



Leading digital transformation.. a personal reflection

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Leading change is hard. It is challenging and it is invigorating, but it is also extremely taxing. Looming over us is the fact that most business transformation programmes fail. And this is the case even when we endeavour to move an organisation from one known, fixed state to another. With digital transformation, we have the added pressure of a future in constant flux and a current state that has not solidified enough to give us real clarity. We are still groping in the dark, only really able to guess what is possible.

So to lead digital transformation you either need to suspend all disbelief and jettison the organisation towards a future you see clearly, or, give in to the uncertainty and do your best to shepherd your businesses towards a hazy unknown. Either of these approaches require leadership styles and competencies that stretch way beyond technological know-how or commercial acumen.

Much has been said about digital leadership and the need to develop leaders who are more agile, curious, collaborative and so forth. Digital transformation in particular requires leaders who can lead with strong emotional intelligence, and who are as comfortable with uncertainty and intuition as they are with data or delivery.

However, there is another side to leading transformation that is less spoken about, less acknowledged and that is the personal resilience and strength it takes to hold these roles. Leading digital transformation means accepting a difficult, sometimes impossible mission. Stats tell you that it is unlikely you will deliver everything you set out to achieve. The business expectations are often unrealistic to begin with. Sometimes you do not have enough resource, budget or buy-in to fully disrupt what needs to be disrupted. Other times your senior stakeholders have bought in too wholeheartedly, believing digital to be some sort of magic bullet, which will only disappoint in the end. Too often the focus is on the latest fads, rather than the fundamentals. Typically, you have no blueprint for change in your sector, as very few businesses are that far ahead of you on the journey. Your transformation vision is a mix of gut decision-making and peering into the proverbial crystal ball.

As a digital transformation leader you are simultaneously telling the story of change, running an agile programmes to drive change, leading your team, managing up, managing down, convincing some stakeholders that digital IS in fact important, and convincing others that it is not going to solve everything, promoting innovation on one hand, whilst trying to stop too much investment in shiny but ineffective distractions on the other, all the while being seen as a potential threat to other ambitious leaders in the business.

And in the end, you will find that you have a very short lifecycle. Most transformational leaders come into a business with...

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