

## National Business Awards 2011

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What is your definition of 'transformational change' as it applies to your business/client base?

Harthill is in the business of supporting the development of leaders and leadership in organisations. We *specifically* claim to underpin transformational change and yet, we know from evolution and biology that change is a constant that largely serves to keep things dynamically stable - to maintain the *status quo*. In other words, we know that systems are conservative in their capacity to self-regulate and human systems, whether we're talking about organisations or individual leaders, are no different from this. However, largely because we are creatures of habit, human beings can be far less flexibly responsive to changing environmental demands than the average amoeba.

So what we partly mean by 'transformational change', is the kind of change that usefully destabilises and challenges the unhelpful and rigidly-held assumptions of an individual leader, leadership group or a leadership culture. It's the kind of change that supports a *recalibration* of their capacity for healthy, generative, self-regulation. In that light, we think sustainable leadership performance depends quite specifically on the capacity of leaders to integrate their intentions, actions and outcomes in a way that supports mutual growth-in-connection. In the world of mechanised approaches to organisation and to leadership, this is also, in effect, a transformational agenda.

In your experience, what is the greatest obstacle to transformational change?

In summary, *rigidity* and *lack of emotional resilience*. In terms of a leader's thinking, rigidity translates as 'black and white', 'either/or', dualistic thinking. We absolutely know that being able to see and hold multiple perspectives is a key to a leader's capacity to embrace transformational change. The lack of emotional resilience is expressed as excessive anxiety and a knee-jerk pattern of negative emotional response to uncertainty typically undermine efforts to support transformational change. In that light, we also know that being able to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty is a key to a leader's capacity to support transformational change. Being a transformational leader is a bit like being an acrobat on the high wire. If you're rigid and fearful, it's unlikely you'll give it a go, and if you do, you're very likely to fall off!

In your opinion, what is the greatest enabler of transformational change?

Well, I've got a few more words for what *enables* our acrobat leader to walk the wire and stay well balanced on it - humility, flexibility, reflexivity and courage! Humility is not a common trait of leaders, but it *is* a characteristic of transformational leaders. Secondly, the 'flexibility' required of our high-wire acrobat seems rather self-evident, but in terms of our transformational leader, this translates as a capacity to use both *rigour* and *imagination* (Bateson, 2002)

in the service of the organisation - a degree of mental agility which is in fact not that common. Thirdly, a more obvious way to convey the need for 'reflexivity' is to use the word 'mindfulness'. Transformational leaders need to cultivate 'a caring attunement' (Heidegger, 1962) and an endless spirit of inquiry. Last but not least, we all know from our own personal experience that no transformation can ever be achieved and sustained without courage.....

### Is it easier to achieve transformational change in the public or private sector, and why?

Many commentators would have us believe that the public sector is hidebound by bureaucracy and public scrutiny that gets in the way of entrepreneurialism, initiative-taking and bold action. My experience does not bear this out. In fact, private sector organisations can be similarly bureaucratic and fearful, with leadership action unhelpfully constrained by competing demands and conflicting objectives. So, transformational change is difficult to initiate and sustain in both contexts where the organisations concerned are large and therefore highly complex.

Where transformation is perhaps easier to support is in small and medium sized enterprises where there is more opportunity to be fleet of foot, where key employees are generally more multi-skilled and where there is a bottom-line necessity to experiment with new ideas in order to continue to generate value. Here, there is the possibility of testing the impact of transformational change initiatives quickly and effectively, at relatively low cost and therefore low risk for the organisation. But whether in the context of large or small and medium sized organisations, well-designed and targeted change experiments are a key to the success of transformational change.

### Why is it important for the National Business Awards to have an award dedicated to transformational change?

In my 30-year career supporting leaders in organisations, 'transformational change' has often been the slogan used by my clients for their many efforts to improve bottom and top line efficiency and effectiveness. In my experience, however, transformational change is elusive and is rarely achieved, let alone sustained, quite simply because it requires an entirely different approach to handling the challenges that organisations face than the linear, problem-solving approach most leaders are trained to adopt. In other words, transformational change is hard to pull off and more than deserves to be recognised and rewarded as such.

Furthermore, with a growing awareness of the global/local challenges all organisations face, it is doubly imperative that we shine the spotlight on those leaders and organisations who have the courage and the tenacity to face into and embrace the complexity of the issues they are dealing with. In other words, organisations and leaders committed to transformational change in the present climate more than deserve to be recognised as standing out amongst their peers.