

The Making of a Transformational Leader

By Gregory L. Ferris, Ed D.

Transitioning

After six years as a secondary school administrator, I had enough. The final straw was taking a gun off a student and being reprimanded for not calling the police first. A couple weeks later, after a long fifteen hour work day, I dragged myself home thinking how I would rest my weary body in a well-worn recliner. As I sat in the recliner my mind began to catch up with the rest of me. A clear thought ran through my mind; I had become the highest paid custodian in town. I knew then that it was time to exit public education after twenty dedicated years. It was time to pack my bags and move on to a new career. However, I had no idea what that career would be until my brother-in-law contacted me about a leadership training manager position in his company. His call was like a tree struck by a bolt of lightning; my mind was aglow with excitement. Within two weeks I was interviewed and offered the position. I accepted! What came next was unexpected.

The Start

Entering the training center, the first day, I was introduced to a peer trainer who struck my attention in a most positive way. Extending his hand, he welcomed me enthusiastically to the training team. Notwithstanding, he proceeded to provide me with an overview of the center and his role and responsibility as the sales training manager. He was outrageously excited about his work with the belief that he could make a difference in the sales force performance, customer relations and, to be sure, improved results. His genuine style and high drive was not something I had observed in the public sector. From that day on I watched him perform as well as interacting with others. He became the benchmark as I soon moved forward in my role as the leadership trainer.

During the four years I worked in the training department, I spent a great deal of time researching, reading and learning that transformation leadership is where a leader identifies needed change, creates an inspirational vision and then executes the change with the commitment of the employees. In my observation of leaders I found, that there are deliberate behavioral attributes of successful transformational leaders: charismatic, motivate through inspiration, maximize mental complexity and give special attention to the needs of others.

I saw the attributes in numerous instances while observing the manager. He approached his sales training participants with a behavior that was positive with convictions that each of them would be given every opportunity to succeed. Each day, in the twelve week class, his role modeling clearly demonstrated a commitment to a set of principles - I am here for you and will challenge you to meet and exceed the expectations of sales training. He captured their minds daily, giving them information and then demonstrating by example. He was all for them, constantly emitting his values through his own actions. Throughout the training period you could see the feeling of success build in the eyes of the participants. I thought to myself, this guy is a natural. From that point on I made every effort to observe him in action.

On a quarterly basis, the sales representatives would travel to the home office for meetings, updates on selling skills and product upgrades. The sales training manager was there to greet the veterans as well as those who had attended his sales training. He had the respect of the entire sales force. And when he stood in front of them you could see the relaxed smiles on their faces and feel the excitement in the air. It was truly inspirational. Many of the sales representatives shared with me how the manager had inspired them in sales training, in the field as well as during the quarterly sales meetings. As one sales representative said, his vision of what it could be was always there followed by optimism about present and future sales goals. Indeed, his presentations to the sales force would ring with meaning and sincerity to the task at hand.

Whether it was sales training, team meetings or interactions in continuous improvement sessions, he always seemed to pose questions to others for clarity of purpose or probing for others to think at a higher level. He constantly challenged assumptions, stimulated curiosity and encouraged creative actions. It was very clear; he went after obstacles that obstructed progress or solution generation.

The one attribute that seemed to surface repeatedly was the manager attending to the needs of individuals. He acted as a mentor and coach giving respect and appreciation to individual contributions as well as acknowledging accomplishments. This action fulfilled and enhanced individual need for self-fulfillment and self-worth. It also inspired individuals to further achievement and personal growth.

Moving On

During my four years as the leadership training manager, I learned a great deal about leadership and had the opportunity to watch a manager demonstrate transformational leadership. The manager had moved the sales force forward with his deliberate approach and effectiveness.

I moved on after four years of learning and interacting with the sales training manager. I remained in touch with him and was pleased to know that he received a number of promotions, reaching higher levels of influence in the organization. Interesting enough, we stayed in touch through phone calls and written correspondence. We continued to share our work experiences and discoveries. It was not until after a couple years of our communication that the manager shared an insight that I had not realized. My ongoing influence and encouragement had accelerated his goal to reach the next leadership challenge. The manager accepted a position in Minneapolis as President and General Manager of a Fortune 500 company. Although this position broadened his perspective, his successes rested on the transformational leadership foundation that surfaced earlier in his career. The tried and true attributes had continued to positively impact those who reported to him as well as key decision makers.

Moving Higher

As our professional relationship progressed, the manager continued to gain work experiences padding his earlier learning as a leader. He continued to grow, influencing and making change as needed. It seemed as though his thirst for challenges were endless. Each time we talked, I sensed a yearning for even greater challenges and the opportunity to make change.

Before long, he was offered a position with a Chicago based company as President & CEO. Upon accepting the position, he was told by the Board of Directors to make radical change in the organization. They wanted nothing less than an organizational transformation or re-making of the business. Initially, he hired a leadership team of like-minded professionals who understood the business and agreed upon the attributes of transformational leadership. For the next two years he made significant change in the organization. He relied heavily on the attributes to move the organization to a higher level of performance. The process brought pain to some as he began to systemically remove the obstacles that had stymied the organization. Each day brought change in business practices and means of communication. He engaged the organization in problem solving. His leadership team moved the organization, adding value through planned communication. The organization began to move as one rather than many. The business once again began to grow and thrive in the competitive market place - productivity increased over 50%, gross margins improved by 44%, quality issues were nearly non-existent.

Using the attributes of transformation leadership, he influenced members of the organization to step forward and make change. His vision of the future unfolded transforming the organization into high energy and motivation. Employees understood the organizational purpose as well as their own; skill mastery was at full throttle - learning the culture of continuous improvement and autonomy was given to solve problems.

He had a sense of accomplishment yet the passion to seek even greater challenges remained. Most recently, he was approached by an international firm to start up a manufacturing company. His reputation in the industry had grown considerably. After accepting the position, he later told me that he was flattered yet honored to be chosen to lead the new company.

My exposure to this transformational leader sparked my enthusiasm and leads me to believe that organizational change is possible providing leadership is in place and embraces the attributes of transformation. Perhaps the following quote best sums up this leader:

"If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the [people] to go to the forest to gather wood, saw it, and nail planks together. Instead, teach them the desire for the sea."

He teaches desire.