The TAO of Transformation:
Vertical Leadership Culture for Senior Teams

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Introduction

Unprecedented, rapid fire disruptive challenges in today's interconnected business environment demand bold, effective, cutting edge approaches. Obvious, yes. But often impossible to do if the executive team won't transform itself. At some point, it becomes likely they will hit a wall that individual expertise and experience alone cannot tear down. Senior leadership today requires a fundamental shift to grow bigger collective minds that can align culture and strategy in continuous change.

The CEO of a Fortune 20 company put it this way: "We know how to reengineer our processes and integrate our systems. We know how to innovate in broad markets and tailor products locally. And, we know how to build new businesses while managing the supply chain. It's just that we have never before had to do them all at the same time. Knowing how in the parts is necessary. But transformation won't happen without people working interdependently together across all of them."

Time and again, CEOs tell us, "I have great talent; they just don't play well together. They say they are all aligned in team meetings, but they go back to their offices and nothing changes." Even when executive teams *want* to work well across their supply chains, too many leadership cultures are mired in competition, self-preservation, thoughtless repetition and individual achievement. Enterprise level performance is stymied.

Senior teams know that strategic change and transformation requires unlearning the many habits of individual centered heroic leadership. Each member of the team must strengthen ties with their peers; see and master conflict; and become collectively responsible for the enterprise. They must deliberately pursue **Trust**, act with **Acceptance** of tensions both interpersonal and organizational, and insist on collective **Ownership** of the enterprise. This is what we call the **TAO of Transformation.**

The path to a *Strategic Zone does exist*; a high functioning learning culture deeply rooted in adaptability, collaboration and shared responsibility where leaders put the whole organization first. But habitual avoidance of truth telling discussions and too much focus on the spin of positioning "my part" of the organization, promises halted organizational learning and stunted development. We all know the corrosive effect that subverting the simple truth has on morale, innovation and productivity.

We focus on a few essentials to share. First, it starts at the top. Organizations likely won't transform if the executive team won't first transform itself. Next, every executive team has its own particular leadership culture, which we define as the durable set of beliefs and practices leaders employ that create a particular type of shared direction, alignment, and commitment. Last, we believe the vertical transformation of leadership culture is key to improving the probability of an organization's strategic success. Steeped in the straight talk of public learning and grounded in constructive development theory, our action research and development practice seeks to demonstrate that leadership cultures can transform into vertical realms of increasing capability; from dependence (controlled conformity) to independence (siloed achievement) to interdependence (inter-systemic collaboration).

Ancient Wisdom for Modern Times

The ancient Chinese Tao (pronounced *dow*) wisdom tradition illustrates a pathway or model for interdependent leadership in a world full of chaos, paradox and tensions, and we respectfully adopt it here as a literary, symbolic device. The Tao teaches that value emerges from within the belief of seeking to see the whole while also paying attention to every step, not by idealizing or attaching to a particular final outcome. In the same way, transformation through the **TAO** of **T**rust, **A**cceptance, and **O**wnership is a developmental journey for leaders and team members alike, of which we are all always both.

If the work of transformation sounds lofty and the idea of TAO seems unrealistic and un-businesslike, you may be tempted to stop reading. In our view, it is un-businesslike for executives to tolerate the habits of leadership as usual with excessive change failure rates, strategic missteps, and tepid forms of collaborative performance. We offer the *TAO of Transformation* as a pathway for profoundly improving the leadership practices of senior teams and maximizing organizational performance at the same time.

TAO OF TRANSFORMATION: WE CAN GET THERE FROM HERE

The reason to pursue Trust, Acceptance, and Ownership is simple: to move out of the *BS Zone* and into the *Strategic Zone*.

Perhaps this sounds familiar: The *BS Zone* is where leaders are ego driven, mired in day to day minutia, focused exclusively on proving themselves and protecting their turf. They've bought into the prevailing milieu where technical expertise and personal skill—as well as power and control—are the hallmarks of success. Big personalities too often rule. Organizational dilemmas become flashpoints for conflict in which leaders polarize around their individual positions rather than reflecting cooperatively about available options. Across the supply chain teams stay their course and fail to make connections or see the implications of their work across silos. Sharing power may be given lip service but appearances trump action, and staying in the *say versus do* gap is the accepted norm. The unspoken reality is that *I/me* is far more important than *us/we* and trust erodes accordingly. As a result, important information remains hidden, feedback is not welcome and critical conversations are far too scarce. The success or failure of a company rests on a few people acting mostly independently. Organizational goals often remain unmet and the expected benefits of change efforts are seldom realized.

In contrast, the *Strategic Zone* is where collective capability is appreciated and driving performance together is expected. Leaders see their connected interests and effectively balance the needs of the whole alongside their own individual agendas. CEOs move past competitive rivalries and big egos are checked, pushing the organization's performance forward through leadership learning together. Leaders rely on each other, seeking congruity between what is said and done. They are self-aware, informed, open and deeply attuned to the whole organization. Trust grows. Dilemmas and tensions become sources of productive debate and dialogue as leaders seek multiple perspectives, and the discovery of root causes unearths hidden assumptions and biases. Big picture learning is valued. Difficult conversations, along with the transparency and candor they require, are regarded as necessary for progress. Ideas are increasingly freed from silos and shared across boundaries. Learning together, executives are willing to identify, challenge and transform their own underlying beliefs to create better practices. Senior teams understand that they must evolve their own personal and professional mindsets to support systemic cultural change. The interdependence needed to execute complex strategic initiatives, meet performance goals and set future strategy begins to take hold.

The Way of Trust, Acceptance and Ownership

Lao Tzu's 6th century BC text, the *Tao Te Ching*, describes a process in which essential truths and patterns create a pathway or guide for living and working in harmony with the natural rhythms of life. Applied to a business context, the Tao of a high performing team is always wholeheartedly pursued, but there is no final attainment. Rather it's an ongoing, never ending learning journey toward increasingly higher levels of organizational, interpersonal and intrapersonal integration.

We discovered the *TAO of Transformation* through action research, observing, and reflecting the experiences of senior teams involved in enterprise-wide challenges. Our work centered on applying the idea of vertical development of leadership culture to strategic change. We engaged leaders' mindsets, beliefs, identity, intuition, imagination and emotions to advance their individual and collective capacity to operate in more complex, systemic, strategic and interdependent ways. This work is both broad and deep in scope.

We noted commonalities among senior teams which were transforming the way they led complex change initiatives. Over time it became clear: the fundamental elements of interdependence are trust, acceptance and ownership, because they **reduce ego**, **maximize performance** and encourage the **view from the balcony**.

Trust

Trust must be earned and is easily damaged. It grows when individuals feel that they can rely on the words and actions of other individuals, teams and the organization itself, and involves a deliberate practice of transparency and the avoidance of carefully packaged positive spin. Without this matrix of safety, senior team members cannot engage in the candid, politically risky conversations needed to successfully set strategic direction and execute change.

To foster a climate of trust, leaders first need to cultivate their own individual *self-awareness*. What drives their moods and behaviors? Can they sense how they are perceived by and impacting others? Without self-awareness, relationships remain one-way streets, transactional and superficial, and the interpersonal underpinning of the organization is strained. As self-aware leaders *expand their individual perspective* to include those of others and the environment, they gain greater understanding of the enterprise system as a whole.

When trust develops within a senior team, the effect permeates the rest of the organization. The greater the trust, the greater the collective imagination and innovation in shared direction, alignment and commitment. Deliberate consciousness *maximizes performance.*

Collective truth telling, risk taking and personal vulnerability in a format we call *public learning* are essential to the team's ability to learn and gain insight. This essential process rests upon a foundation of trust.

Acceptance

Ambiguity and dilemmas are inherent in life and naturally arise in relationships as well as in organizations. We understand acceptance as the ability to live with and gain mastery of these tensions, along with the awareness that such tensions are not always solvable in conventional terms. Their appearance does not mean something has gone wrong. When leaning fully into acceptance, senior leaders can approach each other and complex enterprise challenges with greater resourcefulness and creativity. Rather than polarizing and locking down into rigid positions, executives can learn to flow, to manage and operate within dilemmas, not as problems to solve but as complexities woven into the fabric of activity

and enterprise. This acceptance enables a broader range of responses and that prized *view from the balcony above*.

Acceptance of tensions begins with first acknowledging them and then progresses to active management. At the individual level, leaders manage the tensions of *interpersonal interactions* by hearing and giving feedback, navigating conflict, planning strategically and learning together. Leaders need to engage collaboratively and across boundaries so that the best ideas emerge. By developing what we call *both/and* thinking, leaders can sidestep simplistic *either/or* polarities and operate within a new paradigm: the shared awareness that issues may be inherent in the system—not personal, not fixable, and not the fault or responsibility of any one individual or group.

Rather than vehemently arguing for and against tightly held and typically polarized positions, executives can appreciate the validity of multiple perspectives, find compromise, and align with new approaches through safe debate and discussion. With the acceptance of tensions, leaders are empowered to assess options from a place of collective respect and shared organizational intentions and outcomes. This process of *slowing down to power up* allows optimal ideas to rise, engendering better informed decisions, plans and strategies. The best ideas win.

Ownership

Ownership occurs when leaders take 100 percent responsibility for the organization as a whole, not just their own particular division or team, meaning that they willingly set aside personal interests for the greater good and a common vision. As leaders make an enterprise-wide commitment to performance, they increase the level of transparency and stop shielding themselves from each other. The focus shifts from individual control to what's right for the business. Ironically, this shift also generates individual benefits—the *hero culture* and its associated stresses dissipate as team members increasingly *let go of ego*.

Executives comes to understand what matters to each other through the free sharing of individual knowledge and expertise. As information flows outside siloed boundaries, leaders learn to intentionally and effectively work together. *Power is increasingly shared* as decision making, solution finding and strategy execution travel across boundaries as well. *Collaborative capability grows*. A culture of ownership in which each is fully, deeply engaged in the whole begins to take root and flourish.

The Development Process Clarified

As we practiced our methodology we refined our approach and clarified the development process:

- At the **individual** level, development is focused on s*elf-awareness and interpersonal interaction.* Leaders learn to *let go of ego* and willingly take ownership beyond the narrow confines of their particular function or role.

- At the **team** level, development is focused on *expanding perspectives and sharing power.* This work yields a *view from the balcony* that multiplies viewpoints, generating new approaches to interpersonal and organizational tensions.

- At the **organizational** level, development is focused on *both/and thinking and creating a culture of collaboration.* The work leads to *maximum performance* by way of deeper trust.

Deliberately pursuing **trust**, acting with awareness and **acceptance** of tensions, and fostering collective **ownership** of the enterprise is transformative for individuals, teams and organizations alike. When inspired executives engage in this TAO of Transformation model, a vigorous, forceful energy is released

in waves of work across the enterprise. Radically different outcomes become possible for the organization, its customers, partners and supply chain. Everything changes when the dynamic shifts from a superficial zone and into a grounded and engaged *Strategic Zone*.

Fig. 1: TAO of Transformation Model

CASE STUDY: LENOX MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

Lenox Memorial, a rural *tobacco country* regional hospital evolving into a more complex healthcare system in the southern United States, had a sound reputation from over a century of service but was facing deep challenges. Rising costs, the proliferation of competitive specialty clinics and tensions between medical providers and management were plaguing the hospital. The business was stagnant and critical performance metrics were in decline.

To turn things around, management wanted to overhaul and transform the healthcare delivery process to make it more patient centered.

To ensure full representation and ownership of the change process, executives formed a *Change Leadership Team* by adding three key directors in clinical, nursing and operations to the mostly vice president level team. As the team made progress we expanded involvement to the Top 40, and finally into the patient processes day to day in action development work.

Core Approach

We took an action research approach grounded in vertical change, collective learning and organizational culture theories. Practicing a case study method, we theorized that integrated healthcare supply chains need interdependency capable executives whose vertical development aligns with the complex capabilities required by cutting edge business strategies. In transformation, leadership is the what and culture is the how, and culture must be sufficiently mature to support strategic implementation of ambitious visions. Our core role was helping executives develop the expanded minds required for facilitating enterprise-wide transformational processes.

A key insight of our research is that a *vertical component*, which represents a paradigm shift in thinking, is inherent in the transformation of individual, team and organizational behavior. Vertical development is essentially a shift to a bigger cognitive vista. It involves a higher and broader perspective, an elevated and integrated mindset large enough to take on complexity; in short, a bigger mind. Think of it as the view from the balcony in which the actors can also perceive the stage from above. This enables one to be in the action while at the same time looking down on it—what we call a *both/and mindset*. From here one sees patterns and makes connections among interdependent systems and individuals, all in a state of dynamic tension on an ever-changing stage where ambiguity is the rule.

Our consultation is not an easy quick fix or a band-aid approach. Teams have backstories; pre-existing personalities, behaviors and conflicts which need to be respected as teams take one step forward and three steps back. We typically launch discovery using tools designed to foster client self-observation and self-reflection through active interpretive work. This process generates data from senior leaders' direct experience as we help them make sense of the complex interplay of business strategy, organizational culture and executive team development.

In the action research process we learn and grow alongside clients as they engage in exercises to build trust, the foundation for further exploration and risk taking. We continually challenge teams to rise to their next level of cohesion and development by deepening trust within and beyond the group, strengthening collaborative ownership of issues and outcomes, and increasing collective capacity to operate within a matrix of inherently unavoidable and ultimately unsolvable tensions. This requires the exposure and examination of deeply held belief systems operating behind the scenes at all levels—individual, group and organizational. We support ongoing cultivation of dialogue skills to reduce ego based drive and increase open ended inquiry, a key skill for both/and thinking in the face of complexity. Emerging data continues to inform our design of client work as we simultaneously frame an evidence-based methodology for broader practice.

Entrenched issues take time, energy and resources to change when outmoded strategies have outlived their usefulness and new forms of generativity based on radical paradigmatic shifts are necessary. While we have witnessed executive team transformation in six months, typically 3-6 quarters is required for teams to become self-organizing, self-regulating systems capable of transferring their own ongoing learning and strategy implementation processes into other key leadership groups.

This case study describes the first nine months of our work with Lenox, representing the first two of three phases of the process.

Transforming Company Culture: Straight Talk

During the first 90 days we focused on the connection between organizational strategy and leadership culture. It was imperative that the executive team understand how their de facto operating culture was affecting the implementation of strategy.

A southern conservative culture with an attitude of deference to authority permeated the workplace. The unspoken rule was, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." This inhibiting norm is a process improvement show stopper when change requires transparent communication across the employee hierarchy. Chris Argyris describes *undiscussables* as conflict laden issues hidden from view that sabotage trust and progress. This culture of polite acquiescence needed to be addressed before any real progress could be made.

Early on we introduced a truth telling process. For a half day, leaders alternatively approached then avoided subjects necessary for facing the change that they initially believed *undiscussable*. With our compassionate insistence, team members finally broke through with an animated and emotional discussion of *sacred cows*. Following the lead of the clinical director, the first one to risk sharing a very personal story, participants gave themselves permission to speak openly, eventually naming a dozen undiscussables. Publicly aired, these truths revealed interpersonal and operational compromises that were repeatedly covered up and which were causing deep harm on many levels.

This process of truth-telling and collective emotional release engendered higher levels of energy, engagement and the potential for building trust. We began to sense a change in attitude and a freed up atmosphere—a nascent opening to the possibility of positive change.

Aligning with the Business Strategy

After CEO "Harold" presented his business strategy, we explored the types of beliefs needed to support implementation. We invited discussion about whether the prevailing "Be Nice" culture supported change. Collective embarrassment was followed by the release of tension through laughter. Participants demonstrated their understanding of the need for change by creating maxims such as *Beliefs Drive Practices* and *Culture Always Wins.*

An essential drill down into the CEO's strategy ensued. Many were confused. What *IS* the strategy? Is this the right strategy? Is it a strategy at all or just a bunch of goals? Could constituents and partners across the supply chain understand and commit to the strategy? Was it feasible—could it be implemented without changing the culture?

To explore these issues, we used a human histogram with team members physically placing themselves on a continuum from zero to 100, voting with their feet. Patterns emerged revealing deep strains in oppositional points of view with clinical staff at one end and operations VPs at the other. The CEO was often alone in his own zone, questioning if anyone was really with him. This visual-kinesthetic approach

revealed both personal and operational tensions. System failure loomed as a possibility if strategic alignment did not improve. We encouraged strategy as a learning process.

Participants called it the *Main Thing*—the strategic driver the team would invest resources in, the key lever to change. Over another half day we drove the question home: what is the *Main Thing*? They knew it was all about the patient process, but specifically what about that? Finally it came through—*put the issue in the middl*e, on the table for discussion, discernment and decision—not each other. This insight yielded a new, overriding intention to reduce subjective interpersonal tension by focusing on the actual objective issues in the patient improvement process. Another maxim emerged: *Put IT in the Middle* (not each other). This shift from focus on the subject(ive) to the object(ive) became a core tool for transforming beliefs and practices. We began to hear over and over again in the development work and learning process, "Let's put IT in the middle."

Applying Insights

To implement discovery insights, senior leaders would introduce process challenges into their own team's work. One step at a time they advanced a more open culture into patient processes through development in action. The target was the newly initiated patient intake system that included involvement of the patient's family from registration to intake, room assignments, clinical testing and treatment planning.

Real Life Example #1

A nurse, "Sally," was heading to a clinical shift change meeting. Like others, Sally was imbued with a deeply shared organizational norm to never, ever be late. But on Sally's way to the meeting she encountered a family in the intake process that appeared lost, confused and anxious. Recognizing the dilemma, Sally faced the tension of conflicting beliefs where patient centered service competed with attending the shift change meeting on time. Challenging deeply ingrained professional beliefs, Sally made a critical change decision to prioritize assisting the patient and his bewildered family. She arrived at the meeting ten minutes late and offered her explanation. Meeting participants displayed a change in attitude as well, honoring Sally's decision and foregoing the usual rebuke. A new cultural norm emerged in that moment. The change of shift team discussed this as a tension in which both of Sally's choices were right, displaying *both/and thinking*. Empathy for patients and families had much needed space to grow. Further possible improvements in the patient intake process emerged. A seemingly small incident became highly significant.

Sally's story of tension and choice was retold as part of the new culture's emerging narrative. The roots of a more interdependent leadership culture took hold inside a rigidly hierarchal, conservative hospital. On the job senior leaders developed their team's leaders through patient process improvement experiments. Real time action development of strategy ensued.

Public Learning: Shared Risk Fosters Shared Ownership

During months four through six the focus expanded from the executive team's continued development to the development of their own teams, the Top 40. We led executives into accelerated discovery workshops by repeating part of the previous experience, this time with executives themselves conducting half of the facilitation—leaders developing leaders. Strategy, culture and team discovery data initiated newcomers into the process and illustrated executive ownership. Alongside executives, demonstrating public learning through the sharing of *sacred cows*, we assisted newcomers to conduct their own discovery experiences. Patient process issues were explored, including the perspective of owning past mistakes—a notion that was shocking to many participants due to the longstanding polar opposite practice of concealing mistakes.

Cards with visual images were used to illustrate, compare and contrast existing cultural norms with compelling new visions of a more patient centered culture. The graphics elicited deep emotional reactions and was another form of *putting it in the middle*. Participants developed their skills in observation, reflection, inquiry and openly explorative dialogue that yielded best ideas and multiple right answers. Experimental teams formed to play with *what if* process improvement scenarios in registration, intake, clinical testing and treatment. People shifted out of their *me-silos* to a *we-share* perspective. Leaders began to learn collaborative inquiry—namely, how to avoid kneejerk ego based advocacy and the static polarization of argumentative positions.

Real Life Example #2

Harold, the CEO, was vehement about one *sacred cow* situation that he was convinced was not resolvable. The situation involved a powerful physician in a critical operations role who had significant political influence on the board. Harold publicly described his tenuous relationship with this physician, insisting that the relationship was unlikely to improve. This was quite a risky admission on Harold's part—an early finding that not all issues can be solved, that paradoxical dilemmas exist that need to be managed carefully over the long term. This became a critical public learning moment for the development of *both/and thinking* and advancing a *vertical mindset*.

Real Life Example #3

A few more *sacred cows* were publicly named and eventually a rather high-risk issue emerged. "Susan," one of the executive team members, apparently had been kissing up and kicking down. Under the radar of most of her peers, her behavior had been undermining overall morale as well as nascent trust and belief in an emerging new future for the organization. Harold initially wanted to sidestep this hot spot but his VPs wanted action. The palpable tension over exposing this issue was accepted and dealt with. In this public learning forum a sense of safety and trust began to take root among the Top 40.

The group assembled again soon after Susan had been dismissed for cause—a decision which had led to a surge in collective trust. Kiss up, kick down behavior had finally been called out as destructive and there were consequences. Susan's dismissal had a revolutionary impact, releasing positive energy for generating new patient focused practice improvements. Enhanced authenticity opened a window of opportunity for innovation.

Further Practice

We then put executives in the hot seat for deeper public learning by asking them to map change project revisions into a core business process architecture. The tension was palpable. The Top 40 demonstrated willingness to take risks and make themselves personally vulnerable. They began to see the leadership culture advancing based on new beliefs and practices that were being validated live and in person. Others began to rise to the same level of risk and reward. Trust continued to deepen, tensions were endured as they emerged, and individual ownership of collective issues increased.

Action Development: Engaging Complexity Fosters Expanded Mindsets

Advisory visits and action development teamwork continued into months seven through nine. In cross functional, cross boundary collaboration, simple learning protocols were used: What's working? What's not? What beliefs are driving the old ways and what new beliefs are required to sustain the new and improved patient centered practices?

We designed an *Open Space* forum model for the identification of new patient processes improvements. Anyone could host an open session. Demonstrable payback was a necessary condition. Where a proposal

gained critical mass commitment, a group could apply for resources. The executive team, on the spot again, was asked to share trust, accept and master tensions and take ownership for a dozen projects without delay. Ten projects were approved during the forum with promises for funding within the week. Transformation in the executive team was well underway.

As change leadership emerged, expression of the three TAO elements grew less serial and more simultaneous, overlapping and recurrent. Trust, acceptance of tensions, and ownership of shared issues became a self-reinforcing matrix. Strategic learning which had started in the executive team had become a multiplier in self generating work teams; we came to serve primarily as learning guides. The web of organizational beliefs and practices in the leadership culture was being rewoven into a healthier pattern. Leadership development and organizational development became one and the same thing. *Slowing down to power up became* the tag line of this elevated *view from the balcony*.

Real Life Example #4

In celebration of the progress with the executive team, an old familiar argument broke out. Should the procurement and distribution process of medical supplies be centralized, as the vice president of purchasing argued, or decentralized, as the COO believed? The squabbling had gone on between these two for ten years as the hospital had grown into a more complex healthcare system. We gave the apparent rivals some homework: First, create a both/and map to interdependent leadership along with *walk & talk* instructions to stop their longstanding either/or dispute, and second, practice a both/and dialogue for one hour before they rejoined the team.

Success! The pair returned, exultant to share their breakthrough and more than a little self-conscious about their past bickering. What was the answer—centralized or decentralized we asked?

"Of course, it is YES, it is both!" they answered in unison, how can it not be! We have to accept the tension in complexity and continuously figure out the shifting balance in the paradox that will never change."

As action researchers, we were delighted to see this deep assimilation, integration and ownership of the work. Vertical public learning in continuous action was what was needed to process disruptive complexity one dialogue at a time.

CONCLUSION

In this *TAO of Transformation* process are essential truths that leadership teams often overlook. Culture is often given lip service but ultimately is seen as too abstract for engagement. For an organization to create productive change leadership it must begin with executives. When business and organizational strategy outweighs leadership's capability, moving into the *Strategic Zone* requires intentional vertical development. Through such efforts more interdependent forms of leadership become possible as increasing trust, acceptance of tensions and enterprise ownership are realized.

Not everyone is ready for this work. It is deep, nuanced and complex; requiring commitment, openness, vulnerability and risk taking, and a disciplined approach to learning and growth are necessary.

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