

REFLECTIVE PRACTICES for Transformational Leaders

by Judy Sorum Brown

The seeds of transformational leadership lie in honest, regular personal reflection by leaders. Transforming an organizational culture means understanding that culture, along with the mind-sets that create its structures and its patterns of thinking and behaving.

Eight ways to examine your own mind-sets and help break negative patterns are included. The goal is to improve your effectiveness as a leader and, more importantly, lead transformational change within a not-for-profit organization.

About a year ago, in an article for *FutureAge*, I said that transformational leaders take “time to see into their own processes, to disclose their feelings and thinking, to be honest about themselves, their train of thought, their thinking, their reservations and struggles ... With that leadership courage ... the transformational leader invites all of the human talents of us all, and the result is a new and necessary ‘richness’ in our world of work, a sense of being at home, ourselves, in the workplace.”

I want to take us a step further in that exploration about being a transformative leader, to ask, “What can a leader do to increase those dimensions of self-awareness, and thus to lead wisely through times of uncertainty?” How can we tap the highest aspirations and talents of those around us, and aim all our sights on a higher plane of service and effectiveness? Are there practices that help us make a difference in the world whether we are a leader by title, or simply one who wants to make the world a better place?

A Role for Reflection

The answer is yes; there are practical next steps, and yet the starting point is a quiet place of reflection. Why are personal reflective practices critical to the world around the leader and within the organization? Why be reflective when the world needs action? What is the logic, the payoff, for stepping back from the action from time to time?

Reflective leadership practices focus our attention on the level where leaders have

the most leverage, and which most impacts action: the space of thinking and feeling, the stories we tell ourselves about how the world operates, the unwritten rules of culture.

The world in which we lead is like an iceberg, with only the tip of it seen above the waterline. That tip is represented by events. Everyone is watching the tip because it’s visible. Yet most of the iceberg, as we all know, is below the water line. And below the waterline are the dimensions of organizational life that are shaping what we see.

The transformative leader (or any leader) is faced with events that are anticipated and not anticipated. Since we’re talking about icebergs, let’s use the sinking of the *Titanic* as an example. On her maiden voyage the *Titanic* struck an iceberg in the North Atlantic and sank. That was the event. You can no doubt think of major “events” in your workplace. Huge surprises, some good and some bad. You know how much attention they grab.

But level two of what a transformative leader is aware of, and working with, is patterns of behavior, just below the surface. How did patterns of behavior contribute to the *Titanic* hitting the iceberg? Everyone accepted the captain’s supremacy. Those on the bridge ignored the log book’s detailed notes about multiple icebergs, with the location of each carefully noted. Passengers and staff ignored the lack of space in the life-boats for all 2,000 people on board. Deference to expertise, to position, to authority—all were patterns imbedded in

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the culture of the time. You can think of patterns of behavior in your organization—some that push the organization in directions that are very productive, and others that you think probably hamper the organization.

At a third level on this “iceberg” of reality are conscious and unconscious structures

and rules that contributed to the event. These included rules about running the ship full speed ahead in order to make it to New York on time; rules that the captain was never questioned; rules that you avoid icebergs by having a lookout watching for them. In your own organization, what are structures that are important or powerful,

that keep things operating in certain ways, for good or for ill?

And finally there were mind-sets, ways of thinking that had created the structures, that produced the patterns, that resulted in the event. Did a train of thought sink the *Titanic*? Perhaps; the captain believed that ships the size of the *Titanic* were literally unsinkable. Everyone seemed convinced that experience of success was insurance against disaster, and the captain was taking his final voyage in a long and successful career with the company.

You can probably think of mind-sets, trains of thought that shape how things are done in your work world. There may well be important ones that you so take for granted that they don’t even come to mind.

It is at this level of exploring and shifting mind-set that the leader has the greatest potential for transformation. Mind-set shows up as a train of thought, a dominant story of how things are, how the world operates.

Reflective leadership practices give us increasing awareness of mind-set, our own and others, so that we are increasingly able to bring to awareness the images, the stories, the ways of thinking, that are shaping our structures, that are patterning our behavior, that are producing events and our reactions to the events.

Thus, transformative change begins in the depths—within the leader, and then with the leader’s capacity to help the organization explore the depths of its own thinking, understanding and story. A change, a shift at that deeper level, changes everything up the line. Tinkering with the aftereffect of events has much less impact, and yet many leaders spend huge amounts of time doing just that. With their attention captured by events, their calendars jammed with activity, they are unable to place their attention at the level, within themselves, and around themselves, where real transformation can begin.

Exploring Mind-Sets

Here then are eight ways to wander into the depths of mind-set, intentionally and regularly, to become more aware of the shape of our thinking.

1. Reflecting on the iceberg: This reflective process pulls us back from fixing symptoms, and reacting to the events around us. As a leader it helps us practice getting some space to think more deeply about what is going on around us.

Think of a particular vexing incident or event. Using the “iceberg” structure discussed above, detail what you noticed at the level of action and event. Then write down the various patterns of behavior that seemed to contribute to that event. Note the various structures in the organization, culture or situation that produced those patterns. Finally, detail the mind-sets or ways of thinking that built the structures, that produced the patterns and that caused the events.

2. Leadership shadow: This practice gives us a chance to observe, without judgment and without need for action, a leader who approaches things differently than we do.

Identify a leader whom you admire, whose approach is different from your own. Arrange to spend a day “shadowing” that leader, observing what he or she does, and how. If possible, conclude the day with a half-hour interview of the person. Ask how he or she thinks about leadership and handles the management of change. Ask the person to describe his or her greatest gift and greatest legacy.

3. Easel art: an exercise for shifting out of words. This process can be effective in exploring our vision for our work in the world, our lifetime calling. Using newsprint or flipchart material as an artist’s canvas, with big colored magic markers begin drawing, scrawling, sketching

or scribbling—whatever comes to you. The only rule: no words. Work until you are tired. Leave the “artwork” overnight. The next day, stand before it for a few minutes and then name it and date it.

4. Genius-level questions: This practice shifts us from trying to find an answer to asking more powerful questions. Practice asking completely open and curious questions, questions that only the other person can answer, and about which you can have no possible theory. For instance, you might ask colleagues what they are most excited about in their work ... and what gives them the greatest worries. Or, you might ask someone who is wrestling with a problem whether he or she has ever encountered anything like that before.

5. Accessing physical wisdom: Make a commitment to engaging in some process that creates new “understanding” within your body. It might be taking up golf (or improving your game), walking a labyrinth, taking a ropes course (which I did after I was 50 and terrified of heights), taking up dancing, kayaking, skiing, gardening or woodworking.


6. Daily writing: This is a practice that helps us listen to our own inner wisdom, to take in the lessons of our own lives. It also helps develop greater awareness of our thought processes. Set aside time each day to write freely, from wherever you are in your thinking and feeling. Your writing may reflect what now stands out for you about yesterday, or the sense you have of the day ahead of you. Let your life speak to you. What questions is it asking of you? What information is it giving you?

7. Who draws your best energies: Think about people in your life who seem to have drawn the best out of you, in whose presence you were your best self and were able

to really do fine work. Make a list of those people. What do they have in common, if anything? How often do you now place yourself in the presence of such people?

8. Harnessing creative capacity: Every day, take a moment for some creative endeavor—cooking, writing poetry, playing music, sketching, painting or building something. These processes rest our thinking mind, place us in a flow state, and provide important perspectives for seeing the world around us in new ways.

As you experiment with these eight personal practices and others you may learn from colleagues, note any shifts in your awareness, your centeredness, your sense of purpose. Are you aware of things you didn’t notice before, as a result of one or another of these practices?

Why does all this matter? Because it contributes to your effectiveness as a leader; it increases your capacity to lead change, to be transformational. When you ask people to talk about the best leaders they have worked with, people who lifted them and the organization to new heights, almost always they will mention the leader’s extraordinary capacity to listen, to be present to others, to see the possibilities in others, to hold an unwavering vision. As leaders, we can’t do that for others without practice, and that practice begins within ourselves. Reflective practice is a core transformational leadership skill. It helps us see, and then shift, the deep thought processes and mind-sets that shape transformation in the outer world. The roots of transformation in the world around us lie in the deeper work within us. 

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