



The Moral Courage of Transformational Leadership

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The mind is a curious thing. Sometimes a simple question triggers a thought process that cannot be stopped. Like a drop of water that hits the surface and creates the well-known ripple effect, an idea may ignite a peaceful brain to send electrical pulses to nerve cells. Once an idea settles in, you cannot un-think it. It is a riddle to the brain that only goes to rest when it is solved or fanned out to satisfaction.

Last December a question from the Swedish representative during the final session of the Chiefs of Transformation Conference in Norfolk was such a spark. His question – to be correct, the one I thought he was asking – was simple, profound and surprising. *What kind of leadership is needed for transformation and do we need moral courage for it?*

After more than 10 years of transformation, the question is surprising. Should the answer not already be there? What has morality to do with transformation? Are there choices in leadership? You see, the question probes deep into the nature of transformation and justifies the use of bio-electricity. I want to share my thoughts on this issue in the hope it sparks your brain cells as well.

The strangest element of the question is the relationship between moral courage and transformation. Let's try to identify that link. In short, transformation is change on a continuous basis without a well-defined purpose, a never-ending spiral towards a moving target. It pulls people out of their comfort zone of well-known routine. Change creates temporary stress, continuous change creates continuous stress. Does a leader have the right to put his people, us, into this situation?

Additionally, most of our leaders are in the HQ for only three years and most of them come here without deep knowledge of, or experience with, transformation. Leading transformation is as new for them as for most of us working here. Think about it: Where could they have learned it besides here in Norfolk? Where did you learn about transformation? So, they have to lead transformation without intimate knowledge and lacking the wished-for experience. They have to learn it too, and they too are only allowed the three-year tour of learning and doing.

What do our leaders have as choices? In a military way, I see three broad options.

Option 1: They can do nothing, or, at most, go with the flow. They can act as if this HQ is just another HQ, and do the work as they always have done: the low effort, low risk approach. The fact that there are almost no SMEs in transformation may give them a nice justification for this option. As the leaders, they cannot ask somebody for advice. The normal way to decide is to ask options and to pick the best one, but that does not work in this case. So, no decisions, no change.

Option 2: They can use their time in the HQ to learn about transformation and try to implement the elements they learn and think they master. Sure, this will help the HQ to move a bit further along the transformational road, but while the leaders are learning, their people just do business as usual. Once the leaders have understood a transformational element, they will want to apply or experiment with it. Unfortunately, their people had not the opportunity to learn about it and wonder what the leaders want. They will faithfully execute their wishes, but missing the understanding, they will not fully support the transformational aspects of it. This results in failure, frustrating the leaders and their people. People on the floor expect change; the leaders, after running through their own learning cycles, want change too, but direct subordinates - middle management - do not understand it and are unwillingly to delay the necessary actions. This phenomenon is known as the 'concrete middle layer'. After three years of learning and experimenting, the next leader will come in and start at zero again. As some of the old group will have understood what the old leader wanted to achieve, they will continue these efforts and hit against the old way of doing things from the fresh, inexperienced leader. The initial transformational wave bounces against the leadership wall. The three-year cycle of replacements results in the bouncing back and forth of waves of one-time changes without resulting in the kind of transformation we should be striving for. Just changing things or complicating procedures does not equal transformation.

Option 3: The leaders accept that they do not know transformation and decide to learn on the go. This means that leaders start walking the path while leading their people. They do not take the time to learn it first, but instead learn it together with all involved.

As a staff officer in Joint Force Trainer, you could expect me to offer a fourth option: to have the leaders learn the basics of transformation before their HQ SACT assignments begin. They could take a one or two week mandatory course about the principles and applications of transformational leadership before arriving at the HQ. This common course would promote a unified purpose throughout upper management and would improve consistency between three-year replacement cycles. This option would perfectly be in line with the NATO Education, Training and Exercise Policy and at least everyone would have the same understanding of the work of transformation.

So why do I not propose this one? Firstly, if there is such a requirement, than the Global Programming Approach should pick it up and define a solution for it. Secondly, this would only educate our leaders – who could do that? – and they would still need moral courage to implement what they have learned during this pre-assignment program. So, this option solves only part of the problem and can only enhance the other options.

Back to my preferred option 3. At a personal level, these leaders are confronted with a whole new situation. They must lead the way into uncharted terrain without a clear path and without good individual preparation. They can ask for good advice, but there is almost nobody who can give it, only opinions and limited personal experience. They will have to make difficult decisions and they will make mistakes. They will need to develop a new kind of leadership style they're not used to. Success is unlikely in the short term and the positive outcome may be very debatable, but failure will be immediately visible. To make things worse, things will go worse in the beginning, giving the impression that the new way leads to complete failure. This could result in an ugly spot on an otherwise perfect career. Should they really accept this unfair challenge? It is so much easier and

safer to just do nothing. Physical courage exposed during a military career is nothing compared to the heaviness of moral courage. Some try to escape this moral challenge by stating that there is no real necessity to transform although this is the HQ's *raison d'être*.

At a collective level, does a leader have the right to push transformation forward this way? To put people through a turbulent period, every day? Should the leader not protect us and give us the tranquillity of routine work? The decision by nations to have our HQ leading NATO transformation should stop all discussions on the necessity to transform or not. We may not fully understand the motivation – and even doubt it - for that decision, but we have to execute it. People coming to this HQ should clearly understand that they will work in a HQ that is out of the ordinary. If our name HQ Supreme Allied Command Transformation does not give enough information on what to expect, the orientation session in the first weeks should finish the job.

A more stringent reason that urges leaders to walk the path of transformation is that we have to provide our soldiers with the best option in current, and certainly in future operations. We cannot accept something less because we do not like to be disturbed in our daily routine. What kind of HQ hardship justifies the denial of the best for our forces? So they have to lead us, so that we can take care of the future war fighter.

As option 3 is the only one likely to result in real transformation, as the question about moral courage at the collective level is answered. Our leaders should put us through this rapid succession of changes because this is the only way to succeed, and we should expect it. The right moral question is: Do they have the right not to do it?

Back to the question that triggered my writing this article: *What kind of leadership is needed for transformation and do we need moral courage for it?* Transformational leadership, whereby the leaders guide people on an uncertain, ever-changing path through uncharted terrain, requires that these leaders decide every day to challenge old leadership habits, to question all they have learned, to put their people in uncomfortable and unfamiliar situations, and to risk smothering their careers. Surely, this demands moral courage from our leaders.