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Transformative Leadership Takes Your Organization to the Next Level. . . and Beyond

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Sunday, October 8, 2017

Anyone who knows me or has spent any substantial time around me probably is aware that I am a fan of General Colin Powell and his leadership. One of his quotes that continues to resonate with me is:

“Leadership is solving problems. The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them.”

Well, whether it is a soldier, teacher, or staff member, I believe the aforementioned applies. At the end of the day, I hope we all can agree that leadership matters. In fact, we know that leadership is often considered a key component of the school or organizations success or failure. To develop one’s organization or school and move it forward, leadership has to do something drastic: it has to operate outside the confines of their current leadership style, to move from transactional to transformational leadership.

James McGregor Burns suggested the idea of “transformational leadership” in a 1978 book entitled “Leadership.” Transformational leadership is the idea that leaders advance their team members to “higher levels of morality and motivation,” according to MindTools.com. Bernard M. Bass took Burns’ ideas a few steps further in 1985 in his book “Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations.” A transformational leader, Bass says, is someone who walks the walk of integrity and fairness. This person is encouraging and praises people. People who follow transformational leaders are impacted emotionally and inspired to reach for what people have said is completely unlikely to happen.

Alexia Vernon of YEC Women, a firm that mentors female business professionals, writing for Forbes, put it this way:

Transformational leaders are people who, irrespective of audience, possess the ability to create big shifts in their audiences’ thinking, which leads to big shifts in their behavior, which enables them to achieve extraordinary results.

Contrast this with transactional leadership, where leaders work within the confines of the current situation, solve problems by following known ways of doing so, need a step-by-step way to solve a problem, and keep diversity of thought and action to a minimum, according to Pamela Spahr with St. Thomas University Online.

With transformational leadership, we are talking about leadership that gets things done through a completely different type of leadership than is usually used in schools and organizations. The relationships between staff and supervisors in transactional leadership are usually based more on “do what I say because that is how it is done” than on a mutually collaborative, rapport-building, inspiring, exemplar-driven style of leadership seen in transformational leadership. Imagine what could be accomplished in your school or organization if all leaders were transformational. What impact could the organization have in your school, industry, community, and the world?

How do you become a transformational leader? MindTools sets out four steps to make the leap from transactional to transformational leadership.

1. Identify a Vision People Can Rally Around

People have to have a reason to follow a leader. Leadership’s vision lays out what the team’s purpose is. Identify the values of your team, what they can do, and what resources they have at their disposal. You have to do all of this after you analyze the environment you’re working in and figuring out the best way to step toward the vision. This might mean that you pinpoint ways your team can contribute to the overarching goals, values, mission, purpose, and vision of the school or organization your work for.

2. Convince People to Believe in and Work toward the Vision

Inspire your team members by telling them where you want to end up and the reasons behind it. Job-related or business storytelling is a great way to do this. When you tell a story, what gets people to buy into your underlying message is that you focus on what is happening in the moment in the story, not on what is happening before or after that moment, Vernon recounts from copywriter, persuasive writing speaker and trainer Stefanie Frank’s TedX talk. It stirs their emotions and their desire to be a part of your vision.

Keep the vision within the sight of the team at all times, and connect it to individual members’ goals and jobs so they can see how they are contributing to it. Transformational leaders are also great at encouraging and motivating people to deliver work that supports the vision.

3. Watch Over the Vision's Work

Everyday details of managing work towards a vision are not exactly as inspiring as coming up with the vision in the first place. However, transformational leaders are examples of the values and goals they want their team members to buy into.

- They walk the floors to be available to anyone with questions.
- They mentor employees to help them solve problems and to develop their own leadership.
- They encourage creative thinking and collaboration between levels of management.
- They know how to manage change within the confines of a current environment.
- They communicate clearly and follow through.
- They set attainable goals for the short term that support the vision, as well as longer-term goals.
- They ensure everyone knows what their job responsibilities are, how they support the vision, and they help them deliver on those responsibilities.
- They provide clear, regular feedback to team members.
- Vernon notes that they “take time to slow down, be without an agenda, meditate and let their intuition speak.”
- Additionally, Vernon points out that they are always asking questions about what they want, how can things can be accomplished in a different way, and what will happen if things stay the same?

4. Remember Your People are Your Foundation

Work on building solid relationships with your team based on trust and respect. They are valuable assets. Meet with individuals to see what their developmental needs are and to support them in their growth. In your interactions, be upfront and truthful with your team members. Coach them to find their own solutions to difficult problems to build their skill and confidence. Transformational leaders are those who inspire and accomplish change in their schools or organizations. Vernon says it best:

We can invite our audience to adopt the mindset and the moves to play to their edge and capitalize on their potential, to create not just extraordinary but rather epic results.

If we do believe that leadership matters, I ask you this closing question. Would your organization benefit from transformational leadership? Most importantly, is the school or organizational leadership willing to take the four steps to make the leap from transactional to transformational leadership? This might be a wonderful reflection exercise.

Please look for future articles on transformational leadership.