

Six Things Transformative Leaders Do

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Abstract

This paper is a synopsis of six things transformative leaders do to ensure a business survives and progressively advances towards its long-term goals amid the volatile, unstable, complex and ambiguous environmental conditions of the 21st century. The author draws this synopsis from previous research reviewing, 1) scholarly published papers, academic literature and empirical studies accessed through online scholarly search engines and knowledge bases, dated 2010 onwards, documenting and offering theoretical, conceptual and philosophical frameworks on the emergence of transformative leadership to help leaders profitably navigate the challenges of a chaotic, crisis ridden world, and 2) analysis of published case study data on African CEOs celebrated for successfully turning around failing businesses and posting outstanding outcomes in depressed local economic conditions. The paper suggests that business survival calls for higher skill sets than simply outsmarting the competition, keeping up with evolving customers or managing the bottom-line. Rather, transformative leaders facilitate irreversible transcendent change to ensure business survival, sustainability and long-term success. While conventional theory suggests that apex leaders should take direct control of business operations, transformative leaders install a vibrant business culture where leadership responsibility is shared with empowered followers. They keep the business abreast of the evolving economic environment by maintaining a profitable, responsive and creative tension between the business readiness to change and the impact of external forces altering the environmental landscape. In this paper the researcher uses classic, contemporary and current leadership theory to anchor its findings.

Keywords

Transformative Leaders, Transforming Culture, Turbulence, VUCA, Afrocentric Business Leadership, Dynamic Strategy, Empowered Followers, Transcendent Change, Creative Tension, Ubuntu

1. Introduction

What can a leader do to help a business survive and thrive in volatile, unstable, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environments? The answer to that question depends on the leader, the situation and the desired outcome (Hanine & Dinar, 2022). Nonetheless, a historical review of the terms “leader” and “leadership” suggest that the two are still evolving as scholars struggle to come up with an absolute definition of each term. Indeed, it has been said that there are as many definitions of these terms as the number of those people who make an effort to define them (Landis et al., 2014). The evolution of leadership theory indicates that the role and expectation of leaders has changed over time. Early theories such as the great man and trait theory discuss the leader centric or the apex leader role as the sole determinant and influencer of organization success. Apex leaders articulated a vision, provided direction, communicated dreams and motivated staff to pursue and achieve institutional goals. Later theories focus on “situational” and “contingency” approaches which recognize the need for leaders to help their organization respond to changing conditions. Nonetheless transformational leaders are expected to help organizations deal with ambiguity, chaos and turbulence in an unstable global environment (Alimo-Metcalfe, 2013). Over time newer approaches have emerged to help modern leaders successfully navigate demanding dynamic conditions including human relations, systems theory and transformational leadership (Khan et al., 2016). Modern leaders, rather than bear the full weight of leadership responsibility by themselves, mobilize it within the organization to pursue corporate goals. A leader is a person with a commission to do something about a challenging situation, while leadership is the process of involving everyone else in that co-mission. The leader ethically engages people, power, authority and material resources purposefully to realize desired outcomes (Nohria & Khurana, 2010). One hopes, of course, that the leader has the passion and understanding of what leaders do and what needs to be done to successfully carry out that commission in terms of setting direction, aligning people and motivating them to achieve organization goals (Kotter, 2001). From an African business perspective, “business agility, strategic workforce and demand planning, recovery management for organizational resilience, and conscientious and value-based leadership” help leaders address VUCA conditions (Rimita, 2019). Nonetheless, research shows that transformative leaders are expected to; “1) facilitate institutional renewal and successfully navigate challenging environmental conditions; 2) lead advocacy initiatives to raise societal awareness on ethical issues; 3) provide salvation in seemingly hopeless situations; and 4) enable the moral empowerment of people to participate effectively in the pursuit of corporate goals” (Bukusi, 2020c). While no one person has the capacity to run all aspects of a business, transformative leaders help organizations navigate dynamic changes in the ecosystem and take advantage of emerging market opportunities by sharing out and cascading the leadership role among followers to position their business for survival, sustainability and

long-term success by doing the following six things.

2. Executing a Dynamic Operational Strategy

Businesses today face turbulent environmental conditions occasioned by advances in technology, politics, social trends, market economics and global warming as both sources and forces of disruption (Faeste & Hemerling, 2016). These forces affect business operations on a day-to-day basis. Under these conditions the transformative leader maintains long-term vision and big-picture thinking, but also executes a dynamic strategy to circumnavigate obstacles and take advantage of emergent opportunities in the ecosystem. The leader crafts an operational strategy that incorporates changing conditions as one of the pillars of its construction. Alongside conducting an internal strength/vulnerabilities (SV) analysis in the situation, and evaluating external options/risk (OR) in the environment, the leader also studies the permutations of forces of change (FC) affecting the business to find ways to position it for success (Montgomery, 2013). Executing this strategy may frustrate those who are not used to working with leaders who appear to be always changing their mind. However, the tactical nature of operational strategy demands that a business gets comfortable with change as a survival and success norm. In the sea of environmental turbulence, operational plans need to have the dynamism to steer a business to port, but also the flexibility to take advantage of emerging opportunities as they arise (Bukusi, 2023). Many times, organizations want a map (strategic plan) to achieve the organization goals. However, in VUCA conditions, the map itself is dynamic. A map is useful, but in turbulence, what the leader needs is a goal and a compass. In other words, while the leader is navigating the turbulent environmental conditions, keeping the business safe and holding together, the leader must also ensure that the business takes the next logical irreversible step to strategically advance towards its goals.

3. Facilitating Transcendent Change

While organizations caught in disruptive environments are prone to taking erratic emergency measures such as; retrenching employees, cutting costs and implementing expensive customer loyalty programs, there are those that become distressed and collapse under the pressure of change because they failed to take crucial steps to move the business progressively towards long-term strategic goals (Shumba & Zindiye, 2018). However, transformative leaders employ wisdom to keep the business competitive, sustainable, continuously adapting, changing, driving innovation and evolving in the context of a volatile market (Schiuma et al., 2022). They prominently use four styles to facilitate transcendent change namely; 1) Facilitation; recognizes the existence of expertise within the room and allows this expertise to lead and direct initiatives in their areas of wisdom; 2) Advocacy; recognizes and voices important issues whose impact on the survival of the business would go unnoticed, unchecked or not fully appre-

ciated within or outside the organization. For example, the budget for customer service training may dwindle when company profits surge upward. It may require advocacy to reinstate the training budget as a key to not only driving profits, but also facilitating staff development, health and happiness. Transformative leaders may find that they have to lobby and network within the industry to safeguard the success of the business in the face of toxic environmental forces. It would be unethical for a leader to remain quiet when undue tax rates or industrial pollution are eating into their ability to provide transcendent public services. The leader maintains advocacy as a voice for those do not have access to the decision-making microphone and yet are critical contributors to the success of the business; 3) Sacrificial service; The leader may be called out, from time to time, to come to the aid of those in pain and seek social relief or various kinds such as care, charitable assistance to needy or underprivileged as a service to humanity. This style may come with a personal cost and sacrifice of time and resources; and 4) Moral armament; in this style the leader challenges everyone to passionately take up their co-mission to ensure the success of the organization. In using this style, the leader appreciates that ethics with action is transformative, ethics without action is ineffective, while action without ethics can be destructive (Langlois, 2011). Transformative leaders power institutional transformation and advance by transcending organizational barriers and biases to position it for greater success (Shields, 2010), These leaders enable a change similar to a “quantum leap” in atomic physics. Examples of transcendent leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi personally inspired both enemies and friends to transcend their self-interest for the survival and greater success of the nation (Caldwell et al., 2012). Transcendent change is the moral advancement of an individual or organization to a higher state of being or existence.

4. Maintaining a State of Creative Tension

Transformative leaders maintain the business in a state of creative tension readily responding to the forces of change in its external environment along the path to its desired future. The creative tension between internal readiness to change and external dynamism forces the business to respond with creative ideas, innovation and sheer adaptation to maintain the business on a path to its desired goal. Adaptability is a crucial survival skill in a dynamic market (Joiner & Josephs, 2007). While environments change progressively, they are also known to change suddenly and disruptively forcing everyone in the market to play “catch up” even when leaders have an anticipatory sense, or are made aware in advance of impending changes. A business survives by keeping attuned to its environment and achieves sustainability by remaining relevant in evolving market conditions (Bukusi, 2020a). Resultant internal organization changes (implemented through ideation, innovation and adaptation) reposition the business to take advantage of emergent environmental opportunity and further anticipated change in a series of progressive (transcendent) leaps. A surviving business must

keep advancing as it has no power to recreate conditions that enabled its past success.

5. Empowering Followers to Sustain Needed Change

It is impossible for one person to lead change in more than one place at a time, yet institutional transformation needs to continuously take place in all corners of a business at the same time. To overcome this challenge, leaders share and inspire a transformative mindset among followers and team members. They train followers to think as leaders in their spheres of responsibility (Montuori & Donnelly, 2017). These empowered followers (leaders) enable a groundswell of collective, collaborative efforts to facilitate transcendent change in every department of the business all the time. In other words, it is impractical to expect transformative initiatives, or transcendent change, to take root in one department without systemic, organization wide collaboration with other departments affected by the anticipated change (Arnold & Wade, 2015). The leader motivates followers to engage the same transformative mindset as they share rotational responsibility for institutional advancement based on individual strengths, talents and team roles. This mindset, amongst followers, ensures that transformation continues in the absence of the apex leader who cannot be at all places at once (Chaleff, 2009). The transformative mindset inspires divergent thinking and debate, and avoids “conformism” to explore new opportunities, ideas and innovations that change the organization from within (Bukusi, 2020b). Leaders help followers harness and align their personal contributions to advance the business strategic intent through self-leadership and transformative thinking.

6. Installing a Transforming Culture

Transformative leaders create a safe space for discussion, exploration, ideation and application of innovative initiatives without making followers feel they have to “step out of bounds” to change “the way things are done around here”. In other words, the company ethos needs to allow for “transforming” as the way we do things around here (Bukusi, 2021). The overall responsibility of the leader is to model the way and lead change through people by sharing the vision, change through participation, intra and extra organization interdependence and social empowerment to install and promote a vibrant, ethical, transforming philosophy and culture where policies, procedures and processes advance transcendent change (Ncube, 2010). They advance institutional values that equip the business to embrace and deal with transcendent change and institutional advancement as a natural part of its continued existence. Ethos such as participation, reflexivity, creativity, justice, relatability, action and a sense of aspiration are necessary for a business to establish an organization-wide transformative competence and culture.

7. Safeguarding Renewal & Sustainability

Left to its own nature will organically renew itself, recreate and overcome any

dormant or decaying organisms within the ecosystem. Transformative leaders understand that institutions operating in nature have to keep in tandem with environmental change if they want to survive. This means that organizations operating in turbulent conditions must be constantly learning, managing and leveraging their intellectual capital, resources and innovative competence to, not only to stay ahead of the competition or maintain their bottom line, but also stay in tandem with environmental change (Kianto, 2008). These leaders maintain; 1) a healthy balance between the business operations and the sustainability of its resource environment. For example, logging trees may be “profitable” in the short term, but only by initiating tree planting activities will the business renew its environmental resource base and ensure it survives through to the long-term, 2) guided interrogation of environmental issues facing the business and challenging it to develop solutions that will ensure the business overcomes emergent change. However, many businesses fail and collapse under that strain of unpreparedness, inflexibility as unanticipated sudden change demands immediate and often costly renewal measures. On the other hand, incremental change can creep up on a business until it finds its goods are no longer required in the market. One such creeper is “advancing technology”. This can also be described as “decay caused by success” where successful organizations see no need to change internally and are overtaken by external change, and 3), transformative leaders and followers’ future proof the company with the capacity to remain adaptable and effect incremental renewal on a daily basis. Nonetheless, renewal needs to be described and communicated in terms of deliverables, and aspirations everyone in the organization can identify with in order for staff to participate meaningfully in the process, and 4) governance, infrastructure, business processes and policy need to be constantly audited to keep the company updated and responsive to environmental change. Key elements include strategy, structure, information processing, decision making, flexibility to change and the ability to appropriately locate (decentralize) and empower leaders on the work face (Lester & Parnell, 2002). For example, unnecessary bureaucracy or centralized authority should not hold up staff providing customer facing services from making and communicating basic decisions to satisfy customers.

Findings

This paper highlights, 1) the value of a directional navigational compass in dynamic strategy in a turbulent environment; 2) the notion of irreversible transcendent change as a strategy to keep a business moving steadily towards its goals; 3) the importance of maintaining a business in a state of responsive creative tension in contact with its environment to avoid becoming brittle and breaking under the strain of disruptive shifts within the ecosystem; 4) the importance of enlisting and unleashing the power of followers to lead change; 5) the value of promoting an effervescent engaging work environment rather than maintaining staid bureaucratic administrative procedures that do not allow for

deviant ideation; and 6) the need to install sustainability measures to safeguard long term business survival.

The concept of transformative leadership draws from behavioral, situational, contingency, transformational, adaptive and systems theory alongside complexity and chaos to put a success tool in the hands of leaders in turbulent times. Nonetheless, in VUCA conditions, survival moves from the basic function of “keeping an eye on the bottom line” to a top strategic business priority and organization wide leadership engagement.

Wisdom teaches that there is nothing new under the sun. With some diligent study, one finds that there are others who have attempted similar things before. Thus ideation, innovation and adaptation should not be guesswork or a dismissal of past, traditions, customs and learning. Rather, wisdom dictates an evaluation of history, mining informative data, examination of known knowledge, knowhow and experience, not only to avoid past mistakes, but to isolate new unknowns and chart a future that ensures progressive change and not reactionary responses to stimulus or simply “changing for the sake of change”.

The success cases of transformative leaders in African economies suggest that it is a viable Afrocentric business leadership approach to turning around collapsing business, reviving failing corporations and strengthening institutions facing the debilitating impact of the ultra-dynamic forces of global and local change. Similarly, the adoption of ubuntu as an authentic business philosophy indigenous people are familiar with, can serve to galvanize the organization resolve to overcome disruptive conditions in times of crisis. By remaining open to learning, environmental change and institutional advancement, leaders transform themselves, their followers and their organizations to remain relevant within the ecosystem. Finally, with regards to transcendent change, the theory of change employed in making desired change is as important as the sustainability of the change itself. In other words, what you want to change and why you want to change it is as important as how you go about creating the desired change.

Conclusion

Transformative leaders engage an institutional advancement mindset that decentralizes, disperses and activates the leadership function throughout the business sharing purpose, ethics, power and responsibility for desirable outcomes with followers to achieve transcendent change.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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