

Leadership Transformed

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Read This First

“Decades of academic analysis have given us more than 350 definitions of leadership. Literally thousands of empirical investigations of leaders have been conducted in the last 75 years alone, but no clear and unequivocal understanding exists as to what distinguishes leaders from non-leaders and what distinguishes effective leaders from ineffective leaders.”

— WARREN BENNIS AND BURT NANUS

I STARTED THE DOCTORAL research that forms the backbone of hard data for this book on December 16, 2005. I can be very precise about this date because it was the same day my wife, Kara, gave birth to our daughter, Isabella—probably the best excuse ever to leave early on the very first day of class. As I sped toward the hospital, I had time to reflect on why, with a new baby arriving and a rapidly growing consulting business, I had just committed the next five years of my life to serious academic research.

Three things came to mind. First, I was really frustrated with the leadership literature, as highlighted by Bennis and Nanus.

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Second, I had an expedient (read: selfish) need to make sense of the “success” I was experiencing in my consulting practice. Third, I wanted to make a significant contribution to the field of leadership, in particular to our understanding of leadership transformation. By transformation, I mean the process by which an ordinary manager becomes an extraordinary leader.

As a committed student of leadership and somebody who had, over the course of twelve years, been fortunate enough to build a healthy business out of an obsession with the subject, I had become more and more frustrated with the literature. In my reading of both academic and practitioner-oriented texts, I struggled with the long lists of qualities and attributes that defined “effective” leadership, and with the heroic persona that was often attributed to the person sitting atop the organizational hierarchy. It wasn’t that I had a problem with the content of these works — they espoused largely noble attributes like vision, courage, and integrity. The problem was that, after so many years of working very closely with CEOs and senior executives around the world, I had never met the superhero leader described in much of what I read.

Since 2001, the work of my consulting company, The Alignment Partnership (TAP), had been squarely focused on helping leaders transform themselves, their leadership teams, and their organizations. Unlike the ideal leaders presented in the books I was reading, the leaders I was working with were mere mortals doing the best they could under ever-increasing pressure. The question I had personally become obsessed with was “What

does it take for an ineffective leader to transform into a highly effective leader?” I was searching for a substantive work to support and accelerate my own efforts, a work that laid out a clear road map for transformation in leaders.

Meanwhile, I was personally witnessing transformations unfold quite frequently. Over our first five years in business, my company had grown in stature and reputation following our publication of case studies of success in multinational companies like MasterCard, Bayer, and Dun & Bradstreet, and in the public sector with the government of Hong Kong. In fact, by 2005 we had a dozen case studies of organizational transformation, and more than a hundred stories of leadership transformation involving CEOs and senior executives. As a result, I was already feeling friendly pressure from the consulting community, the business media, and academia to disclose our “transformation formula.”

This attention was flattering but, given the often-quoted statistic that more than 70 percent of all change efforts end in failure, not entirely surprising. It was also very uncomfortable for me, mostly because I had little idea how to respond. I could describe the tools and frameworks we used and the interventions we ran, but that felt superficial, especially since many of these elements were widely used by consultants around the world. To paraphrase Karl Weick, we can only make sense of life retrospectively, even though it must be lived prospectively. It was time to make sense of our past in order to inform our future.

All through my academic research, I held on to the hope that

my results would help me make sense of our work, and eventually allow me to establish and refine processes that would improve our practice. I would then share those insights with leaders and consultants around the world across a range of platforms, from management journals to speaking engagements to, perhaps, a book.

Along with my supervising professor, Richard Badham, and my research assistant, Skye Phillips, my big dream was to produce a work of sufficient quality that it could be published in the *Harvard Business Review*, a journal I had read religiously every month for some fifteen years. In November 2011, this dream came true when *HBR* published “Fire, Snowball, Mask, Movie: How Leaders Spark and Sustain Change,” based on our research findings. This outcome further encouraged me to share our insights in greater depth in a book-length work—the one you are holding right now.

As we were shaping our approach to the research, Richard and I had the good fortune to speak with leadership guru Manfred Kets de Vries following a lecture he gave in 2006. We asked him what model he used in his leadership transformation initiatives, and he admitted that he acted as a *bricoleur*, one who selects, mixes, and adapts his materials in an iterative process of exploring what works in a given context. This was, in fact, very much the approach I had been taking in my consulting work, but I had not yet made the direct connection to my research.

Until this point, I had assumed that the goal of my research was to come up with some universal type of formula for leader-

ship transformation, even though finding such a formula was at odds with my beliefs and actual practice. But with Kets de Vries's words ringing in my ears, I realized that leadership transformation was something that could only ever be understood holistically — through the subtleties, nuances, and idiosyncrasies of the “protagonists” involved. So Richard, Skye, and I chose to go down a very different path from the formula-driven texts that we all found so frustrating. It proved liberating.

Our original research centered on seven leaders of CEO status from my management consulting practice. Their success in transforming themselves, their leadership teams, and their organizations had been well documented. They had seen radical improvement in 360-degree feedback on their personal effectiveness and the effectiveness of their teams, along with significant gains for their organizations in measures like financial performance, customer approval, and employee engagement.

Based on my level of intimacy and trust with each of these leaders — developed over many years of working closely together through good times and bad — I sought to develop a rich and contextual understanding of leadership transformation through their eyes. Their humility and their willingness to be vulnerable was paramount to the findings, with each leader giving me license to tell the “warts and all” version of the story.

We captured these stories through a series of lengthy interviews, conducted a rigorous linguistic analysis, and discovered several themes common to all in the challenges they had faced and the strategies they had used to meet those challenges.

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In subsequent conversations, and inspired by Karl Weick's assertion that "people see more things than they can describe in words," we found that the best way to elicit a deep and broad discussion of those key themes and to describe the leaders' mastery of what they had learned was through the use of metaphor.

Ultimately we uncovered seven distinct yet interdependent metaphors that resonated powerfully with the participants: Fire (ambition), Snowball (accountability and momentum), Master Chef (frameworks, tools, and strategies), Coach (support and feedback), Mask (authenticity), Movie (self-reflection), and Russian Dolls (coordinating multiple journeys).

These may sound familiar or even trite, but each contains deep and powerful insights into how leaders can become more effective. The familiarity of the words makes them memorable—helpful when trying to change entrenched behavior—and easier to discuss with a group. What's more, the seven metaphors are designed to be generative in nature. Unlike lists, steps, and formulas, which are rigid and don't allow for interpretation and personalization, the nature of metaphors is that they can be unfolded. They allow us to open up our thinking, inspire our creativity, and help us discover complementary and related meanings and applications.

Over the last three years, my colleagues and I have shared these stories and applied these metaphors in consulting, speaking, and teaching engagements to thousands of leaders on four

continents. They have proven to be reliable catalysts for purposeful reflection and meaningful action.

More important, they have allowed us to dramatically accelerate the process of leadership transformation in our clients, and thus greatly widened the data pool for this book. We now have hundreds of compelling stories of leadership transformation to draw upon — at the CEO and the executive level — many of which you will read about in this book.

One thing you may notice is that all of the stories in this book are each a little different. That's because there is no one way, no cookie-cutter program by which to apply the seven metaphors. They only make sense in the unique context of each leader's journey.

So *Leadership Transformed* is not just about leaders who have transformed themselves and their organizations. It's about transforming the way we think about leadership: to one where the art is as important as the science.

Quantifying transformation

For those of you who like science, fear not; the leadership transformations we documented in our research were not just anecdotal. Quantitative data on these shifts were captured by the 360-degree survey instrument we used with our leaders — Leadership/Impact (a registered trademark of Human Synergetics International), developed by Dr. Robert Cooke, associate profes-