

# LEADERSHIP THAT TRANSFORMS

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(PART 1) By Richard Searle, [r.searle@mbs.edu](mailto:r.searle@mbs.edu), [www.searleburke.com](http://www.searleburke.com)

A few years ago I attended an executive education course at Harvard University on negotiation and organizational change. One of our presenters, a Harvard Law School lecturer, greeted us in an unusual way at the start of the course by singing a traditional Jewish song to us. She kept repeating lines similar to “Blessed are you for being here. It is a blessing you are here”.

Six months earlier my marriage had ended so it would be fair to say that I was not in a completely positive frame of mind. But I found myself becoming very emotional and very inspired as she sang. I was pleased to be at the course but it most certainly had not occurred to me before then that it could be a blessing for me to be there, and even less that it could be a blessing for others that I was attending it! That whole program made a profound contribution to me and I think I received half its’ value in the opening moments.

Early in the same course on this rather dry topic of negotiation and organizational change, another Professor from Massachusetts Institute of Technology engaged us in a three question exercise. The first two questions were about our work and life aspirations now and half a life time ago, and the third question was about our first memory as a child. He suggested that we might be able to find a strong thread or dynamic between our three answers.

My first memory as a child occurred when I was three years old and living in a suburb called White Hills in Bendigo, Australia. I came racing down this really big hill in the front of our house in a home-made billy cart or go cart, and I fell out at the bottom of the hill. I could see my theme immediately – my whole life and work was about falling out of billy carts. Important relationships or projects would stuff up because of my crappy driving and eventually I would need to dust myself off and forget all about those aspirations and move on to a new phase of my life.

At 3 am the next morning I sat bolt up in bed. Why was I focussing so much on the falling out of the billy cart? In fact, the main part of my memory was the thrill and excitement of racing down that big hill (by the way I have visited my childhood home in Bendigo and that hill is as flat as a tack). And then I saw a different theme to my work and life – I like big, bold adventures, and occasionally these do stuff up because of my poor driving or they just end as things do. I derived most of my additional value from this course by mining this insight.

What happened for me as a result of these two simple interventions from our leaders illustrates one of the three notions of transformation that we commonly use on our own senior leadership program. Transformation can be a shift in how individuals or collectives are thinking, being and experiencing the world, others and themselves. This kind of transformation can open up all sorts of new possibilities and opportunities and avenues for action. And these actions can lead to the second notion of transformation which we use on our senior leadership program, namely, that it results in large and significant changes for the better in individuals, teams and organizations. The third notion of transformation which we use is the one favoured by CEOs when they trumpet their transformation agendas at shareholder meetings, which is the introduction of major

new process, systems and technological innovations which lead to large scale business and organizational changes.

Effective leadership can bring about these transformations. Indeed, it usually requires leadership to bring them about. How do leaders bring about transformations in others? Participants often describe the experience and the outcomes of our own senior leadership program as transformational. Indeed that is how it seems to us too. I believe that we achieve a lot of that very early in the program.

Firstly, we share the goal of the program to the participants as a transformational goal: “Together to learn some new and valuable things about leadership which will make a significant difference in our work and lives”. We keep coming back to the goal and the participants slowly start to realize that we are serious – “they actually mean that we will learn some new, fresh, valuable things that will make a big difference”. Most of these senior managers did not come to the program with a transformational goal - maybe they still harbour some transformational hopes down deep, but their goals are usually to gain a few accretions of knowledge to make things a bit better. To promise anything more can be as disturbing as it is exciting. So that participants don’t think we have all these new bits of knowledge sitting in a bucket somewhere, we make it clear that we don’t know exactly what the new lessons will be and what difference they will make. Indeed we make it clear that we cannot guarantee even that we will achieve our goal because so much of it will depend on them.

We say all these things – we share all these things. But that is not enough. It was not just the opening song on my Harvard course that brought about the big shift in my experience. Yes it was the song, but even more it was the singer. That song sung by a different singer may have made no difference to me whatsoever. And I am not referring

to the quality of her voice – as I remember it was pretty ordinary. I am referring to the quality of the person, to her way of being, to her presence. That Harvard Law lecturer was someone for whom it actually was a blessing that I was there. She brought that possibility and reality into the room through her presence and enabled me to get present to it for myself. She could have faked it and perhaps seemed impressive (or weird depending on your point of view about starting executive education programs with a song) but fakery would not have given me the shift in my experience. It seems to me that effective leaders are already present at least in the form of possibility to new ways of thinking, being and acting which can transform others. This is part of the value that leaders bring with them to the table.

On our leadership program we attempt to demonstrate how leaders not only transform individuals, but how they transform groups and organizations too. Indeed, we argue that individual and group transformations operate as a dialectic – they feed each other. In Part 2 of this Article I will explore how leaders influence the “relational space”, or group and organizational dynamic, in order to bring about collective transformations and big changes.

The context for our particular leadership work is that we are engaged in professional development where we are attempting to help senior managers become more effective and fulfilled leaders so they can help their organizations achieve their purpose, execute their strategies and deliver on their performance goals. The latest incarnation of our program is called Leading for Strategic Success and it is one of the most successful open enrolment programs conducted by Mt Eliza Executive Education at Melbourne Business School. Occasionally people complain that all this transformation stuff sounds like personal development or even worse, therapy. A former

boss of ours used to deride it as merely “cathartic”, which for me conjured images of helping people to vomit. Our view is that if managers are to become more effective leaders they will need to grow as people –that is the good news. And if they happen to find any of our work therapeutic then that is surely a gratuitous bonus. Professional therapy is very different and obviously our work is no substitute for that useful activity.

The following is an edited copy of a letter I received recently from a senior manager from one of our leadership programs. I have the very good fortune to receive many similar letters every year. The writer illustrates what I mean when I say that transformation can be like a shift in our experience of the world, others and ourselves which opens up lots of new opportunities. The letter also demonstrates how half a dozen years later the leadership of those educators on that course at Harvard, and many more, continues to have a beneficial impact in the world.

### **LETTER FROM JACK**

“G’day Richard,

Thought I’d just give you a flavour of how I found my course in Melbourne.

In short, the week was an extraordinarily personal and transformational process for me. I delved into some extremely hidden bits of my life, and some that weren’t so hidden but that I had never addressed. Between 2005 and 2009 my mother slowly died to muscular disease that apparently was a one in four million occurrence - not that it was really ever diagnosed. In any event, it was slow, painful, stressful and crippling physically and emotionally

for all involved. It also consumed my father, eroded relationships, and as I can see now sucked the essence of what I had always considered to be “myself” out of me. It also left me with a deep resentment towards my father. In this same time I also had a third child, became a general manager responsible for a large number of people, lead a major restructure, and took on huge amounts of new accountability and challenges.

I was never able to talk about my mother, literally – I just wasn’t able to do it – until I sat down with another participant on the third day of the course when we were going through some of the exercises you led. It was such a revelation to simply be able to open my mouth and say things that I hadn’t been able to even think for the past 5 or so years. I was just too bloody scared to do so previously. It also became apparent during this day how I had lost the inner essence of myself, which actually I had previously really liked, and what this meant for me. I didn’t laugh as much, took things way too seriously, took way too much responsibility upon myself, lost the ability to really listen and communicate with people, didn’t share of myself in an honest and open way, was scared, hadn’t danced, was never ‘still’ nor could let things go, never lived in the moment, reflected or was mindful.

Ironically, much of my life hadn’t been at all like this, quite the opposite, so it was no wonder I felt so adrift. As a very keen mountain runner I’ve spent literally months of life in the hills, and apart from my family, much of my spiritual and emotional nourishment came from being high in those hills. I always came back from these adventures emotionally charged and spiritually refreshed. Even that hadn’t helped in the past year or two. Worst of all, I had completely lost any ability to be compassionate towards myself. I never reflected with compassion, and always judged myself unduly

harshly, which I can see now led to a huge degree of self-consciousness which crippled my ability to give of myself and enjoy what was around me.

So, going through a process that allowed me to acknowledge all these things, and a whole lot more, was quite an experience that has left me feeling as light, calm and relaxed as I have in years. I also totally understand that this is just the start of a process, but I'm excited about the possibilities and potential of continuing to explore much of what we learnt.

Like a lot of others on the course I've taken this all back into the workplace and for the first time in years I don't feel like I'm putting on armour when I walk in the door and taking it off when I get home. It's actually fun again being a leader – and boy does listening to people, and suspending judgement make it all the more fun. I'm reading a lot about meditation – even got a CD –and I am starting to incorporate this into my life. My three kids, who are the total centre of my universe, look even more beautiful, in fact almost new to me. This is especially true of my little one who is five and like many third children suffers sometimes from lack of attention due to the hurly burly of family life.

In any event, that's all a very long winded way of saying thanks!

Cheers,

Jack”

#### **UPDATE FROM JACK EIGHT MONTHS LATER**

“Hi Richard,

More than happy for you to use my letter in any way you like.

All still good here – the things that I came away with from Mt Eliza still resonate very strongly. Life remains so much easier (has its ups and downs of course like everyone) but I'm seeing the beauty in the world like I used to, have danced, do laugh a lot more and am no longer crippled by self-consciousness. The thoughts on mindfulness are probably the strongest things I've held onto, along with some of the associated meditation. I am continuing to find the whole concept of mindfulness incredibly powerful, and as a tool it's fantastic to bring me back into the present when things start to get a little stressed. I know the triggers and I have a tool to respond. It's almost like a switch when I focus on it. Plus, everything looks like it's in technicolour when really mindful and in the present – sharp, clear and focused. It's great!

Cheers,

Jack"