventions that conceptualise effective leadership as predicting, planning and controlling assume a linear relationship between strategy, behaviour and organisational effectiveness. Such a model does not capture the reality of organisations or the experiences of leaders. In a recent large-scale survey, 75% of respondents described their leadership development

programmes as ineffective. (*Brandon Hall Group, 2013*)

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

I am proposing that we consider leadership from a cognitive perspective, as a meaning-making activity; leaders bring meaning to working life, especially in times of change. It is through such meaning-making work that leaders influence the behaviours of others. From this perspective leaders are those who are able to interpret phenomena, to make sense of 'what's happening', and to convey this meaning to others in such a way that own belief systems are altered. Belief systems are our mental model of reality – a framework of ideas and attitudes about the way things work; our way of understanding the world. Leaders enable others to interpret their experiences and to see the world in a particular way; they encourage the generation of the question "What does this mean?" and provide a

persuasive answer. Complex mental models enable leaders to understand and balance competing interests and perspectives through the generation of a compelling narrative. In this way leaders create meaning and transform relationships which, in turn, transforms organisations. Leadership, seen in this light, becomes less about control and more about influence through dialogue.

Leaders may or may not have formal authority and their objectives may or may not be aligned to those of the organisation, but what they have in common is that they are able to convince others to change the way they see the world, generally in such a way that it aligns with that of the leader. In doing so they facilitate behaviour change as people will largely behave in a way that is consistent with their beliefs.

CORE LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Leaders share a number of attributes:

1. Management of competing perspectives and goals

Leaders need to be comfortable managing complexity, they understand that their objectives not only give rise to competing stakeholder needs, but that they must achieve their objectives through the effective management of the tensions arising from these needs. These tensions cannot be resolved, but they can be understood, influenced and reconciled. Leaders need to be able to comprehend multiple conflicting and contradictory views and develop creative responses, this requires the ability to deal with paradox and ambiguity.

2. Ambiguity and paradox

Organisations are sites of both stability and change, innovation and habit, creativity and control. Perceived paradoxes generate strong emotions and the temptation is to reframe the paradox as a dualism; *either A or B*, but *not A and B*. This means that they must choose between one side or the other rather than envisioning a reconciliation of apparent contradictions. Effective leaders recognise that paradoxes cannot be resolved, only managed and that this management requires the issue to be viewed from a number of competing perspectives.

3. Engagement in multiple dimensional thinking

Leaders are able to look at situations from different lenses, different points of view and to understand their interdependencies. Complex problems can only be understood and managed through complex frameworks. Effective leaders understand organisations as complex adaptive systems.

4. Connect Employees, Processes and Tools to Meet Goals

Effective leaders achieve their goals by bringing together people with competing objectives and divergent frames of belief in a way that generates solutions, shares meaning and inspires action towards common goals.

5. Engage in critical reflection

Leaders recognise when their current framework of beliefs is no longer useful for framing and solving the problems faced. If assumptions are not challenged, change will not take place. Transformative leaders intentionally seek new perspectives.

6. Ability to simplify complexity and generate meaning for those they lead

Leaders must not only create new meaning for themselves in order to move forward effectively, they must also create meaning for others. Leaders are able to influence the narrative which, in turn, directs individual and team behaviour.

Cognitive complexity is essential for transformative leadership, but is insufficient in isolation from emotional maturity. Leaders must be able to identify and manage their own emotions as well as the emotional responses of those they lead.

Leaders who demonstrate the above mentioned attributes demonstrate higher levels of cognitive complexity; the tendency to perceive the world in a multidimensional way. Cognitive complexity is essential for transformative leadership, but is insufficient in isolation from emotional maturity. Leaders must be able to identify and manage their own emotions as well as the emotional responses of those they lead. In addition, research has revealed that emotions are indispensable for rationality, such that one cannot reason without emotions or feelings. (Damasio 1994)

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

Transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 1997) informs our understanding about how our frameworks of belief are altered and can increase in complexity. Actions and behaviours will be changed based on the changed perspective. 'Leading organisational change depends on learning and the type of learning necessary for change to occur must be transformative.' (Franz, 2010)

Mezirow (1997) argued that transformations of one's belief system often follow several phases:

1. Disorienting Dilemmas

Dilemmas describe a disconnect between our understanding of 'how things work' and our new experiences. Disorienting dilemmas are more commonplace when dealing with complexity, such as the complexities generated by major change programmes. They can also be generated intentionally; on occasions leaders must not only illuminate the dilemma but must also shed light on the disconnect between a person's belief system and the ability to move forward effectively. We do not make transformative changes so long as new material fits comfortably within our existing frames of reference. Those with a low desire to change may reject new experiences or they may reframe the experience to fit with their existing meaning scheme.

2. Critical Reflection

After experiencing a disorienting dilemma a level of anxiety is created. One's old framework of belief is questioned and it is found wanting in terms of explaining 'what's happening'. Leaders need the necessary cognitive complexity and emotional maturity to support this process in others.

3. Discourse

New meanings are created through discourse as we challenge previously held assumptions about the way things 'work'. Leaders bring together and reconcile competing perspectives, exploring with others the disconnect between assumptions and experience; making sense of this dilemma and exploring the validity of various options and what their adoption means moving forward.

4. Changed Behaviour

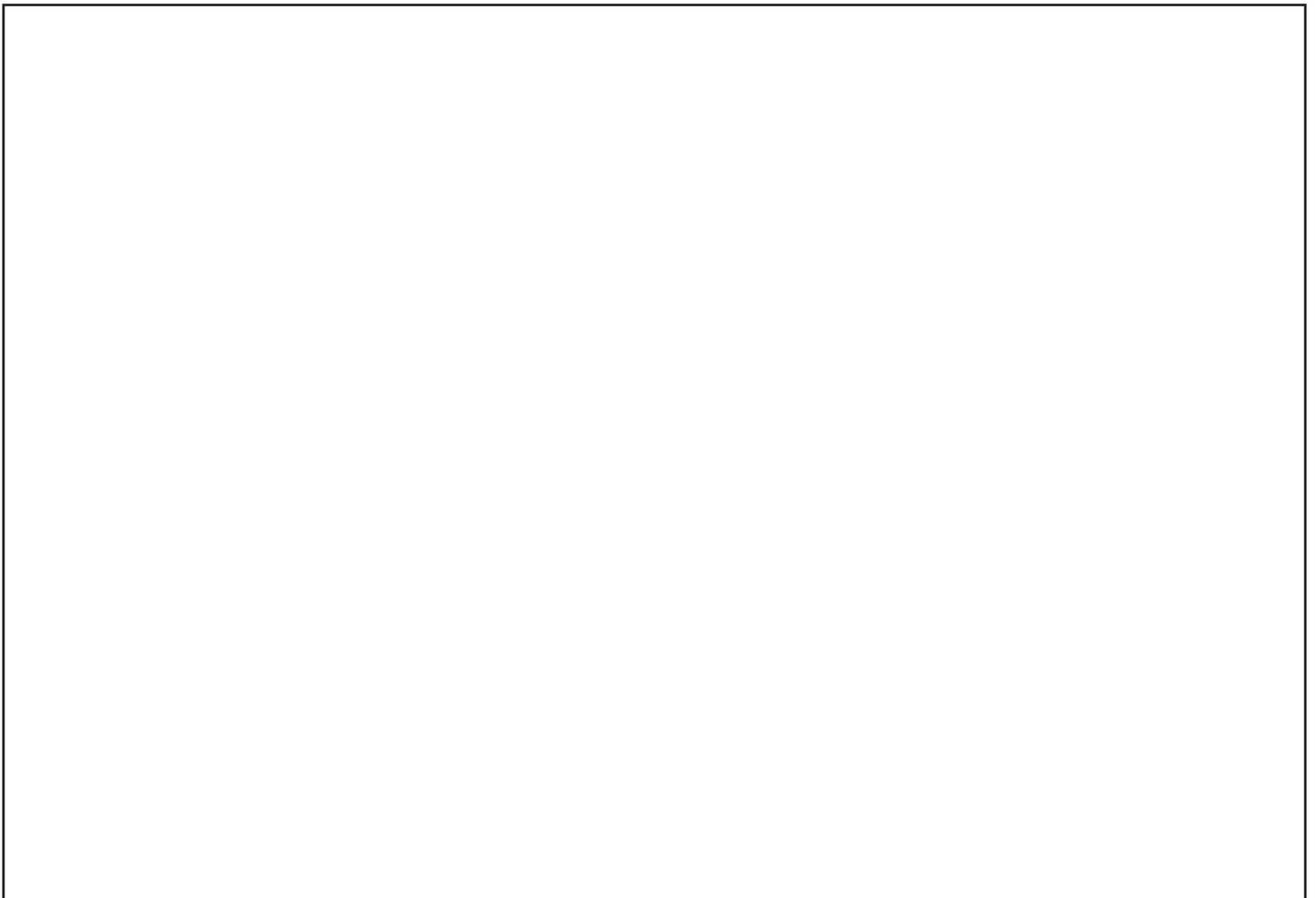
New learning means that we see some aspects of the world in a different way, and this difference in perceptions leads to changed behaviours. Leaders encourage experimentation in applying this new learning, supporting changed behaviours, enabling trial and error and building confidence in followers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Transformational learning theory provides a useful framework for understanding how we might develop our future leaders in the face of increasing complexity. It highlights the learning processes that revise individuals' taken-for-granted assumptions and reframe habitual ways of knowing, doing and being (Mezirow, 2000). This is a prerequisite for leadership development.

Kegan and Lahey's research (2009, p24) indicates that it is possible to 'reach higher planes of mental complexity' and that transformational learning 'correlates with effectiveness for both CEOs and middle managers'. Schein (1996, p65), notes that organisational change can only come about through changes in the mental models of its people. Transformational learning at the individual level, and transformational change at the organisational level must be integrated for effective change to occur.

Through understanding transformative learning, leaders can develop their own ability to reflect upon their belief systems and learn how to create space and opportunity for others to engage transformational learning, dealing more effectively with complexity and continuous change. Kegan and Lahey (2009) argue that, by increasing mental complexity, the process of transformational change facilitates problem solving of the type we need in our leaders today.



FACILITATING TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

What follows is a consideration of how we might facilitate the development of cognitive complexity via transformational learning.

Surfacing (or generating) dilemmas to illuminate gaps in current perspectives.

Examples would include the generation of an alternative, believable narrative which contradicts current understandings another approach may be encouraging learners to challenge mental models through the provision of additional data that cannot be understood within current models.

Providing space for critical reflection.

Mezirow (1997) cautions, 'learners need practice in recognising frames of reference and using their imaginations to redefine problems from a different perspective' (p10). We need to help learners express and refine new perspectives and to test these out through collaborative enquiry. Leaders must also develop the means to illuminate underlying belief structures in others, including identifying learners' defences to change.

Fostering collaboration for critical enquiry;

specifically between stakeholders with competing perspectives. A key ingredient in the process of transformational learning is the quality of relationships. Transformational learning is grounded in the action of communication. One example would be the development of learning communities, they can illuminate new meaning schemes and meaning perspectives. Dialogical OD practitioners are leading the way in considering how we might provide space for this dialogue in such a way that it will encourage critical enquiry. (Bushe and Marshak, 2015)

It is necessary to provide support to encourage perseverance in the face of ambiguity and detachment from old beliefs as learners experience awkwardness and discomfort when previous certainties are challenged. One approach is the provision of a trusted coach, one who can assist the learner to question their own reality in ways that would promote transformation of their world views. A particular and authentic quality of relationship is a critical condition for cultivating conditions for transformative learning.

Recognising and countering countercultural narratives. We need to develop an understanding of the circumstances in which meaning making frameworks detrimental to organisational aims are generated and we need to get better at countering their influence.

Facilitating the development of the communication tools through which leaders change the understandings of others.

Examples include honing skills in the development of compelling narratives, the use of analogy and metaphor and syllogism. 'The way in which the world is imagined determines at any particular moment what men will do.' (Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion*, 1921)

Facilitating the development of critical reasoning skills. We need to create learning opportunities that foster the creative and critical reasoning skills necessary for complex problem solving and leadership growth.

Facilitating the development of emotional maturity and understanding the role of emotions in transformational learning. The work of Laske (2015) provides us with a model of how this might be approached.

Gaining an understanding of how we might cultivate transformative learning in online environments. To be transformational it must have the ability to accompany learners through liminal areas of disorientation and uncertainty, to support reflection and critical analysis and to provide opportunities for trial and error in putting into practice this new learning.

Finally, we need to be able to measure the impact of transformative learning.

The outcomes indicative of transformation may include Cranton's (1992) framework of three types of change: change in assumptions, change in perspective, and change in behaviour.

This article has considered the way in which an understanding of transformational

learning and the role of leaders in this era of complexity can better guide our learning and development strategy. Effective leadership development is a critical factor for any organisation.

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Dr Amanda Harris will present 'Leadership Development and the role of L&D in an era of complexity' at Learning Technologies 2016 on Wednesday 3 February 2016, at 13:30 in Theatre 10.

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