

7 Transformations of Leadership

By David Rooke and William R. Torbert, HBR, April 2005

What makes the best leaders stand apart is not so much their philosophy or personality, but their internal action logic. It is how they interpret their surroundings and react when their power or safety is challenged. There are seven action logics - Opportunist, Diplomat, Expert, Achiever, Individualist, Strategist and Alchemist. Leaders can move through these categories as their abilities grow.

The Opportunist: Opportunists try to win by any means. Such leaders are self-centred and manipulative. They believe that "might makes right". Though they rise to the occasion during emergencies, not many people would like to follow them for long.

The Diplomat: Diplomats want to abide by the rules and avoid arguments. Diplomats act as the glue that holds the team together. However, they do not give negative feedback or make tough choices that may boost team performance.

The Expert: These leaders have expertise in their field and use logical arguments and hard facts to gather support. Their individual contributions are great, but they are not team players. They generally lack emotional intelligence and look down upon those with lesser expertise.

The Achiever: Achievers focus on getting things done and obtaining results. They take on managerial responsibilities and promote teamwork. However, they do not deviate from the trodden path.

The Individualist: The Individualists disregard rules and operates in unconventional ways. So, they are well-suited for venture and consulting roles. They end up annoying colleagues because they do not follow important organizational policies.

The Strategist: Strategists are good at transforming the organization and its people, over short as well as long terms. They are highly collaborative. They envision pragmatic initiatives and challenge existing assumptions.

The Alchemist: Alchemists are true visionaries (like Nelson Mandela) who bring about society-wide change. They reinvent organizations in significant ways.

Leaders can evolve from one action logic to another. These transformations can result from changes in their own perspective, as well as due to external events, or changes in the work environment.

From Expert to Achiever: Training programs like delegation and managing by objectives, must emphasize getting results through flexible strategies rather than rigidly following a single correct way. Coaches can help Experts realize that their assumptions may be different from others.

From Achiever to Individualist: Leaders who want to undergo this transformation should become more self-aware as also appreciate other world-views. Instead of thinking about how to achieve given targets, they must reflect on the worth of the targets themselves. They should focus on thoughtfully setting the highest-impact goals.

To Strategist and Beyond: Leaders moving towards the Strategist and Alchemist action logics already have the requisite personal skills. Now, they must engage in mutual mentoring with colleagues, who can challenge their assumptions and practices, as well as those of the company.

Just like individual leaders, teams can also be associated with action logics. Teams with a Strategist culture are found to be the most effective. But, most senior manager teams operate at the Achiever level. They prefer clear targets and deadlines and work with clear strategies against tight deadlines. Large, mature companies usually have Expert senior management teams. Individualist teams are rare, and are likely to be found in creative, consulting and non-profit organizations.

Conclusion

The leader's journey of development is full of challenges. While some leaders change considerably in their lifetimes, others may not change much. Those who are truly passionate about becoming more self-aware and developing themselves can definitely grow into transformational leaders. Few may become alchemists but many have the potential to become individualists and strategists.