

# Untransformational Leadership Development: Combining Realism with Wisdom

BY Dr. NANCY NAZER with David Creelman

**Our story reveals how we worked to create an award winning state of the art transformational leadership program and then, after we had fine tuned each detail, realized we must drop the whole idea of transforming leaders. Faced with that insight we rebuilt our leadership programs based on a quiet, long-term view of individual development.**

## **The Dawn of Competition**

Like many large traditional companies the company in our story had a history of investing in people. However, this company like many other companies faced with globalization, de-regulation, and advances in technology forced it into a much more competitive landscape. We realized we needed to change the culture to be faster, more innovative and more customer focused. A big part of that culture change would have to come from leaders, so we elected to revamp our leadership development programs to the highest standards. We believed if we could find the right course, the right content, the right ‘magic’ we would enable the transformation of our leadership and from there transform the organization’s culture and performance.

## **Selecting A Suite of Transformational Programs**

Beginning in 2001 we introduced a new suite of programs designed to transform our leadership. One core course was designed to establish a common leadership language across the company and provide leadership tools to use back in the workplace. *This program* fostered an environment where leaders could share business experiences and best practices with other leaders.

Then we designed *next level leadership program* , which combined storytelling, action learning and other activities—training methods with a strong track record of effectiveness. Next we added courses focusing on important leadership skills: a change management program, a communications program and a coaching program. Some of these were seen as so important that we mandated that managers must attend.

However, as professionals in this area know, training programs are only one part of the development process. Leaders need to learn from other leaders so we created an innovative mentoring program. HR simply didn’t have the resources to match individual mentors to mentees so we created what would now be seen as a type of social networking software. This web enabled program allowed people wanting mentors to link up with those willing to be mentors based on the mentee’s career interests, location and language preference. It provided mentoring guidelines, evaluations and even e-learning courses for

mentors and mentees to become more effective. Everything was built into the program to ensure the mentoring experience would be a successful one.

### **Measuring Success**

These core programs were a real success. Not only were they well received internally; we won numerous awards such as the Brandon Hall ‘Excellence in Learning’ award. Our programs attracted attention and were written up in various international journals. We also were doing Kirkpatrick level 1 and 2 assessments (people’s reaction to the learning program and evidence that they had learned the material). These assessments showed an overall satisfaction of close to 90 percent with our core programs (!)

Any yet, our methods were still not delivering precisely the kind of results we envisioned. Despite the evidence success of our programs, we set out to make them even better.

### **The Quest to Make it Better**

We tweaked the programs, the courses, and the content; we brainstormed creative ways to make a difference; we worked with outside vendors to see if they had ideas we hadn’t thought of. We kept looking for “IT”—that magic something that would create a lasting “Aha!” moments for our leaders.

We could never quite find the recipe that would take our leaders and have them come out of the program a changed man or woman. The search for the Holy Grail for leadership programs was often a depressing quest. A vendor would say “Look, we’re different; we’ve put our ideas on a wheel.”

Another vendor would point proudly to the fact their leadership model was on a cube. Finally, we began asked ourselves if leadership transformation could really exist in the form of a seven step model to greatness or a leadership change wheel. We began to doubt we were ever going to simplify leadership to some key principles that fit on a convenient laminated, wallet-sized card. Eventually some vendors began to tell us, “We can’t help you. You are already doing everything.”

#### **Paris by Checklist**

Want an efficient way to experience Paris? Simply go through the highlights listed in a guide book. Eiffel Tower, check! The Louvre, check! Notre Dame, check!

Yet, anyone who has done this knows it’s not really much on an experience at all. Experiences don’t come pre-packaged or in a list. The most fulfilling trips to Paris are times of individual exploration and discovery. We think leadership experience happens the same way.

We felt real discomfort when managers came to us saying, “I’ve done programs A, B & C. What’s next?” It was as if leadership development were a checklist and they were just ticking off the pieces one at a time. Something was still wrong. Despite all our efforts, we couldn’t find that magic something. Why did we believe it existed?

### **McDonald’s and Plato**

If I tell you that perhaps we were ‘brainwashed’ by McDonald’s, you might think I’m losing it. And if I tell you I thought we were imprisoning our leaders in Plato’s cave, that might close the case! But I promise to explain.

First, McDonald’s. Our society today wants simple answers. The way we work, the way we eat, the way we believe there’s a formula for everything. We look for automation, quick and easy recipes, efficient models that will produce consistent results. Why? Because in our fast-paced, complicated world, the McDonaldization of society means we don’t have to think.

McDonaldization is a term coined by Dr. George Ritzer in his book *The McDonalization of Society*. He writes, “*McDonaldization is the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world.*”

With McDonalization everything is automated, packaged, controlled, fast, efficient and sure to produce the same result every time. Does this apply to developing leaders? We probably wouldn’t state it so bluntly but the market clearly is catering to that desire. Books and training vendors promise quick and easy formulas to turn out effective leaders. That is the product people are buying. But does human development work that way? And if it did would we really want assembly line, ‘cookie cutter’ leaders for our company?

That’s one half of our dilemma. Now here’s where Plato fits in.

For those of you who didn’t take the same philosophy courses I did, I’ll give you a brief synopsis. In Plato’s famous lesson about reality, he describes a cave where prisoners are chained, unable to turn their heads. All they can see is the wall of the cave. Behind them burns a fire. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a parapet, along which puppeteers can walk. The puppeteers, who are behind the prisoners, hold up puppets that cast shadows on the wall of the cave. The prisoners are unable to see these puppets, the real objects, all they can see and are shadows and can hear only echoes cast by these objects. That is their reality.

We came to realize that we were developing our leaders the same way. We arranged them in classrooms, sent them on courses and programs, put them through the ‘packaging’ process – with some options available, as if they were different car models. We offered

blended programs, e-learning, self-paced modules—but it was all still prefabricated, fully automated, and offered very little choice. It also required very little original thinking.

The people in our classrooms thought they were having a real leadership experience when they were really just in a classroom. We realized we were providing the same semblance of reality that Plato’s puppeteers provided for the prisoners in the cave.

### **Revelation**

It took deep reflection to uncover what was wrong with our ‘successful’ programs. At the heart of it was that we were trying to put leaders through a one or two day experience and have them leave transformed. It wasn’t just what we in HR wanted, it’s what the participants wanted to, when I asked “How many of you feel this course will change you as a leader?” everyone would put their hand up.

Yet, that view is not realistic. People do go through transformations in their life, but not on cue. Some people find a particular book transforming, or a key conversation, or a specific work experience. However, a leadership development program cannot reliably transform people as though we were transforming raw metal into a nail.

It’s also worth acknowledging that our leaders were not so hopeless that they needed transformation. What they actually needed was to develop their skills here and there, to get some sort of edge, to overcome a particular weakness.

Another insight was that leadership transformation could not be something we were doing for them or to them. Development ultimately comes from within. HR programs will support development, but the idea that we were doing something to them, was twisted the wrong way.

Finally, leadership development is not something that someone does, finishes and then gets on with life. It is more a way of being in the world, a way of being constantly reflective, always learning about yourself and others, always trying to improve.

### **Transitioning to Untransformational Leadership**

Clearly our solution was not going to be in adding more modules nor in further tweaking the ones we had. What was needed was to change the context, to change the framework within which managers made sense of the training they were getting and how they should pursue their own development.

We did several seemingly small but significant things to go beyond transformational leadership and create a new approach.

One of the first things we did was put the individual courses into a structured program we called a pathway. We had three pathways aimed at different groups: Essential Leadership

for new managers, Enhanced Leadership for mid-managers, and Strategic Leadership for more senior managers.

The pathway approach was developed to strengthen capabilities of all leaders, whether they plan to transition to other careers or remain in their current positions/levels. Leadership pathways are not an automatic progression to senior positions; rather, an ongoing development process for leaders at all management levels. By extending the pathway approach to junior leaders, we will build stronger leadership earlier and deeper in the organization.

So we moved away developing a series of standard ‘leadership training events’ designed to ‘produce’ leaders at the end of a finite event, to an ongoing process that requires individuals to take a much more personal and collective approach to leadership throughout their careers. Working with his or her own leader, each leader selects the right experiences, relationships with others, and training for their specific career plan and where they want to go in the organization. While the pathways differ, they share several common elements: personal introspection, ongoing commitment and intensive development work throughout the leader’s career, common experiences and transitions that all leaders experience – and a commitment to ‘pay it forward’ by assisting others to follow their own leadership pathways. Each pathway consists of four critical steps:

- Identification, Invitation, Acceptance, Registration and Orientation
- Assessment, Feedback and Reflection
- Personal Growth Planning with Leaders using blended approach
- Execution of Personal Growth Plan, Evaluation and Monitoring

#### Re-packaging Leadership Development

This re-packaging changed the way people viewed leadership development. Instead of thinking in terms of ticking off a set of courses, the metaphor was now going on an extended journey. Instead of expecting transformation from a particular course the message was that development will come gradually, over time, from the slow accumulation of insight and practice.

A second contextual change we made is that courses are no longer mandatory, nor are they automatically available to anyone. Managers have to be invited to join a pathway and after the invitation they still can’t attend until they’ve won funding and support from their department. This small change had a visible impact on the attitude of the participants and their business units. Firstly, we are now making an offer to an individual and expecting a commitment in return. It is no longer just another corporate program to sit in on. Secondly it is now very much a business program not an HR program. The business is investing in an individual to improve their leadership ability, this has increased the commitment to learn in both the manager and those around them.

Tightening the link to the business also helped with another important change to our development program. Earlier we had focused effort on the training and coaching components of development. However, we hadn't done much on the experiential aspect of development. The well-known Center for Creative Leadership model of leadership development suggests that 10 percent of learning is from training, 20 percent from relationships (e.g. coaching, mentoring) and 70 percent from on the job experiences. In collaboration with the business units we created a process for management to identify appropriate on-the-job experiences for people on our development pathways.

Not only are development experiences important in themselves, they also tied the whole learning journey more closely to the actual work. The pathway as a whole, including the development assignments, were seen as a total package to improve leadership in the business.

The final aspect of re-contextualizing the program was probably the most important. We start the pathways by immersing the managers in a period of self-reflection. We use tools like 360 degree and emotional intelligence assessments to help managers understand themselves better. We get them to talk to their leaders about themselves and their careers. They think about their aspirations, their priorities, what sets them apart, how they can uniquely contribute, how they *want* to uniquely contribute.

The reason this step is so important is three-fold. Firstly it puts the ownership of the developmental experience clearly within the individual, this is something that is going to come from within them, not something imposed from without. Secondly, it turns the programs very clearly into an individually experience. People may attend the same program, but for different ends, to match different aspirations. The goal becomes for individuals to develop according to their own aspiration, not to fit an HR defined model of the ideal leader.

**Contrasting Old and New Approaches**

<b>Transformational</b>	<b>Untransformational</b>
Answer is in a book or program	Answer is in the person
Learn the material	Be reflective
Short term	Long term
Checklist	Layered
Discrete steps	Journey
Transformation on demand	Transformation when the student is ready
Big leaps	Small tweaks
Left hemisphere	Right hemisphere
Aim for extraordinary humans	Make ordinary humans better

Empower HR & mgmt to change you	Empowered to change yourself
Doing	Being

**Where Does This Leave Us?**

We are left with a system that has people taking responsibility for continually seeking ways of improving their leadership capabilities over the years. The organization offers a great deal of support but the focus on the individual. It's a balanced program, offering excellent training programs, coaching and mentoring, and developmental experiences.

We've abandoned the notion of transforming our leaders. We do recognize that there are transitions leaders go through, and we provide support so that they can go through these transitions effectively. But they are going through the transitions as part of their own internally driven progress, not on cue.

Successful transitions require a different level of thinking and introspection, on a personal and very individual basis. They require you to reflect on your personal leadership, who and where you are, where you're going and how you plan to get there. For new leaders, it's the transition to thinking of yourself as a leader, the conversations you'll have, the people you'll impact. For existing leaders, it might be a transition to a new responsibility, a new organization.

Think again about Plato and Aristotle, and the way they taught versus the way society teaches today. Instead of an automated, prefabricated process, we want to give leaders the individual attention and tools they need, based on real experiences. Because everyone is different,

**Human Transformation**

It's a common experience for people at certain times of their lives to feel they have gone through some sort of personal transformation. This may be triggered by a dramatic event, such as boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter found when he was imprisoned, or something more mundane such as reading a book that allows us to see the world with new eyes. The transformation is real but we may be wrong in attributing the transformation to an external event rather than something going on in ourselves.

Work by Jean Piaget helped us understand that children go through distinct stages in their development and in passing into a new stage rapidly master new abilities.

Dr. Elliott Jaques believed the same thing happened in adults (see *Human Capability* Elliott Jaques and Kathryn Cason) and that roughly every fifteen to twenty years an adult will move to a new level of capability. It is a natural, inward driven progression.

The Buddhists have said, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." We think this captures the truth that transformation is fundamentally an internal dynamic that finds the appropriate external stimuli.

This means trying to program transformation is a waste of time. We simply have to encourage people to grow so that they transform when they are ready.

some might prefer the simplicity of the automated approach. In Plato's lesson, one prisoner made it out of the cave and realized they had all been looking at shadows. But when he went back to tell the others, many refused to believe him and stayed in the cave. They weren't ready for the tough journey to true reality, so it was simpler to stay put.

This personal assessment of your own development needs is very different than thinking "All leaders need communication skills, so I need communication skills". Instead, if you choose to improve communication skills, it is because you have introspectively seen the need.

It is a revolutionary approach, and one we truly believe will also meet the needs of the organization, by producing successful leaders, effecting sustainable culture change, and establishing a truly competitive edge

**Patience**

If you tell a typical group of manager in a classroom to engage in deep reflection they ask "How long is this gong to take?" We don't want that kind of thinking. Leaders need to lead in their own development and that requires patience, a commitment to the long term. Our old program was a success by conventional metrics, but we think our new program is much better at helping our leaders reach the highest aspirations for themselves and for the organization.