

Leading a major transformation

by Stéphane Lhuillier*

Leading a major transformation is a crucial moment in a company's lifetime. It requires three main actors putting in coherence – the leader; the team; and the organization – coherence of decisions, communication, and actions in a timely and geographic manner for global or international companies.

1. The Leader

At first, the leader gives a purpose to the transformation. By developing his/her “story” in a very personal manner, the leader is able to transmit and generate the energy necessary for the transformation. The starting point will be the diagnostic s/he makes of the situation. S/he will share it with the largest possible number of people and explaining openly this is where we are and these are the reasons why we need to change. This story shall describe a path that “speaks” to everyone – change agents and employees alike across the whole organization.

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S/he will then need to personify the transformation. With a series of very symbolic actions, highly visible in the company, the leader will clearly indicate the new behaviors expected. If s/he joins from another company, his/her first actions will be scrutinized and relayed delivering strong and lasting messages.

If s/he comes from within the company, a visible change in behavior will be determined. Acting in new ways, s/he will make change credible by role modeling the new behaviors. This side often requires an important personal change - a true personal transformation of the leader.

Throughout the transformation process, the leader will pass through periods of convictions, euphoria and doubts. It is a very dynamic process during which his/her main challenge will be to remain coherent with the transformation purpose and its personification.

The leader will need to be confident, credible and legitimate in everyone's eyes in order to hold high this purpose. For this, the leader will create a reflection space for himself/herself to share his/her dynamics in all discretion and protection. A partner, a mentor or a coach will be the most appropriate person to offer this necessary space. Working with a coach will allow aligning the quality of the story and of the personalization. The leader, along with the coach, will focus on the coherence identifying the strengths and more delicate areas. They will identify and experiment personal transformations together and check their impact on the team as well as the organization.

2. The Top Team

The top team will then lead the transformation through its completion. A major period of change requires a level of team cohesion much higher than what is acceptable in regular periods. The leader will have to choose the team members with the necessary individual capabilities and the true desire to support the team and hold on the purpose of the transformation. The choices will be highly visible to the rest of the organization, thus showing again the desired behaviors.

The team challenges will be cohesion and coherence. A major transformation is made of ambiguities, uncertainties and contradicting decisions at times. They challenge the team cohesion throughout the entire process. Managing this team will require a fair amount of time. It will be essential to regularly regulate interpersonal relationships by openly and frankly discussing the matters. Additionally, the team will have to make major decisions together and to share vast amounts of information.

Just as with the leader, working with a coach will help the team better be able to pass through these turbulent times. The coach and the team will address team dynamics. For example, to what extent do team members share the transformation purpose? Are individual roles and responsibilities sufficiently clear to everyone? How good are interpersonal relationships? Last but not least, is everyone on board with all decisions? This is the main focus of the coach and team throughout the transformation process.

3. The Organization

The organization is the entity that will really implement the transformation. Success will be measured by the organization's operational configuration and everyone's acceptance of the needed changes. Their desire to execute the changes will be largely influenced by the coherence of the messages they receive and perceive from their respective hierarchies. People will continuously seek this coherence when interacting with their superiors and "check" explicitly and implicitly between departments and services. It is absolutely essential that the team be at its utmost for communicating the transformation purpose. Not only the contents (the what) of the messages but also and more importantly the way (the how) the messages will be shared and analyzed. They will drive people's decisions to implement or not the changes.

The leader will check people's desire with regular shop visits and by tracking key performance indicators (KPI). S/he will select the KPI's in line with the transformation objectives. These indicators will become "thermometers" of the transformation. They will focus all of the energies on the most critical operational levers. Measuring them at regular intervals and debriefing results will enable the leader and team to identify the necessary actions to drive the transformation further.

The actions will reinforce everyone's perception of the leader and team willingness to drive the transformation to its end. The process will be repeated until the transformation has been completely achieved.

Conclusion

Leading a major transformation is a crucial period in a company's lifetime. It requires three main actors putting in coherence – the leader, the team and the organization.

The leader shall develop four essential roles:

1. Create a purpose for the transformation
2. Personify it in his/her decisions, actions and communication
3. Create a team to drive it
4. Ensure the organizational impact of the changes taking place

Coaching the leader and his/her team and measuring the impact in the organization throughout the entire transformation process are key success factors. They ensure coherence at all levels and the complete execution of the transformation.

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